FOREGOING IRREDENTISM: THE POWER OF ARGUMENT AND THE RISE OF THE TERRITORIAL STATUS QUO NORM

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BOOK REVIEW

IPPR Volume 5 Number 1 (October 2009)
pp. 79-84
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Quarrels over territory have long been a staple of relations between sovereign states. Several of the most prominent of these so-called irredentist disputes, including India’s and Pakistan’s mutual claim to Kashmir, China’s claim to Taiwan, and Syria’s and Israel’s clashes over the Golan Heights, have for many decades threatened regional and world security. Yet irredentist conflicts are neither predestined to eventually end in bloodshed or the exchange of territory nor are they bound to last forever. Many irredentist conflicts may in fact be settled by the claimants foregoing their demands and accepting existing border arrangements.

In Irredentism and European Politics, Markus Kornprobst convincingly explains how irredentist disputes between European states have been resolved peacefully since the end of the Second World War by casting more light on the role of argumentation and compromise in bringing about both policy change and a deeper-lying, more fundamental normative change. He does so by applying a novel three-stage norm selection mechanism to two case studies: the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the Republic of Ireland. The West German case spans the better part of three decades – the 1950s, 60s and early 70s – between the partition of the Third Reich at the end of the war and the wide acceptance of the territorial status quo under the chancellorship of Willy Brandt. The Irish pendant covers a substantially longer period, from the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty that divided the island into its northern and southern part to eventual dispute settlement in the late 1990s. Both country cases are analysed with great attention to detail and the author draws on an impressive range of sources, including parliamentary debates, newspaper editorials, opinion polls, as well as (auto-) biographies of the relevant German
Chancellors and Irish Prime Ministers. The picture is rounded out by interviews with key decision-makers and advocates involved in each country’s debates on the issue.

The main question posed by Kornprobst is why European states have given up their irredentist claims. A comprehensive survey covering irredentist disputes throughout the world from 1946 to 2000 (from 1848 in Europe) provides a convincing puzzle from which the question is drawn: in a divergence from its own past and the situation in other world regions, European states have largely solved their disagreements through peaceful recognition of the territorial status quo since the end of the Second World War. What explains this variation in outcomes? Expanding on more traditional understandings of irredentism that focus largely on the retrieval of ethnic kin and the land they inhabit from other states, the author starts by defining the phenomenon as “a territorial claim by a sovereign state against another sovereign state, aimed at reaching congruence between the boundaries of the nation and the borders of the state.” While traditional definitions may suit cases such as the claims made by Serbia in the 1990s, the FRG’s claims to lands incorporated into Poland and Russia after 1945 and the Republic of Ireland’s continued claim to Northern Ireland, they are unsuited to explain the FRG’s claims to the GDR – this having been a claim to the whole country and its inhabitants.

Irredentist disputes and their settlement cannot be properly understood, Kornprobst alerts the reader, without taking into account three tightly intertwined ideational factors – the episteme, identity and norms – which together form the repertoire of commonplaces that structures public discourse. As the collection of taken-for-granted beliefs upon which people construct the world around them, the episteme “delineates what is imaginable for actors.” The identity narrative defines what the nation is and how actors see it in relation to others. Later chapters provide empirical evidence that dispute settlement in both the FRG and the Republic of Ireland was driven by advocates who

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3Ibid., pp. 22.
primarily drew on their respective countries’ identity as part of the European Union, employing the norms of peaceful resolution of conflicts and the territorial status quo.

Championed by constructivist scholars, norms have come to play an increasingly important role within International Relations. Analysing norm selection in two country cases by drawing on a great variety of domestic sources spanning several decades, this book contributes to an academic discipline that, despite a few notable exceptions, has not yet devoted enough attention to the often-decisive influence of levels below the international. Despite its title then, this book is not so much a study just of irredentism as the development and testing of an innovative three-stage norm selection mechanism.

According to Kornprobst, various actors involved in the West German and Irish irredentist debates came to select the territorial status quo norm through a process of innovative argumentation (1st stage), persuasive argumentation (2nd stage) and compromise (3rd stage). During the first stage, advocates of change, including prominent intellectuals, made first attempts at reasoning in favour of the territorial status quo. Although their efforts were at first met with staunch opposition in most quarters, these early attempts laid the foundation for a more refined mode of argumentation, crucially supported by revolutionary events – the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961 and the collapse of the Sunningdale Agreement in 1974 – which “made advocates feel compelled to seek a new beginning.”

The new situation clearly required new arguments.

Over time, drawing on historical experience, the Idea of Europe and the norm of peaceful resolution of disputes, the advocacy coalition broadened to include major parties, churches, interest groups and the most influential national newspapers. This no doubt made the difference in persuading the wider public of the necessity of giving up irredentist claims – public opinion in the FRG and the Republic of Ireland turned in favour of this view in the late 1960s an early 1990s, respectively. In both countries, the shift in public opinion put pressure on influential elites either unconvinced of or opposed to foregoing irredentist claims. Wishing to get rid of the costs that come with opposing a majority view, those actors that shared the repertoire of commonplaces settled for a compromise resembling “the original position of the advocates much more closely than

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4 Ibid., p. 135.
the recalcitrant actors’ original stance.\textsuperscript{5} In West Germany, the Christian Democrats largely abandoned their former opposition to Chancellor Brandt’s Ostpolitik and continued to support the territorial status quo norm upon their return to power in the 1980s. In Ireland, Fianna Fáil compromised in support of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, recognising Northern Ireland as rightfully part of the United Kingdom. The development of a mechanism that accounts for both genuine persuasion of the appropriateness of an advocated idea and compromise at the bargaining table in fear of the consequences of non-compliance is a significant advancement over existing accounts of norm selection. Kornprobst’s study of reasoning and argumentation is, therefore, an important further step towards bridging the constructivist-rationalist divide.

It is not lost on the author that the small number of cases examined may lend itself to criticism and it is useful here to compare Irredentism and European Politics to another major work tackling irredentism published in 2008, Saideman and Ayres’ For Kin and Country: Xenophobia, Nationalism and War. Saideman and Ayres, both prolific academics in the field of ethnic conflict and foreign policy, base their work on two sets of irredentist disputes between states in Eastern Europe: one involving “pit bulls” that sought forceful resolutions to their territorial claims, as was on evidence in the violent conflicts engulfing Serbia and Croatia in the early 1990s, and the other involving so-called “silent dogs” that did not bark, such as Hungary and Romania.\textsuperscript{6} Although an integral part of his overall research puzzle, Kornprobst alludes to these cases only in passing, focussing his attention instead on two successful Western European examples. While this may limit the applicability of the findings to other cases, the author does not strive to “resolve the research puzzle of European irredentism once and for all.”\textsuperscript{7} He instead presents the reader with two in-depth case studies testing his theoretical approach to argumentation and norm selection. In effect, Kornprobst devotes considerably more space to each of his cases than comparable works, resulting in a cornucopia of insights that should appeal to social scientists as well as historians. Furthermore, Irredentism and European Politics identifies the emergence of a worldview heavily influenced by the Idea

\textsuperscript{5}Ibid., p. 223.
\textsuperscript{6}Ibid., pp. 12.
\textsuperscript{7}Ibid., pp. 52.
of Europe as an important factor steering domestic debates on the territorial status quo while *For Kin and Country* emphasises the power of xenophobia in driving the dynamics of territorial disputes between states. Each makes valid points and it seems clear that a comparability of cases encompassing both Eastern and Western Europe has its limits. Yet acknowledging that certain outcomes are contingent on a variety of factors allows for each of these works to be seen as offering complementary rather than rival explanations, each filling existing gaps in the literature.

Finally, more attention could have been devoted to economic development and trade in shaping the repertoire of commonplaces and helping to build the basis for a peaceful resolution of territorial disputes. In recent years, the historical literature has begun to shed more light on the crucial role played by trade between the two German states in laying the foundation for the cautious policy of détente (*Entspannungspolitik*) pursued by the FRG in the early 1960s, which in turn fed into Chancellor Brandt’s new *Ostpolitik* and, ultimately, the acceptance of the territorial status quo.\(^8\) West German industry engaged in an economic diplomacy that sought to open trade relations with the Eastern bloc and ease political restrictions, all of which contributed to Bonn’s rapprochement and a greater normalisation of German-German relations\(^9\) (Rudolph, 2004). Furthermore, the West German economic miracle (*Wirtschaftswunder*) of the 1950s and 60s and the resulting increased economic and political importance of the FRG are likely to have played a role in this outcome.

Overall, Kornprobst succeeds in exploring a much denser web of reasoning than has been identified in the literature to date. This well-researched, lucidly written book sheds more light on the puzzle of European irredentism while making an important contribution to theory development in International Relations. In addition, it serves as a rich historical account of public opinion and elite debate on matters of national identity in both Western Germany and the Republic of Ireland. For all these reasons it should be widely read and discussed.

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