

Nations Torn Asunder: The Challenge of Civil War



MSc student **Bryan Mutiso** provides a comprehensive review of the *'Nations Torn Asunder'* LSE Literary Festival event, which took place on Thursday 23 February 2017.

The question of what makes civil wars so attractive, in the context of the supposed change in the nature of warfare post-WWII, was lucidly discussed at the LSE Literary Festival event 'Nations Torn Asunder'.

Bill Kissane, author of the book *'Nations Torn Asunder'*, is Associate Professor in Politics at the LSE Department of Government, where he has been teaching full-time since 1998. Sharing the panel with him was the veteran war-correspondent, Anthony Loyd, who has covered conflict in Chechnya, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, lived in Bosnia for the duration of the war, and is a critically acclaimed author, himself. Chairing the event was Denisa Kostovicova, who hosted the event with the Conflict Research Group.

Bill Kissane stated that he encountered initial skepticism when he first expressed his wish to write on "civil wars," due to the perceived notion that "you can't say anything general on civil war." He admitted that every context requires particular attention, but puts out a strong rebuttal, pointing out that almost every revolution brings on civil war — it was noted that the Syria and Iraq crises begun as "democratic revolutions" — "So why the gap in the literature?"

While the concept of state fragility in the post-Cold War era has been largely accepted, with an approximate 70 percent occurrence rate in "new states" due to the pattern of decolonisation, discussion of why civil wars are so destructive is far from commensurate. Citing the example of Mozambique, where 900,000 lost their lives over 16 years, Bill Kissane went on to say that the phenomenon largely revolves around issues of development; out of 54 African states, only 8 have not experienced some form of civil war.

Historicising Civil War

Bill Kissane took the audience back to Thucydides, who long ago described civil war as the consequence of democratic politics. Beyond the ancient Greek philosopher, the Romans were

wary of a “war of citizen versus citizen,” as to them this implied an unrecoverable, calamitous situation, whereby the interminable, boundless nature of such warfare would proceed. Hobbes would later ponder over what life is like without state, later concluding that civil war was mere evidence of things that are constantly present in humanity. Bill Kissane also drew on Carl Schmitt’s belief that civil war was the “purest form of human politics”.

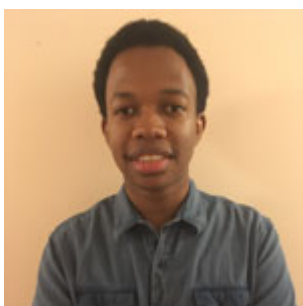
Moving through the ages, the 16th century was presented as a time when “state” came to be seen as the antithesis to civil war. By the 19th century, the unity of political community, or “nation,” was constructed to be sufficiently exclusive to prevent challenge. It was said that today we may enjoy a wider set of tools to address civil war. However, on the somber note that solutions might actually be drivers of conflict, Bill Kissane reasoned that humanity has yet to design a regime-form that is immune from civil war, saying that only, advanced, consolidated, Western democracies, have proven stable. In a plea to all, Bill Kissane supposed that we might overcome civil war if we could create a global nation based on humanity.

The “intimacy of violence”

Anthony Loyd’s reflections on his own observations of civil war as a “crisis of social relations,” evinced another key theme that was touched upon. Loyd related how most people whom he has interviewed over the course of his career personally knew who was behind the gruesome killing of their kin, in what he refers to as “public war crimes”. He took to Bill Kissane’s assertion that cruelty is the aim, and not the by-product of civil wars. As such, Loyd pointedly argued that cultural context is pivotal to defining a post-conflict choice on reconciliation and justice. Above this, he stressed that what most people desire after such brutal violence, is security “above all else,” due to what Bill Kissane termed the “morality of the shaken”.

When asked why identity was not a key focus of the book, Bill Kissane stressed that civil wars involving identity are not obviously more violent, drawing from the example of the Irish nationalists who fought amongst themselves. Regarding the technological age we live in, the role of social media in instigating and/or protracting civil war was one query that elicited an intriguing response. Loyd posited that social media may, in effect, be a “double-edged sword,” where the belief of democratisation as with the “Arab Spring,” was subsequently met with all sorts of violent perpetrators relishing their new-found publicity. Further, it was noted that the pace of globalisation has meant that international proxies may lengthen, and redefine what we mean by “civil war”. This was slightly disheartening in light of the earlier philosophical question on whether civil wars are ultimately formative, or disintegrative, where it was said that earlier eras had civil wars as the catalyst for democratisation.

Overall, the event made for one of the most thrilling events at the LSE Literary Festival. High praise has been heaped on the book for its “daring intellectual effort,” ability to capture the “nitty gritty” details of conflict, and the combinational use of art, poetry, stories, and hard theory. Denisa Kostovicova describes the book as distinguished from the pack, as it has managed to achieve an analytical threshold by grappling with the causes of these conflicts, taking a historical view, and using multiple cases. I’m putting it on my to-read-list, and so should you.



Bryan Mutiso is an MSc Conflict Studies student in the **LSE Department of Government**. His background is Political Science/Sociology and he is interested in Peace-building and “Horn of Africa” affairs.

*Note: this article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the **LSE Department of Government**, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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