Debate


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For some reason, Cambridge University Press sent me two review copies of Roger Petersen’s new book. I contemplated returning one, but I think I am going to keep it, because the copy I read is now full of markings and comments on the margins. This, to my mind, is probably the greatest endorsement a book could receive. The intensity of my engagement with Western Intervention in the Balkans, however, stems both from the fact that its argument is interesting, thought-provoking, and at times exceptionally elegant, and that it is, unfortunately, also deeply flawed.

Petersen sets out his goals as: 1) providing a history of ethnic conflict in the Western Balkans since the breakup of Yugoslavia, 2) supplying a methodological innovation to further our understanding of the variation in the success and failure of the West’s intervention policies in the region, and 3) thus providing us with a better understanding of the West’s intervention policies in general (p. 3). There are significant issues with the way all three of those goals are fulfilled. In this comment I will first address what I see to be the book’s principal methodological weaknesses, then the problems with its historical narrative, and finally the implications this has for the broader lessons about Western intervention policies.

Petersen’s methodological point of departure is the critique of what he sees as the united front of Western social science and intervention policy, which is “driven by a narrow sense of human nature. More specifically,
individuals are seen as responding to short-term, largely economic incentives and disincentives, or perhaps to physical threats” (p. 5). In Petersen's opinion, both Western foreign policy makers and the social scientists evaluating their work have for much too long seen conflict and peace-making in terms of “sticks and carrots.” They have also viewed violence “as a matter of very small numbers of actors, either elites or criminals, making rational decisions to initiate and sustain violence to achieve narrow ends.” (p. 6) Petersen explains the practical results of this collaboration of foreign policy making and the narrow-rational-choice strand of political science in his elegant presentation of what he terms the “Basic Intervention Game:” a series of game-like interactions between the international interveners and the local players – interactions which often ultimately fail to bring peace exactly because of the Westerners' narrow conceptions of human nature and rationality (pp. 71–78).

This is where Petersen's methodological grounding is the strongest. His critique of rational choice approaches to the study of ethnic conflict is well-reasoned and incisive. “Is this really the way individuals behave?” he asks in a particularly poignant passage. “Perhaps individuals believe that violence has reduced their group's dignity; or that they have lived treated as inferiors for most of their lives; or perhaps they have endured what they consider unjust subordination for years. Do such individuals simply maximize their economic welfare and decide whether to radicalize or not?” (p. 91). Of course they do not. Anyone with a modicum of understanding of the actual human experience behind ethnic conflict is aware of the power of emotions, which determine the conflict's onset, dynamics, and ultimate end. But can we study emotions in the context of ethnic strife in a rigorous way?

Petersen not only believes that we can, but he also believes that we can incorporate emotions into the methodological structure of game theory. As he explains, “A central goal of this book is to show that a wider view of human nature will not necessarily lead to methodological chaos” (p. 14). His methodological innovation is based on a set of assumptions that associates three broad experiences of ethnic conflict with five distinct emotions: 1) the experience of violence creates the emotions of anger and fear; 2) the experience of prejudice and stigma supports the emotions of contempt and hatred; and 3) the experience of status reversal leads to the emotion of resentment. These emotions are assumed to have lasting effects and can be used as resources in conflict, much like guns and money (pp. 13, 16). In Petersen's story, the actors who use emotional resources are exclusively the local political entrepreneurs who do not want to play the “intervention