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REVIEWS



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PHILIP G. ROEDER, *NATIONAL SECESSION: PERSUASION AND VIOLENCE IN INDEPENDENCE CAMPAIGNS*, CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS, ITHACA, 2018.

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National secession can be defined and understood in several ways. Political theorists tend to justify it as a (remedial or inherent) moral right to territorial separation of political communities from existing states, while legal scholars view it as an (illegal or extralegal) act of creating new subjects of international law. Both approaches place emphasis on the moment of political divorce, which is why political scientists do justice to the given subject of inquiry by also trying to analyze and understand socio-political processes which create right circumstances for (and lead up to) successful and unsuccessful acts of territorial withdrawal.

Philip Roeder's book *National Secession: Persuasion and Violence in Independence Campaigns* can be placed within the latter of the three research categories. It is an important work in a series of attempts to grasp the variables and the logic behind secessionist movements. Yet, it provides a fresh and innovative approach to the old problem of explaining the motives and factors which cause a population (or a proto-nation) of a distinct territory to rebel against the state.

Roeder's starting hypothesis is a solid one. He claims that there are many

potential and existing independence movements, but only some succeed in becoming popular political projects, while an even smaller number of those projects actually manage to achieve their end goal; that of creating a new state. He sets to prove this hypothesis by analyzing the entire process of state creation; from its early beginnings that are to be found within the period when enthusiastic patriots romanticize the idea of national self-determination, across the initial phases in which capable social elites utilize the nationalist narrative in order to create a cause for mobilizing a proto-nation into a potent political group, to the phase in which violence is applied as an effective tool of showing strength and determination, and finally the period in which a window of opportunity opens for the seceding territory to gain international support (without which independence is virtually impossible) and become recognized as a full member of the community of sovereign states, or achieve *de facto* independence without securing a seat in the United Nations.

Roeder believes that nationalist leaders – if they are to completely achieve their goals – must be persistent and ready to endure the political and/

or military struggle against governing authorities while patiently waiting for this window of opportunity to emerge, at which point they must act swiftly in order to secure sufficient support of other states. For Croatia and Slovenia, that opportunity presented itself in the form of a collapsing Communist Bloc, which led to the disintegration of Yugoslavia, while East Timor is an example of a plebiscite being organized at the right time. By providing a comprehensive overview of several secessionist movements and their activities (such as Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Chechnya and Transnistria, to name a few more), the author exemplifies why some have succeeded where others have failed.

However, Roeder does not only rely on illustrative examples in order to achieve the research aims that he sets forward. The author also sets up a comprehensive explanatory theoretical account, one which is tested against and supplemented by a series of qualitative studies. Concentrating on strategic moves and decisions made by independence movement leaders, Roeder shows that a crucial decisive indicator regarding whether or not a territory manages to gain freedom from central authorities is the success rate at which secessionist elites ensure the coordination and fulfillment of expectations of the *populus* in whose name they have proclaimed independence. The diversity of motivations that might stimulate each member of the nation to take up arms or to politically support the state-building cause must be sufficiently articulated through an overarching narrative. This narrative, expressed through a political campaign for independence, should manage to motivate those members of the nation

who really see the secessionist struggle as a worthy cause, but also those who are motivated by narrow self-interests (such as money and power), and those who seek a cause to rebel against the current state of things (regardless of what the political platform for rebellion is).

When it comes to the compositional structure of the elites that are supposed to convey and implement the secessionist political narrative successfully, Roeder is right to notice that the group must include those who are able to persuade, but also those who are able to conduct the “business end of things”, even if this includes violence as a potential resort of achieving results. Without pragmatism and expressed readiness to make sacrifices, an independence movement stands little to no chance of reaching its ultimate goal.

However, perhaps the most important contribution of Roeder’s analysis is that it points to aspects of secessionist struggles which other similar works overlook or take for granted. While many studies of this sort do analyze the inner-dynamics and local politics of groups which strive towards independence, this might be the first book that offers an in-depth comprehensive overlook of how the very structure of an independence campaign is to be set up and conducted if the campaign itself is to be successful and yield desired results. This is the key element which makes *National Secession: Persuasion and Violence in Independence Campaigns* – among other important findings and conclusions that it offers – a well-rounded work of political science, or (more precisely), one which provides new insights into the important subjects of nationalism and secession.