



**Roger Dale Petersen.** *Western Intervention in the Balkans: The Strategic Use of Emotion in Conflict.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. xii + 333 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-107-01066-6; \$32.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-28126-3.

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**Published on** H-Diplo (May, 2012)

**Commissioned by** Seth Offenbach

### Rational Choice with a Human Face

In 2003 an unusually forthcoming U.S. battalion commander told the *New York Times* how he would win Iraqi hearts and minds: “With a heavy dose of fear and violence, and a lot of money for projects, I think we can convince these people that we are here to help them.”[1] To Roger Petersen, an MIT political scientist, this statement epitomizes the problem with Western military intervention—a problem his own colleagues have abetted (p. 5). U.S. political scientists, like the commander in Iraq and the West in general, assume human beings are narrowly rational, influenced overwhelmingly by material incentives, Petersen argues. In thrall to rational choice theory, they have blamed ethnic conflict on the machinations of a few people in society, usually politicians or criminals. The apotheosis of this approach came in 2005 when Edward Glaeser, the entrepreneurial economist, posited that hatred was peddled by power-seeking politicians and accepted by populations according to their “supply” and “demand” for it.[2]

Petersen will have none of that. He took four long trips to the Balkans over the course of a decade. He conducted many interviews, aided by his Serbian-speaking wife, and reports that he was shown “respect and kindness all over the region” (p. xii). He is, in short, hardly reducible to a theory-obsessed political scientist. What he found in the Balkans was that societies had undergone painful experiences of ethnic violence, prejudice, and subordination. Such experiences fostered emotions powerful enough to overcome the “carrots and sticks” dangled by an expectant West. Thus from 1991 to 2008 the Yugoslav successor states defied massively financed Western efforts to transform them into multiethnic societies, and not because the peoples of the region were somehow irrational.

“Emotions,” Petersen argues, constituted the invisible strategic resource that overcame the Western advantage in the tangibles of guns and money. Petersen’s attention to emotions is the book’s chief novelty. It enlarges a growing, multidisciplinary literature that seeks to integrate emotionality into the study of social relations in a sophisticated manner, befitting the increasing belief that the Cartesian duality between reason and emotion is a construct of Western culture rather than a feature of actual mental processing.[3]

To this Petersen adds a theory of emotions tailored to the situations of ethnic conflict and humanitarian intervention. He thinks that particular experiences produce a corresponding emotion in society at large. Each of these emotions, in turn, tends to generate a distinctive action. For example, the experience of violence triggers the emotions of fear, when the perception of danger is acute, and anger, when an identifiable group seems to have purposefully targeted one’s own. Whether fear or anger predominates has consequences: fear gives rise to a fight-or-flight impulse that reduces risk in order to preserve oneself, whereas anger produces a desire to punish whoever seems responsible. The experience of a reversal of status, by contrast, tends to make the subordinate group feel resentful and act to reverse the status hierarchy. Finally, experiences of stigma and prejudice breed contempt and hatred. Although both of these emotions are premised on a perception of the other group’s inferiority, they are not equivalent. Contempt leads merely to the avoidance of the other, but if the opponent comes to look dangerous, contempt turns into hatred and inspires efforts to achieve physical elimination. Even in the Balkans, genuine hatred was rare, Petersen implies: pervasive in Kosovo but scarce

elsewhere.

Regardless of whether this theory is convincing, it attributes an importance to emotions that makes the concrete experiences and subjectivities of Balkans societies important to understand. The second half of the book contains narratives spacious enough to let readers put their own interpretations on the collision of Western hopes with Balkan realities. Petersen follows the fate of eight agreements brokered by the West, concentrating on Kosovo while devoting a chapter each to Bosnia, Macedonia, Montenegro, and South Serbia. The last of these has received little attention from scholars, and Petersen writes movingly of its plight. When NATO intervened in Kosovo, Albanians hoped to escape their subordination in South Serbia through a strategy similar to that of the Kosovo Liberation Army, he claims: they attacked Serbian police in order to provoke an overreaction that would cause Western intervention in their defense. Instead, the Serbian government, now rid of Slobodan Milosevic, was eager to please the West and participated in a NATO-brokered settlement that has left the area peaceful but poor, divided, and forgotten. Albanians there still suffer systemic discrimination. “The obvious lesson to be learned,” Petersen concludes, “is that violence is the best way to get the West’s attention” (pp. 219, 221). Petersen is similarly unsparing about intervention and nation-building in Kosovo, which he finds to be impoverished and monoethnic despite tens of billions of Western dollars spent to make it a model state.

What has emotion to do with these lamentable outcomes? Plenty, to be sure, but proving that much of a population is imbued with anger, resentment, or contempt is hardly a straightforward undertaking, and Petersen more declares than demonstrates such claims. He establishes the existence of emotion largely by inference from political outcomes: actors in the Balkans thwarted Western goals, so they must have used emotions in order to redress the West’s material superiority. But emotions are not the only resources at the disposal of those who resist foreign intervention. They tend to enjoy greater local knowledge, popular legitimacy, and political will than the intervening powers can muster. Emotions deserve to be integrated into these factors but should not be isolated from them, much less singled out as the difference maker.

Further, Petersen’s treatment of emotions often sounds surprisingly rationalistic. Despite quoting so-

ciologist Theodore D. Kemper, who allows that emotions can result from “imagined outcomes of social relationships,” Petersen does little to trace the ideological and discursive schemas that helped to constitute emotions in the first place and to determine the actions that emotions motivated.[4] Under Petersen’s theory, a certain experience, typically violence, yields its correlating emotion and thence “action tendency.” How insubstantial, one wonders, can an “experience” be? How far could Petersen’s theory explain, say, the Nazis’ identification of Jews as a grave threat to the physical existence of the German *volk*, or Ottoman authorities’ fantastical perception of Armenians, and the genocides that followed?[5] What of the role of institutions in constituting emotions and channeling them into action? Perhaps it is a narrow conception of and focus on emotions that permits Petersen to come to the jarring conclusion that “history has ended in the Western Balkans” and “the era of massive violence and isolation appears to be over,” all thanks to the arrival of European integration heralded by the formation of a pro-EU Serbian government in 2008 (pp. 293, 4).

A more convincing demonstration might confine itself to one or two of Petersen’s eight cases in order to offer a close reading of evidence of popular subjectivities and attend to the constant feedback among emotion, belief, and action in relation to Western intervention. Petersen cannot take this route, however, because, far from opposing rational choice theory, he is actually out to save it from its own excesses. Petersen translates Western intervention in the Balkans into a series of “games” in which local “political entrepreneurs” choose to cooperate or defect. He wants to add emotions without sacrificing all-important “rigor and parsimony” (p. 14). He must say enough about the Balkans to seem to convey the causes and impacts of popular emotions, but not so much as to undermine the apparent transportability and predictive value of his theory. Rational choice with a human face: does he—could anyone—succeed?

Like Alexander Dubček, Petersen deserves credit for trying. In Petersen’s hands, moreover, rational choice aims less to show the prince how to get what he wants than to tell him why his worldview is misconceived. Yet the rational choice set-up limits Petersen’s critical power from the start, by restricting the faults he finds in Western intervention to those that can be remedied via new inputs into game theory. Game theory cannot critique the game itself, only how the game is played. As an influence on pol-

icy, it embodies some of the deepest problems with intervention: the reliance on synoptic knowledge at the expense of local knowledge and the desire to satisfy the preferences of intervening states without being held accountable to local populations. In any case, Western declarations of intent to promote ethnic harmony should not be taken at face value. In Petersen's own telling, the United States sanctioned Operation Storm, Croatia's three-month ethnic-cleansing operation against Serbs in 1995 (p. 122). More profoundly, the international community might have reified and prolonged ethnic divides, especially in Bosnia and Kosovo, by insisting on brokering settlements that distributed power and territory on ethnic lines. Not least, the humanitarian ideology that compels the West to stop the misdeeds of others simultaneously vitiates the efficacy of its actions. Captivated by spectacular wrongs perpetrated against passive sufferers, the West loses interest once the crisis abates or the victims reveal themselves to be active political agents. This humanitarian ideology, by depoliticizing the most intense of political conflicts, can render inaccessible whatever insights strategic thinking has to offer.

Petersen's neglect of the West's emotions is therefore his most striking omission. A story of the rationalistic West and the emotional rest will not do. Not only does Petersen pay no attention to Western emotions beyond a passing reference to their existence (p. 15), but he does not account for the emotions that the subjects of intervention feel toward the West—no small matter given that anxieties about a group's control over its destiny fuel ethnic conflict from the beginning. Petersen also exaggerates Western rationalism in another way. He supposes that the tenets of U.S. political science embody those of "the West," but he engages in no cultural analysis of Western images of human nature or non-Western peoples. "The West," he asserts, "does not believe in hatred" (p. 166). A cursory reading of Western interpretations of ethnic conflict in the Balkans, which British prime minister John Major infamously attributed to "ancient hatreds," suggests all is not so simple.<sup>[6]</sup> Petersen's claim that "many in the West" believe forces like hatred account for the plight of "the Roma or the Jews during the Holocaust, but surely few others" is belied by the stream of Holocaust analogies applied to the

Balkans as elsewhere (p. 133).<sup>[7]</sup> Western thinking does not so much hew to a narrowly rational image of human nature as it vacillates between the crudely conceived extremes of materialistic rationality, on the one hand, and emotional or ideational non- or irrationality, on the other.

Part of Petersen seems intent on transcending this predicament. But another part exemplifies it, and this part dominates the book. Ambitiously yoking rational choice to emotion theory and narrative history, Petersen delivers some local insights but confronts neither the contradictions in his assumptions and method nor the implausibility of his ultimate conclusion that the West believes human beings do not experience powerful emotions and that this explains the failings of Western military intervention.

#### Notes

[1]. Dexter Filkins, "Tough News Tactics by U.S. Tighten Grip on Iraq Towns," *New York Times*, December 7, 2003.

[2]. Edward Glaeser, "The Political Economy of Hatred," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 120, no. 1 (February 2005): 45-86.

[3]. See William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); in the subfield of diplomatic history, see most recently Frank Costigliola, *Roosevelt's Lost Alliances: How Personal Politics Helped Start the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

[4]. Theodore D. Kemper, "A Structural Approach to Social Movement Emotions," in *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements*, ed. Jeff Goodwin, James Jasper, and Francesca Polletta (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 59.

[5]. See Dirk Moses, "Paranoia and Partisanship: Genocide Studies, Holocaust Historiography and the 'Apocalyptic Conuncture,'" *The Historical Journal* 54, no. 2 (June 2011): 553-583.

[6]. European Council (Copenhagen), *Hansard*, 227, June 23, 1993, col. 324.

[7]. Michael Desch, "The Myth of Abandonment: The Use and Abuse of the Holocaust Analogy," *Security Studies* 15, no. 1 (January-March 2006): 106-145.

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**Citation:** Stephen Wertheim. Review of Petersen, Roger Dale, *Western Intervention in the Balkans: The Strategic Use of Emotion in Conflict*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. May, 2012.

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