BOOK REVIEW

Peace by Design: Managing Intrastate Conflict through Decentralization

By Dawn Brancati

Reviewed by Aisling Lyon[1]

For many years, academics and policy makers alike have been preoccupied with whether or not political decentralisation can manage intra-state conflict and the secessionist tendencies of minority ethnic communities. Dawn Brancati's book 'Peace by Design', however, shifts the focus of this debate to when decentralisation is effective at managing ethnic conflict and under what conditions. The main premise of her argument is two-fold:

- decentralisation increases the strength of regional parties through regional legislatures, which *reduces* ethnic conflict by giving groups control over their political, social, and economic affairs; yet

- decentralisation increases ethnic conflict *indirectly* by encouraging the growth of regional political parties, which reinforces ethnic identities and encourages groups to engage in ethnic conflict and ultimately secessionism.

Brancati proposes that in the past, when academics argued that decentralisation increases the risk of ethnic conflict, they were in fact observing the effect of regional parties on ethnic conflict, rather than decentralisation itself. Brancati suggests decentralisation can reduce

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intra-state conflict in democracies, but its effectiveness depends on the shape of the political party system, and the balance it strikes between state-wide and regional parties. Understanding how certain features of decentralisation promote regional parties over non-regional or 'state-wide' parties is therefore essential to explaining why decentralisation does not always reduce intra-state conflict and secessionism.

Based on limited case study analysis of the experience of political decentralisation in Czechoslovakia, Spain and India, along with the statistical analysis of the election results from fifty countries over a period of 15 years (1985 - 2000), Brancati's analysis demonstrates that, even when controlling for other contextual characteristics, as regional parties win more votes the likelihood of decentralisation reducing ethnic conflict diminishes (Brancati, 2009:158, 193). She identifies the following aspects of decentralisation, which can strengthen regional and ethnic parties at the expense of more salutary state-wide parties:

- the proportion of seats individual regions have in a national legislature;

- the number and size of regional large legislatures in a country;

- the method used to elect national upper houses;

- the timing of national and regional elections; and

- whether countries are undergoing democratic transitions.

Brancati suggests that in order to creat the most appropriate conditions for political decentralisation to successfully manage ethnic conflict and seccessionism, countries should 'design' decentralised institutions that not only reduce the electoral strength of regional parties, but also prevent regional parties from overwhelming the political arena.

'Peace by Design' is divided into three parts. In the first section Brancati develops her arguments; explaining why regional parties are more likely than state-wide parties to intensify ethnic conflict and secessionism in democratic countries. In the second part (chapters 3 - 5) she carries out a comparative case study analysis of three countries (Czechoslovakia, Spain and India) to examine their experiences with political decentralisation. In the final section, Brancati tests the generalisability of the hypotheses she derives from the case studies through statistical analysis, whilst controlling for a number of other factors that may also affect ethnic conflict and secessionism, such as level of democracy and extent of economic development.

By basing her research on primarily quantitative data and statistical analysis, Brancati adopts an unusual research approach. Many prominent peace researchers interested in ethnic conflict, and in particular political decentralisation and ethnic conflict, take a case study approach to their research, using qualitative data. Whilst these qualitative case studies are "useful for generating interesting ideas about decentralisation", Brancati asserts "these illustrations and case studies do not provide strong evidence of their claims" (Brancati, 2006: 653). She further comments on the fact that, according to Brancati, studies are generally selected on the dependent variable, that is, ethnic conflict and/or secessionism, as opposed to her own research, which is based on the independent variable (political decentralisation)

(Brancati, 2006: 653). The consequence being that, to date, the majority of studies claiming decentralisation *decreases* ethnic conflict have been based on successful examples of decentralisation; whilst those studies claiming decentralisation *increases* ethnic conflict have been based on failed examples of decentralisation.

Brancati took great care to accurately quantify a variety of concepts appropriate to her research interest, and she conceptualised, operationalised and measured variables with great skill. Brancati's choice of statistical test was also appropriate to the data upon which her analysis is based, and the data sources utilised to operationalise variables are credible. However, I do not consider the research Brancati presents in 'Peace by Design' successfully achieves its objective, since the simplification which inevitably occurs when one attempts to quantify social phenomena results in a failure to capture the subtleties and meaning of such a complex social phenomenon.   As Prof. Daniel Little notes, the discovery of a statistical regularity among variables is not in itself explanatory; rather it constitutes an empirical description of social phenomena that in itself demands explanation (Little, 1991: 177,179).

Brancati's innovative analysis does makes a valuable contribution to the ongoing academic debate regarding whether or not decentralisation is an effective tool in mitigating intra-state conflict. Whilst on its own Brancati's statistical analysis may not provide all the answers, her research does indeed provide a strong basis from which to further investigate this complex social phenomena through other research approaches.

References

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