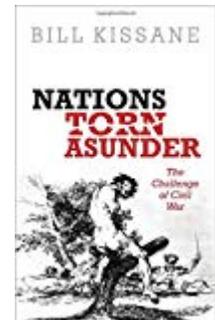


Bill Kissane. *Nations Torn Asunder: The Challenge of Civil War.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Illustrations. 272 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-960287-2.



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Published on H-Nationalism (November, 2016)

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No sooner had the end of the Cold War swept away forty years of certainties than the study of intrastate armed conflict became a minor obsession within a number of disciplines. Policymakers have harnessed economics and political science in their efforts to predict and therefore to prevent conflict, while historians and anthropologists have emphasized the singularity of cases and of causation. Critics of comparative approaches have highlighted the fluidity of categories over time and space. University courses and modules on conflict have taken a cross-disciplinary approach and encouraged students to play off the disciplines one against the other.

Bill Kissane strides into this epistemological battleground with a call for further interdisciplinary engagement: his contention is that civil war has been “ignored by political philosophy” (p. 3), an observation that he attributes to distaste for the subject. Revolution may appear heroic, “indelibly linked to the idea of progress,” whereas civil war is just nasty. It is “unnatural” (p. 5) in the decay that it both represents and reproduces

within the body politic, a medical metaphor which Kissane knowingly and self-critically calls upon at several moments in the text. The challenge of this ambitious book, then, is to bring the insights of political philosophy into a field where political scientists, historians, anthropologists and sociologists have already been doing battle for several decades—and where consensus seems as elusive as in the most intractable of civil wars.

Kissane’s book sets philosophy in a dialogue with history. It begins with and frequently returns to the Greek historian and philosopher Thucydides, in arguing throughout for a view of “violence not just as a political crisis but as a force that takes on a momentum of its own” (p. 12). Kissane draws extensively upon Thomas Hobbes, particularly in seeing civil war as an inversion of social order (p. 32). He departs from Hobbes, however, in refusing to see this breakdown of order primarily as the consequence of the absence of the Leviathan state. In so doing, Kissane also takes issue with a slew of late twentieth-century theorizing about the relationship of violence to state

failure or state collapse, pointing out that “the state has clarity and integrity in political theory that it does not always have” (p. 165) and that “[t]he basic problem with the Hobbesian paradigm—when exported beyond early modern Britain—is that the state is not a constant, but a conceptual variable” (p. 166).

Hence Kissane urges us not to look simply at the state as we seek to understand conflict. On the one hand, he concurs with the view that the proliferation of nation-states that took place after 1918 and even more rapidly after 1945 has fueled conflict, as existential survival was perceived to depend on taking political control of one these ever-smaller entities. On the other, he encourages the reader to see continuities across the centuries, and in fact what is initially most remarkable about this book is the breadth of Kissane’s historical references. He evokes repeatedly the civil wars in England, the United States, Ireland, Finland, Greece, Spain, alongside the postcolonial conflicts of Angola and Mozambique. Nevertheless, he contends that war has changed from the relative simplicity of the American Civil War when the contest was “to win the war and gain state power” (p. 151), to “systems of violence [that] may originate in political divisions but are perpetuated by a complex web of interests” (p. 152).

If attention only to the state is inadequate in explaining this, Kissane convinces his reader that social solidarity, or rather the lack of it, is key. Acknowledging Carl Schmitt’s contention that “the affirmation of a community in opposition to another is the essence of politics” (p. 138), Kissane turns to the work of theorists such as Charles Tilly and Stathis Kalyvas in exploring the micropolitics of conflict: the mutually reinforcing relationship between violence, perceptions of individual and collective interest, and social fragmentation. As societies split apart, “[t]he fragments that result are neither random nor natural; they reflect pre-existing social relations” (p. 224).

Indeed, fragmentation is for Kissane the defining characteristic of civil war, distinguishing it from, say, an insurrection or a coup d’état that has less deleterious consequences for the body politic. “When people begin to apprehend the consequences of fragmentation and act accordingly, they lose that sense of shared fate which underpins any community. Hence these conflicts become potentially catastrophic” (p. 233). While this fragmentation of the political community may in some cases anticipate secession as was the case in Yugoslavia, it can equally well apply to a crisis over who “speaks with the authority of the state” (p. 59) in a territory that two rivals want to rule in its entirety and have no intention of carving up.

Kissane offers this in answer to what he sees as a tendency, one that exists today as it did in early modernity, to overdiagnose internal conflict as civil war in order to justify a worldview of perpetual crisis (p. 237). It may seem peculiar that Kissane waits until the epilogue, having taken us through a volume’s worth of rich and subtle reflection on all manner of strife, before offering us a definition of what is purportedly the subject of his enquiry. On the other hand, this is a field in which definitions and categories are notoriously slippery. In emphasizing complexity, Kissane’s approach is consistently critical of the policy-driven attempts at predicting conflict: these, he suggests, are ultimately unreliable since they rest on what he terms the “semantic bleaching” (p. 105) of data in order to facilitate comparison. His corrective is one of perpetual self-reflection that defines and analyzes in the same movement, tracing and comparing processes while refusing to admit simplification.

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Citation: Justin Pearce. Review of Kissane, Bill. *Nations Torn Asunder: The Challenge of Civil War*. H-Nationalism, H-Net Reviews. November, 2016.

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