

Layton, Robert. *Order and Anarchy: Civil Society, Social Disorder and War.*

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Layton, Robert. *Order and Anarchy: Civil Society, Social Disorder and War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

At its most basic level, Robert Layton argues that social order reacts to changes in the economic and social environment in ways that are analogous to evolutionary adaptations reacting to changes in the physical environment. Social arrangements represent equilibria that best fit the current economic and social milieu. When, or if, that environment changes, then the once “fit” social order becomes inefficient and needs to, and will be, replaced by an order more adapted to the current environment.

This highlights what I think is a critical insight of Layton’s book. Political development is not a linear or even progressive process. Political orders do not improve across time in that institutions today are not “better” than they were a thousand years ago. Clearly, they are more efficient at extracting resources, but this is because they were forced to adapt to an environment that rewarded resource extraction. There is no guarantee that this environment will exist indefinitely and so the future structure of states, or social order, is not predictable.

Layton also attacks common interpretations of civil society. According to Layton, civil society (p. 11) refers to “social organizations occupying the space between the household and the state that enable people to co-ordinate their management of resources and activities.” The previous conceptions of civil society as uniquely associated with commercial capitalism and the enclosure debate is too narrow and politically biased. For instance, these preceding views essentially excluded ethnic groups from a discussion of civil society. Layton argues, in contrast, that these groups are formed for precisely the same reasons as voluntary associations, political parties, and so on. In particular, if “the concept of civil society was devised to explain how people acting rationally in their self-interest can create a stable fabric of social relations . . . [then] this approach should be tested against all forms of human society.” (p. 45)

From this perspective the “breakdown” of civil society during the war in Yugoslavia was not a breakdown but the development of a new form of civil society. By appealing to ethnic grouping and ethnic politics, individuals were not eschewing civil society but were simply responding to changes in the economic and political environment by developing another type of civil society. From this perspective civil society does not always correlate with civil order, and this is why Layton wants to expand the conception of civil society.

The decision to engage in alternative forms of civil society is, according to Layton, completely rational. In fact, he notes (p. 46) that “different social strategies are most likely to succeed in different social environments, and if the social context deteriorates (as it did with the collapse of socialism in Yugoslavia), people may respond by narrowing the scope of their social relationships.”

Individuals in a society clearly act in ways to maximize their utility, and when they are confronted with changes in their social environment, they react in ways that maximize their ability to survive.

While Layton's book presents an intriguing argument, I think it could be improved upon in two main ways. First, given the scope of his argument, it seems superficial at times. This is understandable because in order to develop his theory he touches on a number of subjects ranging from civil society to rational choice to civil war. That being said, the engagement with the previous literature and arguments is shallower than would be ideal. Second, while it is admirable that Layton examines a variety of cases, it is not always clear as to how they relate to his larger argument. While many of the cases certainly address his theory, there does not seem to be any definitive tests of his main theoretical contention.

Taking a step back, Layton simply wants to understand why social change occurs in an orderly fashion in some cases and violently in others. One of the most critical factors is the ability of individuals to build mutual trust. When social change undermines trust, then individuals will rationally narrow their social relations. This can lead to the development of ethnic politics or other relations that amplify instability. This argument is not meant to justify violence but to understand it. In fact Layton (p. 173) explicitly notes that "violence is not inevitable . . . but a response to particular conditions in the ecology of society. . . . Socially disruptive actions are sometimes, from the actor's perspective, rational, and civil war is not treated as an outbreak of irrationality, but as a reasoned response to particular social conditions."

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Davenport, Christian. *State Repression and the Domestic Democratic Peace*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Arguably the most solid empirical finding in international relations is that democracies do not go to war with each other. Scholars working in the so-called democratic peace research program offer many contending explanations, but a consensus has emerged that the likelihood of full-scale war between two democracies is extremely low. This proposition began as a statement about the propensity of democracies to engage in war and has been refined based on improved theoretical explanations and empirical tests.

Like the democratic peace in international relations, the domestic democratic peace, or the notion that democracies are more pacific in their relations