

Ellen Lust-Okar, *Structuring Conflict in the Arab World: Incumbents, Opponents, and Institutions*

Faten Ghosn

Volume 29, spring 2009

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs29br03>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)

1715-5673 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Ghosn, F. (2009). Compte rendu de [Ellen Lust-Okar, *Structuring Conflict in the Arab World: Incumbents, Opponents, and Institutions*]. *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 29, 0-0.

mechanisms for interrupting the conflict cycle but concludes that, since no two societies or civil wars are alike (a theme throughout the work), there is no “universal blueprint” for peace or reconstruction.

Two problems mar the work. First, Misra is too quick to make unsupported assertions about history. In arguing that large territory makes revolutionary civil war difficult for would-be rebels, Misra argues that “there has never been any serious attempt to seize the power of the state” in Russia, India, or Indonesia. (p. 24) Surely, the 1918-1921 Russian Civil War and even the 1953 Darul Islam revolt in Indonesia serve as counter-evidence for this hypothesis. The same hasty generalization is found when Misra discusses the well-known commitment problem:

Negotiated settlements always produce a scenario where one group or party is naturally less powerful than the other. In a scenario where the state and rebel groups enter a peace settlement the latter always end up with a lower position of strength in the overall military balance or equation. (p. 99)

No evidence is provided for this assertion that all governments are more powerful than all rebel movements. Second, Misra fails to make specific or testable predictions, often settling for vague statements of little use to scholars or practitioners. For example, Misra argues that both “greed” and “grievance” play a role in civil war initiation — a stand on the position long since adopted by scholars on both sides of the divide. Similarly, Misra waffles on globalization: “While there is some truth in the argument that economic globalization precipitates conflict in a fragile state the opposite can often be true in some cases.” (p. 37)

This vagueness re-emerges in his discussion of nation-building efforts:

. . . the process of nation-building is successful where the post-conflict community is enlightened and capable, where the citizens forego their previous animosity against one another, make sacrifices for the future well-being of all, and embrace the universal values. In the absence of these fundamental prerequisites, it is hard to attempt any meaningful and reasonable state-building. . . . (p. 94)

Few scholars attempt to deal with every aspect of civil war in one study, and this book synthesizes a vast body of literature, drawing attention to unsolved puzzles. Its primary failure lies in its inability to define its core concepts — nationalism and nation-building — precisely enough to make specific and testable predictions about civil wars. Even though it ultimately fails to solve the puzzles it presents, the scope and ambition of the work make it useful as a starting point for those searching for common threads between the different stages of civil war.

Jeffrey Dixon is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Social Sciences at Tarleton State University.

Lust-Okar, Ellen. *Structuring Conflict in the Arab World: Incumbents, Opponents, and Institutions*. New York: Cambridge, 2005.

In her book *Structuring Conflict in the Arab World: Incumbents, Opponents, and Institutions*, Ellen Lust-Okar investigates the conditions under which political opponents take advantage of economic crises to press their political demands. While many studies have attempted to explain the impact of economic crises on political reform by focusing on the nature of the economic crises, the strength of the civil society, regime type, and elite satisfaction, Lust-Okar argues that they have failed to predict when political elites are willing to push their demands for political reform as they do not take into consideration the structure of contestation. Therefore, the main argument of her book is that the structure of contestation, which determines who is and is not allowed to participate in the political arena, explains “both the dynamics of government-opposition relations and when liberalization is more and less likely to be stable.” (p. 5)

Lust-Okar maintains that there are three ideal types of contestation structures within nondemocratic states: first, inclusive, unified structure of contestation; second, exclusive, unified structure of contestation; and third, divided structure of contestation. (p. 38-40) In an inclusive, unified structure of contestation, all political opponents are allowed to participate in the formal political sphere but their participation is controlled by the incumbent elites. In contrast, in an exclusive, unified structure of contestation, no political opponents are allowed to participate in the system. The divided structure of contestation provides a middle ground between the former two types as it allows some political opponents to participate in the political system while excluding others. By focusing on the relationship between opposition groups and the incumbent elites, the relationship between competing opposition

groups, and the incumbent elites' ability to manipulate their relations (p. 22), we can predict the dynamic of opposition during prolonged economic crises.

According to Lust-Okar, an "opposition group's inclusion or exclusion from the formal political sphere, and the structure of contestation within which a group acts, influences the incentives that the opponents face when deciding whether or not to challenge the incumbent elites." (p. 68) In a unified structure of contestation, inclusive and exclusive, we find that as an economic crisis drags on the opposition is increasingly willing to challenge the government since they do not expect to be repressed more severely if they join with more radical groups to demand political reform. However, in a divided structure of contestation, the dynamics are quite different since some groups are allowed into the system while others are not. Included opponents that are allowed to challenge the regime pay lower costs for mobilization than illegal opponents do; however, their demands are constrained as they must seek balance between the restrictions of the incumbent elites and popular dissatisfaction. As a result, we are more likely to witness such groups mobilizing early on in an economic crisis in order to relieve popular pressure without creating an unstable situation that may be exploited by opponents outside the system. In contrast, illegal opponents face higher costs for mobilizing against the state, but they are also more capable of capitalizing on the rising popular discontent that usually accompanies prolonged economic crises.

To determine the dynamics under each structure of contestation, Lust-Okar utilizes formal models to build hypotheses and then combines them with case studies from Morocco, Jordan, and Egypt for validation and interpretation. By focusing on the structure of contestation in each of the cases Lust-Okar's theory is borne out through the case studies. She shows how Jordan and Egypt under Nasir and Sadat had unified structures of contestation, and as a result, political opponents were more willing to challenge the incumbent elites as the crises continued. On the other hand, in Morocco and Egypt under Mubarak, there was a divided structure of contestation. In these cases, the legal opposition was unwilling to challenge the state as the economic crises dragged on.

Lust-Okar's contribution in this book is threefold: first, she combines formal models with detailed case studies from the Middle East; second, she contributes to our understanding of the impact of economic crises on political reform; and last but not least, she focuses on the role of institutional rules that govern the opposition, demonstrating that political systems are independent of political regimes — a dimension that is usually overlooked in studies on authoritarian regimes, as the main assumption is that formal institutions make little difference in such regimes.

Faten Ghosn is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Arizona.

Leoussi, Athena S., and Grosby, Steven eds. *Nationalism and Ethnosymbolism: History, Culture and Ethnicity in the Formation of Nations*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.

This important collection of 20 new essays on ethnosymbolism brings together some very strong studies from various theoretical, national, and comparative perspectives. According to the editors of this interdisciplinary and collective effort, the core concept of "Ethnosymbolism" in itself had been coined by Anthony D. Smith in his numerous books, including *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (1986), *National Identity* (1991), and *Nationalism in a Global Era* (1996). (And Professor Smith has written a welcome afterword here.) In their Introduction, in order to articulate the concept of ethnosymbolism in terms of time, space, and culture, both editors argue that: "For a nation to exist, there must be a symbolic representation of a territory such that, when acknowledged and thereby incorporated as part of the understanding of the self, a territorial relation, a territorial kinship, is posited over time." (p. 6) Obviously, these shared symbols of a nation located in a given place have to be defined, negotiated, and accepted by a group or nation.

The first half of the book is more conceptual, theoretical, and interdisciplinary, while the second half gathers twelve case studies related to a specific country or nation, with examples coming from all continents, including (among many themes) post-Apartheid South Africa, the Taiwan/China dilemma, Aborigines in Ecuador, the Middle East, and Israel. In the first section, two authors try to link national culture with national identity and nationalism in a given country, in this case with the classical music of Vaughan Williams in England.