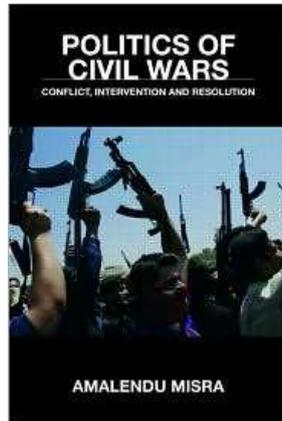


BOOK REVIEW

Misra Amalendu,

Politics of Civil Wars: Conflict, Intervention and Resolution,



Routledge, London and New York, 2008.

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Amalendu Misra has written one of few single-volume works about the different aspects of civil wars. The book covers the different phases of civil wars, by following the ‘cycle’ of conflict, starting with causes, then conduct and finally the end of the wars. While the first part examines the start and the conduct of civil wars, the second part gives room for the analysis of intervention and conflict resolution. The list of contents follows the structure of the author’s own approach to how civil wars should be treated; “capable of going through the cycle of development, decay and eventual demise” (p.1).

In his first chapter Misra guides the readers through the theories of civil wars, investigating the main actors, such as the state, the rebel and the individual, but also some of the causes,

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including grievance and greed. Additional factors like identity, ethnicity and religion are thereafter added to the analysis after Misra had finally established that the causes of civil wars are limitless.

The author takes on an in-depth perspective on the aspect of nationalism in the second chapter, by claiming that the level of nationalism determines the level of violence and conflict in a given state. Nationalism is according to Misra's main argument; both able to unite and divide. It is also through this facet that he borders the issue of globalisation, emphasizing the radically different standpoints that might be taken in this regard from a nationalistic point of view.

In the chapter with the intriguing title; "Erotics of violence", an analysis of violence in civil wars is structured along themes such as logic, genocidal (genocide) and psychology of violence. It is also in this section that the author connects to the introduction, discussing the difference between new and old wars and making a rather bold statement that present-day civil wars lack both legitimacy and politics (p.59). Although Misra does defend this argument by some examples, the lack of an exhaustive analysis of the actual causes behind this change, which for the author seems so obvious, leaves the reader without a strong conviction. Though a plausible explanation leans towards a change in the mentality of the population, this aspect is never investigated.

The second part of the book examines the different features of intervention and conflict resolution. It is in these chapters that the author's own experience of working in conflict affected areas comes most to its right, as the empirical examples enriches the analyses with their clarity and pertinence. It is also in these parts that the author's own voice is heard through the many references and Misra's contribution to the study of civil wars becomes evident.

In the chapter discussing intervention the reader is led through the many obstacles and motivations behind the decision to intervene, touching upon the principle of sovereignty and the never-ending debate about selective interventions and self-interest. While highlighting many risks with intervention, in particular preventive intervention, the author adopts the standpoint that the risk of spill-over effect is one of the strongest arguments for intervention.

Misra goes on to portray the difficulties associated with rebuilding a nation or a state, or both, as he sees them as intrinsically linked; differing between the soft (nation building) and the hard (state institutions) aspects of state construction. He then compares two actors' records in state-building; the US and the UN and concludes that even though the US has had

two success stories in Germany and Japan, the conditions for state-building are no longer the same and the UN stands as the more successful of the two. A more inclusive examination of exactly where the UN has succeeded would have been suitable here for a more balanced comparison.

In his last chapters, the author depicts the difficulties with both reconciliation and resolution of civil wars. After having explored different strategies such as pardon, punishment and amnesia for reconciliation and resolution approaches, the general conclusion is that there is no such thing as one overarching answer to all civil wars; each conflict needs a tailor-made solution.

Overall, Amalendu Misra delivers an excellent introduction to the study of civil wars. It offers both a wide overview of the different aspects and phases of the conflicts as well as thorough analyses of certain well-chosen issues. In particular, the many different case studies make the work easy to read while also lifting the quality of the book above that of a typical textbook. The complexity of the work is however also one of its weaknesses. The broad perspective occasionally leads to the author's own contribution getting lost in the many references. Rather all-inclusive conclusions are also somewhat disappointing as few alternatives are rejected or clearly embraced.