Irredentas and Secessions: Adjacent Phenomena, Neglected Connections*

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To think about something makes it necessary to identify and isolate it, to fix upon it and, in fixing upon it, to reify it. Even before conscious conceptualization occurs, even in the selection of phenomena for study, concepts creep in. The more careful the thinking, the more precise the identification of the phenomena for study, the greater the isolation of one phenomenon from its neighbors, even its near neighbors. When the careful thinker says, "I mean to include this and to exclude that," the precision that makes any careful thinking possible may come at a price. Less careful but perhaps more nimble thinkers—namely, those actors whose behavior forms the subject of social science thinking—have a way of putting back together what careful thinkers pull apart.

Secessions and irredentas are near neighbors that can be pulled apart for analysis, properly in my view, but with points of contact and even, at times, a degree of interchangeability that might permit groups to choose one or the other and that also makes it necessary to treat the two phenomena together, in order to have a full view of each. By and large, the two have not been treated together. They have either been treated in isolation or mentioned in the same breath without an appreciation of their connections. When, however, secessions and irredentas are considered together, some rather startling conclusions emerge. Since the two phenomena are sometimes alternatives to each other, the frequency of each is, in part, a function of the frequency of the other. Furthermore, the strength of a given movement may be, in part, a function of the possibility that the alternative movement may arise. Indeed, the fate of a movement, at least in the sense that it manages to extract concessions from a central government, may depend on which course it takes.

* A slightly different version of this essay will appear in Naomi Chazan's edited volume, Irredentism and International Politics, to be published by Lynne Rienner.
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Two Distinct Phenomena

The two phenomena are definable in distinct terms, even if we restrict ourselves solely to ethnically motivated secessions and irredentas. Secession is an attempt by an ethnic group claiming a homeland to withdraw with its territory from the authority of a larger state of which it is a part. Irredentism is a movement by members of an ethnic group in one state to retrieve ethnically kindred people and their territory across borders.

It will quickly be noted that disparate subphenomena are subsumed in the definition of secession propounded here. That definition might be sufficiently elastic to embrace the activity of a group that merely seeks regional autonomy or creation of a federal system and control of its own state as a component of such a system. This was the aim of the Federal Party in Sri Lanka until at least 1972 and of the Liberal Party in the Sudan until 1958. The same definition of secession might also comprehend the activity of an ethnic group occupying a discrete territory within a state in an existing federal system but aiming to carve a new state out of its portion of the existing state. The Telangana movement in Andhra Pradesh is one of several such movements in India. Nigeria has had many comparable movements, beginning with the United Middle Belt Congress in the 1950s. Finally, and most relevantly for connections to irredentism, this definition of secession certainly includes attempts to form separate, independent, internationally recognized states out of existing sovereign entities, as in the unsuccessful war for Biafra and the successful war for Bangladesh. In this definition, secession thus entails several forms of greater or lesser withdrawal from existing units.

Similarly, irredentism, as defined here, contains two subtypes: the attempt to detach land and people from one state in order to incorporate them in another, as in the case of Somalia’s recurrent irredenta against Ethiopia, and the attempt to detach land and people divided among more than one state in order to incorporate them in a single new state—a “Kurdistan,” for example, composed of Kurds now living in Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey. Both forms of reconstituted boundaries would qualify as irredentist.

Despite their elasticity, the definitions of the two phenomena are conceptually distinct. Irredentism involves subtracting from one state and adding to another state, new or already existing; secession involves subtracting alone.

Moreover, the distinction between secessions and irredentas seems to capture some important differences in political phenomena on the ground; it is not merely a figment of the imagination of analysts. A glance at the relative frequency of the two phenomena hints at this. There are possibilities aplenty for secession and irredentism in the post-colonial world of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Most states are ethnically heterogeneous; of these, most have territorially compact minorities. Likewise, many ethnic groups are divided by territorial boundaries. Consequently, secession and irredentism are both abundantly plausible possibilities in the contemporary world. The necessary conditions, if not the sufficient conditions, for both are present. But the two