

Why African Americans Do Not Rebel? How Hierarchic Integration Prevents Rebellion

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Mobilization and Conflict in Multiethnic States, by Manuel Vogt, New York, Oxford University Press, 2019, \$74.00 (hardcover), ISBN 9780190065874.

Why African Americans do *not* rebel? Why is there no armed insurrection of African Americans across the USA, especially in cities and states where they make up almost half of the population? In many parts of the world, ethnic, racial, and religious groups that are much smaller in size, much less disadvantaged socioeconomically and politically, and with relatively fewer historical grievances than African Americans, launched armed insurrections that lasted for decades. The quiescence of African Americans is a momentous puzzle if one subscribes to grievance-based theories of violent ethnic insurgencies (e.g., Gurr 1970). There are more than 40 million African Americans in the USA, which makes them a more populous ethnic group or a potential nation than any Eastern European nation in the European Union. Yet, approximately 40 million African Americans, despite their high level of collective consciousness and multifaceted grievances, did not produce as much armed insurgency as less than three million Basques in Spain have, to expand a comparison Manuel Vogt (4) briefly alludes to. What accounts for this dramatic difference?

Mobilization and Conflict in Multiethnic States provides an answer to the following question in a comparative perspective: “Why is ethnic mobilization more likely to trigger violent conflict in some countries than in others?” (1). In a nutshell, colonial settler societies such as the USA and the rest of the Americas are stratified societies characterized by very rigid ethnic hierarchies and a high level of integration (read assimilation), making it nearly impossible for the subordinated ethnic groups such as African Americans to rebel. In contrast, ethnic groups in decolonized African polities are characterized by unranked and segmented ethnic cleavages that are particularly prone to violent ethnic mobilization. This partially results in what I understand as an inverted-U relationship between inequality and rebellion; the most egregiously oppressed and thoroughly assimilated ethnic groups in colonial settler polities cannot rebel. However, the effect of inequality (hierarchization), the first dimension of Vogt’s theory, is conditioned by the second dimension of his theory, which is whether the group is integrated (i.e., assimilated, having the same religion and language as the majority) or, on the contrary, segmented. The combination of high inequality and high integration makes ethnic rebellion nearly impossible. In contrast, linguistic and religious differences are the indicators of segmentation that endow ethnic groups in decolonized African polities with the capacity to mobilize and, when necessary, rebel in pursuit of their interests, especially in the absence of historically rigid inequalities (hierarchies) between ethnic groups. Applying Vogt’s main argument to the question I posed in framing my commentary, I understand that African Americans do not have the capacity to rebel because they do not have a different religion or language that

distinguishes them from the dominant, White American majority—namely, they are both (mostly Protestant) Christian and English speaking.

Vogt focuses on “ethnic cleavages that emerged as the result of European overseas colonialism, one of the most powerful global forces of state-building” (3), and also “the most powerful instance of foreign rule in modern history” (94). Indeed, all of the Americas, Oceania, and Africa (except for Ethiopia and Liberia), and almost all of south and southeast Asia, were colonized by European powers. Only nine non-European multiethnic polities—namely, China, Ethiopia, Iran, Japan, Liberia, Nepal, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, and Turkey—escaped being colonized by European powers (31), which is an astounding fact. In a nutshell, Vogt argues that European settler colonies produced stratified societies, which are defined by a stable hierarchy of ethnic groups with European-origin settlers on top, combined with a high level of integration, which is defined as the relative lack of religious or linguistic differences between the former colonizer and the colonized (9). In contrast, decolonized states without settlers have segmented (as opposed to integrated) and unranked (as opposed to hierarchized) ethnic cleavages where various indigenous ethnic groups often dominate in different regions. Vogt expects “the extremely unequal colonial settler states to experience fewer and less lethal ethnic civil conflicts but higher levels of peaceful ethnopolitical contention than the decolonized states” (12–13). Subordinated ethnic groups in stratified societies, which are characterized by what he calls “the equilibrium of inequality” (e.g., 13, 44), are forced to adopt nonviolent, peaceful protest because of their weakness. All of the Americas with the exception of Guyana exemplify colonial settler states (hence stratified societies), whereas all sub-Saharan African states with the exceptions of South Africa and Zimbabwe are decolonized states, hence resulting in segmented, unranked societies (31). Thus, Vogt identifies two distinct postcolonial legacies, which correspond to two different patterns of ethnic conflict. “This integrated approach, thus, explains both *why* ethnic groups rebel and *how* they rebel and thereby helps us understand why some of the most unequal societies of today’s world experience mostly peaceful ethnic group mobilization” (3; Vogt’s italics). This divergence is not due to a democratic, institutional advantage that makes some countries more amenable to nonviolent mobilization, since Bolivia and Ecuador, with “highly unfavorable political institutions,” have “peaceful dynamics of ethnic mobilization [that] are surprisingly similar to those of the Civil Rights movement in the United States, a country with an allegedly favorable institutional legacy” (5). The theoretical argument is very convincing and thought-provoking, even though I have some disagreements, especially with a few of the applications of the theory beyond the Americas, as I discuss further below.

A related argument of the book is its political assessment of the role that ethnic organizations play in these two different types of societies: Vogt expects “ethnic organizations to exacerbate existing intergroup competition in segmented, unranked societies, undermining ethnic equality and increasing the risk of civil conflict,” whereas “in stratified societies, ethnic organizations should assume an emancipatory function, fostering the political inclusion of historically marginalized groups” (102). Thus, ethnic organizations are a force for good in the Americas, while ethnic organizations cause inequality, conflict, and violence in most of Africa, and in unranked, segmented societies elsewhere. It is a testimony to the theoretical originality and empirical richness of this book that reading it provoked dozens of page-specific comments, criticisms, and questions, which I will try to pose throughout my commentary.

In some of the empirical applications, the definitions of ethnicity appear blurred and conflated with other social categories. For example, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is considered as “an ethnic organization because its leaders and members follow a clear ethnoreligious political agenda that excludes the country’s Christian minority” (14), but based on such an approach, religion and ethnicity may become coterminous, and this runs counter to the Weberian definition of ethnicity as subjective belief in common descent or blood kinship with which Vogt otherwise seems to agree (23). In other words, it is unclear why and how the Muslim Brotherhood, or any other Islamic (or Christian) organization, can be considered an ethnic organization unless they combine their religious message with a specifically ethnoracial appeal to a subjective belief in common descent.

Otherwise, Islamic and Christian political movements are usually supraethnic. More generally, the only marker of so-called ethnicity in highly integrated and stratified societies (i.e., the Americas) appears to be race in the absence of religious or linguistic differences. On another terminological side note, despite the frequent use of the term *regimes* throughout the book (e.g., “regimes of ethnic dominance” [67]; “regimes of ethnic exclusion” [80]), there is no discussion of what makes them regimes in the sense of a set of policies reinforcing and reproducing each other.

The classification of Israel as a decolonized state instead of a colonial settler state is controversial in light of the extant literature as Vogt readily admits, and his reasoning that “the Jewish settlement in Palestine was not connected to the colonial expansion of a European state” (32–33) is not convincing since Jewish immigration took off only after the British Empire captured Palestine from the Ottomans in 1917. Similarly, his claim that, “with the exception of Haiti, all settler states have remained under the control of the European-stemming elite” (47) does not seem accurate if one considers the indigenous takeover in formerly French Algeria, Apartheid South Africa, and Zimbabwe.

Given the centrality of religious or linguistic segmentation for violent, ethnic mobilization according to his theoretical framework, I would argue that the religious homogeneity of the Americas (e.g., a near monopoly of Christianity) is the most significant variable that produces the nonviolent outcomes Vogt studies. As I argued elsewhere (Aktürk 2020, 704), Christianization of the Americas produced the most religiously homogenous geopolitical region in the world, an entire hemisphere, which in turn shaped global religious demography and politics. In light of this fact, Vogt’s claim that “the European colonial settler states are, on average, still more heterogeneous today than the category of states that remained unaffected by European overseas colonialism” (37) appears unconvincing in terms of religious demography. Similarly, many scholars of Eastern Europe and Eurasia, which are amply represented in the pages of *Nationalities Papers*, may be surprised but probably also unconvinced to read that “countries that remain unaffected by European overseas colonialism are relatively homogenous in their ethnic makeup and, above all, are significantly more homogenous than both categories of European colonies” (41), a claim that is repeated throughout the book (58). The noncolonized states of Asia and even the titular nation-states of Europe have more religious diversity (e.g., Muslims in Europe, or Christians and other minorities in Asia) than the European colonial settler states of the Americas.

A noteworthy omission in Vogt’s theoretical framework is geopolitics in general and the impact of US hegemony in the Western Hemisphere in particular. This factor becomes particularly conspicuous through its absence in Vogt’s discussion of “the absence of an ethnic kin state” (60) and the lack of external support for the subordinated ethnic groups in the colonial settler states. External, foreign support for an ethnic insurgency can be provided even in the absence of ethnic kinship (Şan Akça 2016), and alleged or real ethnic kinship can be claimed between various West African states and racial minorities in the Americas. However, the real reason for the lack of external sponsorship of ethnic insurgencies in the Americas is most likely the Monroe Doctrine and US hegemony: the USA virulently opposes any foreign meddling in what it considers as its geopolitical backyard and reserves, and frequently employs, its own right to intervene across the Americas. To apply this insight to the question I posed at the outset of this commentary, the lack of foreign sponsorship of an African American insurgency in the USA is not due to the lack of potential ethnic kin states but because of the fear that the USA would massively retaliate against an external actor that would provide weapons, financing, or any other kind of support to an African American armed insurgency within its borders. In the analysis of the lethality of ethnic civil conflicts, “instances of one-sided violence (or mass murder) against unarmed civilians” (78) are excluded. I wonder what kind of a picture would emerge if the focus was entirely on such one-sided violence: did decolonized societies or stratified colonial settler societies witness more mass murder against unarmed civilians? The answer to this question may be valuable for our understanding of ethnic cleansings and genocides beyond Europe.

Case studies of ethnic politics in Cote d'Ivoire and Gabon as unranked, segmented decolonized states, and Guatemala and Ecuador as stratified, colonial settler states, are thought-provoking and were a pleasure to read. Case studies demonstrate that the contours of ethnic politics may differ within the same subgroup, but broadly speaking, violent ethnic mobilization is far more likely in unranked and segmented decolonized states. The detailed discussion of how through “the institutionalization of the concept of *Ivoirité*, millions of ordinary Ivoirians from the north were excluded from the national community and from citizenship” (131) reminded me of recent developments in India, where new laws on citizenship are similarly targeting Muslims for exclusion based on similar arguments about indigenous-versus-newcomer designations. I had the impression that the northern ethnic groups excluded from citizenship in Cote d'Ivoire for not being indigenous are also Muslims, which suggests to me that Muslims across many polities may be excluded from citizenship and the national community by being so-called newcomers who are not indigenous. In contrast, we learn that Gabon's all-powerful president Omar “Bongo also reserved the second highest office in the regime for a representative of Mba's Fang group—an informal but strictly followed rule that is still applied today by his son” (125). However, for a book that is deeply concerned with ethnic power relations, I would expect to see the ethnoreligious breakdown of the cabinet or the legislature in Cote d'Ivoire versus Gabon, in order to be more fully convinced that Gabonese politics have been more inclusive vis-à-vis different ethnoreligious groups compared to Cote d'Ivoire. Moreover, the narratives in the case studies are incomplete in the sense that we often do not learn about how the conflict processes ended: What exactly happened leading up to a rebellion (against whom?) in 2002? Who were the main actors, and what exactly happened in “the second ethnic civil conflict” (136) in 2010 in Cote d'Ivoire? Even more importantly, how did these cycles of violent conflict end?

In colonial settler polities of Latin America, Vogt also finds that neither the level of democracy nor the strength of leftist parties determines the political empowerment of subordinated ethnic groups (149). My observations about the rights of ethnic groups in communist and postcommunist Eastern Europe and Eurasia are parallel to these findings in the sense that some of the most authoritarian and even totalitarian regimes (i.e., Soviet Union) provided an astonishingly high level of official status to ethnic and linguistic groups, which contrasts with their often severe repression of religious groups (Aktürk 2012). The finding that there are only three violent ethnic conflicts in all of Latin America—namely, in Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Mexico (152)—compared to dozens of such conflicts in any other comparable geopolitical region, is very much supportive of Vogt's thesis regarding the nonviolent nature of ethnic mobilization in the egregiously unequal colonial settler states of the Americas.

Political underrepresentation of subordinated ethnic and religious groups is a major problem in some societies such as France (Aktürk and Katliarou 2021). I wish Vogt provided comparable data on ethnic representation for all of his case studies. For example, “indigenous people constitute the demographic majority in Guatemala with about 52% of the country's total population” (157), but even decades after democratization, “during the legislature in place from 2008 to 2011, only 17 out of 158 parliamentarians were of indigenous origin” (160), while their population size would correspond to roughly 80 parliamentarians! Perhaps even more disappointingly in Ecuador, since it is presented as having “Latin America's arguably strongest ethnic movement” (177), “the first self-identifying indigenous parliamentarian was elected in 1984” (161). There is no data on more recent levels of indigenous political representation in Ecuador, although we learn that the indigenous party “Pachakutik won five provincial prefectures and 19 municipal governments” (174) in 2000.

The way in which religion plays a role in weakening the indigenous movement in Ecuador, and Vogt's interpretation of that role (174–177), also raise some questions. Vogt argues that “religious differences” or “religious divisions” (174–175) within the indigenous population led to internal challenges and weakness. However, since both the indigenous people and the nonindigenous majority are nominally Christian, an alternative way to depict the empirical reality would be to argue that the lack of religious difference from the majority, combined with different gradations of religious affiliation, conspired to weaken the indigenous movement. This may be arguably similar to

the pacifying role that (mostly Protestant) Christianity played vis-à-vis the mainstream African American movements, as opposed to the Black Muslim movements that posed more radical challenges to the stratified racial order in the USA.

Vogt's arguments raise some other important questions. For example, an empty category in a two-by-two depiction of empirical reality always raises questions: why is there no example of an integrated and unranked society in figure 1.1 (9) and figure 2.2 (43)? Vogt claims that in such a scenario ethnicity becomes politically irrelevant, which provokes a further question: if African Americans, or any other disadvantaged ethnic minority in a stratified society, achieve equality in the future, does Vogt predict that ethnic identity will become politically irrelevant? Another question concerns within-country variation: it is very common that within the same country, some ethnic groups may have nonviolent mobilization whereas some others resort to violence. The United Kingdom, where there has been violent ethnic conflict in Northern Ireland, but peaceful mobilization for independence in Scotland, is a case in point. Are there stratified ethnic cleavages in Scotland as opposed to segmented ethnic cleavages in Northern Ireland? Relatedly, should we infer stratified ethnic cleavages in each and every case of nonviolent ethnic mobilization? For example, since Turkish minorities in Bulgaria, Greece, and North Macedonia have had exclusively nonviolent mobilization for their ethnolinguistic and political rights (Aktürk and Lika 2022), should we infer that the ethnic cleavages in these Balkan countries are hierarchical and integrated (as in colonial settler states) rather than unranked and segmented (as in decolonized states)? Another related question concerns change in the nature of ethnic mobilization over time: what explains the change from nonviolent to violent mobilization of the same ethnic group in the same country over time? For example, ethnic Kurdish mobilization in Turkey was nonviolent for about 40–45 years, roughly from 1938 until 1978–1984, after which it turned violent at least in part (Aktürk 2012).

Overall, Manuel Vogt's *Mobilization and Conflict in Multiethnic States* is a stellar example of multimethod research, combining an original and generalizable theory with cross-national data sets and rich case studies based on multiple sources of qualitative causal inference including fieldwork in four countries in two continents. It is a must-read for any student of ethnic politics, conflict studies, and nationalism.

Disclosures. None.

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Cite this article: Aktürk, Ş. 2023. Why African Americans Do Not Rebel? How Hierarchic Integration Prevents Rebellion. *Nationalities Papers* 51: 959–963, doi:10.1017/nps.2021.96