

Nations, States, and Violence: A Critical Review

— Laitin, D., *Nations, States, and Violence* —

Monterroso Torres, Leonel

David Laitin is a renowned scholar within the field of political science, and has published a plethora of books and articles that deal with nationalism, political culture, national identity and ethnic conflict. His main works include *Nations, States and Violence* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), *Identity in Formation: The Russian-speaking Populations in the Near Abroad* (1998), *Language Repertoires and the State Construction in Africa* (1992), *Somalia: Nation in Search of a State* (1987), *Hegemony and Culture: Politics and Religious Change among the Yoruba* (1986), and *Politics, Language and Thought: The Somali Experience* (1977). Laitin has conducted extensive field research in Catalonia (Spain), Somalia, Estonia and Yorubaland, and has focused mainly on language and religion as important factors in the creation and development of the nation-state.

As a researcher, Laitin has utilized and applied the principles upheld by the “rational choice theory”¹ for the conduction of his research. Indeed, Laitin’s quest to learn what motivates a given group to behave in a particular fashion has taken him to Estonia, Catalonia, and Somalia, and the conclusion to which he arrives is that: in effect, regardless of the geographical context (be it Québec, Estonia, Ghana, Catalonia, etc.), “nationalism is driven by the same forces of rational decision-making and coordination; that is, while nationalism may vary in its intensity and scope across time and space, the causal paths which result in its existence do not” (Green 2009:558).

As mentioned previously, Laitin’s work concentrates on language politics, nationalism and religion. These elements are constant in all his work; likewise, there are two more proposals that are developed. First, the notion of multicultural diversity as detrimental for the production of goods (economically speaking). Second, the role that a given state exerts either as a regulator or inciter of violence. Indeed, for Laitin, the state should be a regulator and, above all, it should provide security to its citizens if it does not want to experience violence. Precisely, the work to study in the following pages (*Nations, States and Violence*) discusses the topics aforementioned in depth.

Nations, States, and Violence studies the issues that derive from building a nation (nation-building), as well as the “challenges of doing so while recognizing the incentives for individuals to coordinate and ultimately to give loyalty to distinct nationality groups within their multinational states” (Laitin 2007:137). Laitin covers the issues of ethnic and national identity by discussing and presenting the findings of previous research conducted in Estonia, Spain, Somalia and Nigeria. In principle, the preservation and promotion of an ethno-cultural diversity constitutes the main proposal of the text. Likewise, the author studies and proposes a liberal-democratic approach for the preservation of such diversity.

The book is divided into five different chapters:

¹ The theory of rational choice has been used by political scientists to study and explain human behavior. Among its most ardent exponents are Gary Becker (1976), Radnitzky and Bernholz (1987), Hogarth and Reder (1987), Swedberg (1990), and Green and Shapiro (1996).

Chapter 1: The Pandemonium of Nations

Chapter 2: National Cascades

Chapter 3: The Cultural Foundations of Nationalism, Nations and the Twenty-First Century State

Chapter 4: Managing the Multinational State

The first part of the book (chapter 1), studies the issue of nationalism and violence. According to Laitin, nationalism can be dangerous, but it cannot be regarded as a main cause of conflict; what is more, as he points out, there is no affinity between national difference and violence whatsoever. In effect, Laitin rejects the proposal that ethnic heterogeneity serves as a means to violence, which has been presented and defended by other scholars and schools of thought. The author presents four mechanisms that link nationalism and violence, with the aim of analyzing the nature of conflict and its supposed relation to nationalism. Laitin presents quantitative data that: indeed, demonstrate the low probability of violence among heterogeneous groups and (surprisingly) the existence of conflict in homogenous groups. For instance, in the case of Africa, the data collected and analyzed showed that communal violence among heterogeneous ethnic groups was very rare (Laitin 2007:11), which would contradict the postulate that diverse ethnic groups that dwell within a given geographical position tend to fight all the time. Now, in terms of the supposed connection between mechanisms of violence and nationalism, Laitin argues that it is not the spirit of nationalism that incites the rebels to confront a state, but the inability of the latter “to provide security for their homesteaders in the region of settlement, and its inability to accurately target those who oppose it” (Laitin 2007:21). In other words, the cause of violence within a nation lies in the state itself.

Chapter 2 concentrates and deals with the question on how nations are formed. In principle, the author presents two conceptions: the first (known as primordial view) postulates that “nations were somehow natural, based on common race, religion, language and geographical zone” (Laitin 2007:29); the second conception (based on Ernest Renan’s proposal) states that “cultures are not given to people by nature, but rather are constructed through collective action and reinforced through the manipulation of collective consciousness” (Laitin 2007:30). Laitin tends to embrace the second position, but asserts that Renan was “half right”. For Laitin, “language serves as a proxy for national identity” and it constitutes an ideal means for unity; hence its importance.

Laitin studies the formation of national identity vis-à-vis the use of language. Here the author presents the Estonian and Catalanian cases as examples on how language can determine the formation of national identity and, subsequently, the foundation of an independent state. In the case of Catalonia, it was the sentiment of cultural and linguistic differences that moved the Catalan people to seek independence from Madrid; similarly, the successful implementation of a Catalan-only policy in the region resulted in the building of stronger cultural ties among the Catalans, and it also obliged non-Catalan speakers (mainly immigrants) to assimilate into mainstream Catalanian society. In the same line, Estonia implemented an Estonian-only language policy by seeking to integrate Russian speakers into Estonian society, which proved to be successful.

The author presents and seeks to answer the question on how former multilingual empires (e.g. Spain, France and Britain) have embraced a national language as the mother tongue of its inhabitants. Laitin answers this question with a floral model of communication (based on de Swaan’s original “floral model”). In principle,

members of each peripheral group tend to speak the language of the center, given the economic and social benefits that such linguistic ability represents for them. Now, in the case of the members of the center, hardly anyone speaks any peripheral language, given that there is no practical need to make use of the rest of languages represented in the region. Similarly, worth mentioning is the conception and definition that the author presents on what a nation is. Laitin defines it as “a population with a coordinated set of beliefs about their cultural identities whose representatives claim ownership of a state for them by dint of that coordination either through separation, or amalgamation, or return” (Laitin 2007:40).

In chapter 3, the author argues that national identity permits individuals “to condition their behavior on common knowledge beliefs about their behavior of all members of the group” (Laitin 2007:64). The chapter introduces the term “culture” and seeks to conceptualize it within different approaches. For Laitin, culture can be conceived as “a resource enabling collective action” (Laitin 2007:61) or as “an equilibrium in a well-defined set of circumstances in which members of a group sharing in common descent, symbolic practices and/or high levels of interaction are able to condition their behavior on common knowledge beliefs about the behavior of all members of the group” (Laitin 2007:64). Here, the author stresses the fact that culture in itself “embeds common knowledge beliefs that are transmitted across generations” (Laitin 2007:78) and, precisely, one of the elements that is transmitted across generations is, without a doubt, language.

In chapter 4, the relationship between nation and state is assessed. Laitin opens the discussion with a question on “whether there is a political logic that ensures the commensurability of nation and state; in other words, will multicultural states break up into their national components?” (Laitin 2007:82) For Laitin, the answer to the previous question is no, Laitin presents and compares the linguistic homogenization that certain countries have gone through (e.g. Spain, France and Japan). In the case of Spain: for instance, given the political power of Castile, *audiencias* were held in Castilian; therefore, those presenting their cases before the king had to be competent in the language of the court (which was Castilian); hence the reason why the Catalans switched from Catalan to Castilian as the language of political affairs and business. In the case of France, as Laitin points out, with the official promulgation of *Francien* (or French), many dialects and languages that were spoken in the region were relegated and their speakers were forced to acquire competence in the new official language, given the economic and political benefits that the common language brought to their lives. Now, in the case of Japan, (which is often described as a natural nation-state) Laitin mentions that it was the promotion of the *yamanote* speech (spoken by the Tokyo middle class) that unified the country from a linguistic point of view.

In the final chapter, Laitin proposes a liberal-democratic mechanism for achieving local homogeneity. According to the author, ethno-linguistic heterogeneity has a negative implication in the sense that it impedes “economic growth and the efficient production of public goods” (Laitin 2007:107). Furthermore, he points out that cultural diversity “weakens the social solidarity necessary for a healthy public life” (Laitin 2007:107). Although Laitin seems to be a bit pessimistic on the theme of cultural diversity and its influence on economy, he presents a liberal-democratic model as a solution to deal and face with such diversity. In principle, a liberal democratic approach would “allow democratic politics to play itself out, permitting groups [...] to carve out administrative zones where their languages (and cultures) could be homogenous” (Laitin 2007:114). In effect, the promotion of a

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liberal-democratic policy would serve as a means to the provision of public goods locally and, according to Laitin, would be of benefit for everyone; although there is a downside: reduced state-level solidarity.

For Laitin, the state plays an important role in the conformation and proper function of a nation. If the state is weak, violence and confrontation will erupt. Precisely, the aforementioned assertion is one of the main arguments of Laitin's work: *Language Policy and Civil War*. In this work, Laitin presents and discusses the existing correlation between linguistic concessions to minority groups and the outbreak of war. The thesis to be presented and argued throughout the work is that, "the steady increase in state recognition of languages appears to signal a trend towards state weakness" (Laitin 2003:183); therefore, civil war is an inevitable manifestation of such weakness. In order to prove his proposal, Laitin studies the relationship between democracy and civil war. According to the Laitinian proposal (based on the Stanford version of Minorities Risk dataset), "in democracies where politics are presumably more amenable to the redressing of grievances, distinct language groups are less likely to receive official recognition" (Laitin 2003:172). In the same line, "language recognition is more a last gasp effort by weak centers (states) to (rather unsuccessfully) stave off rebellion" (Laitin 2003:172).

According to Laitin, there are three general patterns of language recognition and rebellion. These are as follows: a) strong states, weak groups and low probability of war b) weak states, recognition and high probability of war c) advanced industrial states: language recognition in the context of state weakening (but not sufficiently so as to invite insurgency).

Finally, the work presents, what I consider a debated conclusion from David Laitin: "the steady increase in state recognition of languages cannot be interpreted as a trend toward justice; rather it appears to signal a trend towards state weakness" (Laitin 2003:183).

The works of David Laitin present; in effect, an array of topics and proposals to be carefully studied. For instance, the conception of nationalism as detrimental for the development of egalitarian societies has been treated and discussed with precision. Also, the conception of the state as a provider of a given society has been presented and developed in a clear fashion. Indeed, if a nation wants to experience stability and development, the state should be responsible for the implementation of the rule of law and it should stand and exist for its people. Now, when the state lacks coordination and impedes the execution of democracy, that is precisely when violence and conflict erupt. In other words, as Laitin puts it, nationalism should not be regarded as the main means for the eruption of conflict; instead, the attention should be focused on the state. Similarly, I agree with Laitin's position on the lack of relationship between ethnic diversity and conflict/violence. Indeed, there is no inherent reason to think that ethnic diversity in a given country can be a cause of violence. True, there have been instances when this may have been the case, but I argue (as Laitin does) that the origin of such conflict/violence does not reside in the ethnic diversity represented but; rather, it lies on the incapacity of governmental actors to meet the needs of its citizens. Lastly, the arguments presented concerning the preservation of multiculturalism as an antidote against fanaticism and nationalism have been consistent, credible and, in my view, of great importance for the study and research of language rights, language policy and ecolinguistics.

Now, there are three proposals developed by Laitin that I would like to comment and criticize. First, Laitin presents the state as an entity that should meet the needs of the people, which I support. However, his proposal

also sounds a bit extremist in the sense that the state should regulate and dictate the way in which a country should function. For instance, Laitin holds that “weakly institutionalized states cannot commit to minorities that any concessions given to them will still be honored when the state (re) gains its ability to project power” (Laitin 2007:22). Also, Laitin implies that ‘the elimination of minority grievances would be sure fire way of lowering the incidences of civil war (Laitin 2003:182). By “grievances” the author is referring to “language concessions to minority groups”, which, again, I find a bit out of place, especially if one is to advocate for multicultural and linguistic diversity as David Laitin has in previous works.

I, as a citizen of a country where more than 21 languages are spoken², cannot disagree more with Laitin on the role of the state as a “ruler” and the relegation that minorities face. Indeed, I cannot conceive the idea of having one state (controlled by a linguistic group) imposing its will on others. That is not only unfair, but also lamentable; for all groups that dwell in a given geographical region have the right to live and maintain their identities. True, Laitin may regard cultural diversity within a specific geographical territory as a threat to stability and peace, but I assert that diversity (including linguistic) represents a positive aspect and it constitutes an ideal means for the construction of egalitarian and cohesive societies.

A second argument proposed by Laitin is that “heterogeneity (including linguistic) is associated with poor public services and low economic growth. Attempts to achieve justice through revival of long lost heterogeneity are costly and yet provide little if any economic advancement to those who are targeted by linguistic revival programs” (Laitin 2007:112). In my view, linguistic diversity does not impede the economic growth of a given country; on the contrary, it is beneficial and brings with it gains for all citizens and society as a whole. Indeed, economic growth and multilingualism are key in the development of a nation as several scholars have proposed; for instance, Gorter (2004), Graddol (2006), Henley and Ruffel (1993), Grin (1996), and Fernandez (2008) have approached the thematic (referring to linguistic diversity) as an “economic good that generates opportunities for all”. According to the proposal, globalization has had an impact on how the world communicates and does business. It seems as though certain *lingue franche* will not be enough to establish rapport among different groups, given that these are multilingual and; therefore, the use of other languages will prove to be key in the expansion to new markets, which will surely promote the exchange of languages. True, these theories seem to be more appropriate in rich multilingual countries that have; indeed, taken advantage of the plurality represented in their territories to promote economic growth; however, the practice and combination of economic growth and multilingualism can also have positive effects in third-world countries such as Guatemala.

Lastly, for Laitin “language serves as a proxy for national identity” (Laitin 2007:31) and regards it as an indispensable aspect in the unification and construction of a nation. Although I agree with Laitin on the important role language plays in the creation and promotion of national identity, language can also serve as a means of division and fanaticism when it comes to shaping a national identity in a territory where multilingualism is a reality. Now, the author presents and discusses a model on national choice based on the preponderance and

² The linguistic map of Guatemala presents Achi, Akateko, Awakateko, Ch’orti’, Chuj, Itza, Ixil, Jakalteko, Kaqchikel, K’iche’, Mam, Mopan, Poqomam, Poqomchi’, Q’amjib’al, Q’eqchi’, Sakapulteko, Sipakapense, Tektiteko, Tz’utujil and Uspanteko as languages of Mayan origin, Xinka (from the Lenca linguistic community), Garifuna (from the Arawakan linguistic branch) and Castilian (Spanish).

prestige that a given speech (language) obtains within a multilingual area; precisely, that “unfairness” (from a linguistic point of view) and “relegation” that minority groups experience may ignite a sentiment of separation and extremism (typical of nationalism), which can have serious consequences.

I argue that, while language is pivotal in the construction of a nation, a sentiment of belonging to it can be fostered vis-à-vis a sense of coexistence in a multilingual context, but within a common national identity (e.g. the United States of America, Switzerland and Singapore). In effect, it is possible to reconcile both plurality and the sense of belonging to the same state; however, progress needs to be made in the eradication of inequalities and the balance of power within different societal groups.

In sum, the work of David Laitin constitutes an important contribution to the study of nationalism, state foundation and, above all, linguistic diversity, for which it should not be underestimated. What is more, his work serves as an incentive for those of us seeking to address the issues aforementioned; therefore, *Nations, States, and Violence* stands as an invaluable reference of study.

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