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Dominant Nationalism, Dominant Ethnicity: Identity, Federalism and Democracy

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Book Reviews

Dominant Nationalism, Dominant Ethnicity: Identity, Federalism and Democracy
by André Lecours & Geneviève Nootens (Eds). *Brussels, Peter Lang, 2009*, ISBN 978-90-5201-487-6

The editors, Lecours and Nootens, turn the spotlight on to the double standard operated by liberal democracies which, despite having politicized their populations' cultural and ethnic ties, carry on representing the state as culturally neutral. The book opens with an insightful introduction to state nationalism, democracy and federalism, followed by nine wide-ranging multidisciplinary contributions organized around two central questions: how might federalism serve to better accommodate diverse nationalisms and ethnic groups within the same state? And what implications do dominant nationalism and ethnicity have for democracy?

In Chapter One, Eric Kaufmann writes about how dominant ethnicity and dominant nationalism tend to establish the state as their referent and view the nation through the lens of the majority of the population—lenses that may be understood as the Kantian glasses or the Foucaultian grille, depending on our allegiances. Along with these two elements, symbolic resources are also essential for forging national visions as shown, according to Kaufmann, by Canadian nationalism's post-national discursive image, which he considers just another particular dominant nationalism whose referent remains Canada despite its multicultural futurist lens.

Chapter Two, by Daniele Conversi, deals with state-building, assimilation and violence. It is, perhaps, the least compelling chapter of the book since its diverse topics are rather disjointed, diminishing its cohesiveness. Although Conversi is highly regarded amongst English-speaking scholars of nationalism for his expertise in Iberian national identities, his postulated correlation between ethno-political violence and lack of visible cultural variations remains, at least for the Basque case, somewhat hasty.

In contrast, Chapter Three is the most appealing one for those interested in looking deeper into the interface between comparative politics and international relations. Jan Erk argues that French and Dutch dominant nationalisms, as they emerged over the course of the nineteenth century, were shaped not by their internal social structure, but rather by their international positioning. Thus, he brings interstate relations to the fore as the determining variable in explaining the degree of European countries' national unity.

Stephen Tierney maintains, in Chapter Four, and following Kaufmann's line of argument, that dominant constitutionalism prevails, including in Canada, as the main ally of dominant nationalism. This seems to be the outcome of a liberal theory and a liberal constitutional practice that overlook the fact that each state becomes the tool for consolidating the particular features of the dominant national society's specific culture. In the same vein, Alain Gagnon and Raffaele Iacovino suggest, in

Chapter Five, that the dominant political identity tends to unilaterally impose a specific representation of the country in order to hold it together. This ‘unity imperative’ is what leads Canada to undermine the substantive aspirations of distinct societal cultures. They argue that Canada continues to structure federalism around monistic conceptions of citizenship and services rather than around representative governments and constituent nations.

Daniel Béland’s and André Lecours’ approach, in Chapter Six, to the dominant nationalisms of Canada and the United States focuses instead on how welfare policies have been used as nation-building tools. These contributors maintain that social programmes are not only, as in the case of liberal constitutional theory and practice, an outcome of national values but are also constitutive of national identities, since they reinforce symbolic boundaries between countries and sub-state entities.

Chapter Seven, by Jacques Bertrand, analyses the conditions that have led Indonesia to move away from its strong state nationalism and accommodate its multinational reality. Bertrand argues that the key condition has been the democratization Indonesia has undergone in recent decades. This new political context has reduced the state’s ability to repress national minorities, thereby forcing negotiation and compromise towards a more ‘civic’ notion of national identity.

In Chapter Eight, Michael Burgess invites us to relate the study of multinational federations to their historical process of state- and nation-building. Thus, each federation must be examined as a distinct case study, Canada being the one he focuses on. In spite of distinctive features though, there is a common argument that ‘being federal’ not only requires majority nations to tolerate minority ones for the sake of their own interests, but also calls for a voluntary moral imperative. In Canada’s case, this would imply not only appropriate institutional provisions to channel political elites towards operating a multinational federal system, but also an open-ended constitutional dialogue, as suggested by Tully in 1995.

It is precisely James Tully who rounds off the book with a study on the interdependence between diverse federations—specifically federal states, ‘glocal’ federations, quasi-federations, such as the European Union, and the informal federation of global governance. He shows how the latter federation has led to the marginalization of ‘glocal’ federations which evolve from below, and consequently proposes approaching the study of federalism from a broader and more interconnected perspective that would extend the practices and theories of federalism beyond the dominant ones.

Despite the diversity of its contributions, the book is a promising step towards a more systematic analysis of dominant nationalism and dominant ethnicity. It will certainly be fascinating to see how culturally-biased states might be made compatible with multinational and multi-ethnic representative democracies—a task to which not only scholars of nationalism and federalism, but also politicians and society itself, will have to buckle down.