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Book Review: War and Reconciliation: Reason and Emotion in Conflict Resolution by William J. Long and Peter Brecke

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BOOK REVIEWS

William J. Long and Peter Brecke, *War and Reconciliation: Reason and Emotion in Conflict Resolution*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2003). 235 pp.

Emotions are back. You know this is the case when they take center stage in the heady world of rational choice, game theory, and international relations. After hearing about the effects of a public and symbolic reconciliation on a group of antagonistic primates, the authors of *War and Reconciliation* set out to rethink the age-old human question of how and why wars end. Eschewing the rational actor models dominant in political science, they take their cues instead from new developments in evolutionary psychology and neuroscience to explore the role of emotional mechanisms—reconciliation events, in this case—in restoring order after large-scale civil and international conflicts. Long and Brecke are not the first to reintroduce emotions into the study of political life, rather they are in line with a growing number of social scientists conducting systematic research on the emotional dimensions of social movements, violence, decision-making, and conflict resolution.

Reconciliation events are public, symbolic meetings where belligerents express the desire for better relations. To test their role in ending large-scale conflict, the authors adopt a macro-level multi-case comparison. With existing datasets, such as the Conflict Catalogue, and historical secondary sources, they selected eighteen cases of civil (ten cases) and international (eight cases) conflict that roughly span the 1940s to the early 1990s. Reconciliation events occurred in each case but the degree to which violence diminished or persisted thereafter varies a fair amount (determined by time series analysis). The authors find that when belligerents—either two states or sub-national groups—take part in formal reconciliation events, future violence is less likely to occur and social order is more likely to be restored. More interestingly, they discover that success depends on the type of reconciliation event that takes place. Civil conflicts turn out best when parties adopt the full “forgiveness model,” that is, when they sponsor a combination of truth-telling, identity transformation, partial justice and calls for new relations, as was the case in South Africa and Argentina. In cases of

inter-state conflict, such as Egypt/Israel and Poland/West Germany, parties who resort to costly, novel, voluntary and irrevocable concessions—use of what the authors call the “signaling model”—are more successful in de-escalating their wars or improving bi-lateral relations. The authors conclude from these findings that certain kinds of cognition based calculation and bargaining are more effective problem-solving mechanisms in international disputes, while emotional mechanisms such as forgiveness help bring civil conflicts to an end. They explain that the conditions of civil conflict, especially the proximity of hostile parties to each other and the need to be able to live together in the future, necessitate this deeper version of reconciliation. There are too many obstacles and too few incentives for states to engage in forgiveness-style resolutions in the international arena.

Some of this rings true and stands to be useful. Personal experience and recent research do reveal the power of forgiveness to restore order to friendships, families, and romances. It also appears that apologies only work to restore that order when there is a certain “fit” between the hostile situation and the form of the apology. Otherwise, tensions continue to simmer below the surface or explode later on. This suggests that a relational, situational, combinatorial and selective approach to negotiating the end of conflict—including large-scale wars—should work better than a one-size-fits-all approach. It also means that practitioners of conflict resolution will have to spend less time mastering single strategies such as third-party mediation and shuttle diplomacy and more time learning about the history and culture of the groups at war with each other.

There are two major problems in *War and Reconciliation*, both the result of some of the trappings of mainstream political science. Limited to a quantitative macro-methodology, the empirical part of the study, more so than the theoretical discussion, ends up reproducing the very dichotomy it seeks to overcome. If emotions and cognition coexist as human problem-solving processes, each influencing the other, as the authors argue, then why attach them to two different models of reconciliation? Isn't it more credible to argue that forgiveness works in part because it is carefully thought out and orchestrated, and that government leaders choose certain novel and symbolic gestures because they

“feel right”? It is hard to imagine that those involved in reconciliation inside South Africa and between Egypt and Israel didn't draw on elements from both models. Closer inspection of one or two cases, through qualitative sources, could help answer these questions. The impetus to associate emotion with one model of reconciliation and cognition with another may also stem from the overly clear-cut distinction between the two types—“civil” and “inter-state”—of conflict. Messy regional wars (in Latin America and Africa) and hostilities during the break-up of empires (French Indochina/Vietnam) defy easy classification as one or the other.

The biggest disappointment in the book is that the authors never do demonstrate that reconciliation events bring on lasting peace and social order, as they argue from the beginning. The findings do suggest that robust and well-timed reconciliation events do help de-escalate and even halt violent conflicts, that they create opportunities and room for new governments, new institutions, identities and social orders. But there is no evidence that the reconciliation events actually produced the peace and order in the years following war. The authors foster the unwarranted impression that the period following war and resolution is a singular, timeless state rather than a complicated, contingent process driven by multiple mechanisms and factors. Their case studies hint at other more likely independent variables, such as economic stability, successful democratic elections, third party assistance, professionalization and civilianization of the military, and creation of an independent judiciary, in sustaining social order over the long haul. Further research should work to identify which conditions help convert successful reconciliation events into lasting order. Ultimately, *War and Reconciliation* does show that emotions play an important role in jump-starting peace. It also confirms that there is much more involved in maintaining it.

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