Opening the black box of secessionism

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For a long time, social scientists have studied nationalism and ethnic conflict from multiple dimensions: they have analyzed how ethnic diversity affects governance in democratic countries, trust and reciprocity, violent conflict, civil wars, and resistance to foreign occupation (among other things). The results tend to be pessimistic, although there are some optimistic findings such as that ethnic heterogeneity is not significantly related to violent conflict[1] or that altruism is not intrinsically related to coethnicity.[2] In comparative politics, secessionism has often been connected to the study of ethnic politics and ethnic conflict; secession and partition have been analyzed as possible solutions to civil war, with some positive answers,[3] but also some negative ones.[4] In political theory, instead, the focus has been on the normative exploration of the "right to secede". One of the most influential theorists of secession, Allen Buchanan, has argued that the right to secede is related to Locke's "right to revolution".[5] In other words, it is a remedial right that should be conceded only when there have been major injustices suffered by those demanding it. Buchanan also reflects on the fact that a credible threat to exit can generate a *de facto* "minority veto." For example, Catalonia could threat Spain with secession every time there was a disagreement with policies enacted from Madrid. Even though Buchanan recognizes that the principle of territorial integrity of the states reduces the bargaining potential of the "threat to exit" by a minority, he does not elaborate much on the reverse of this argument, which is the following: a credible threat not to allow exit (by the state) can generate a *de facto* minority veto within the territory claiming secession. For example, the Spanish government led by the *Partido Popular* (a political party that is majoritarian in Spain and yet minoritarian in Catalonia) can undertake policies that endanger the economic and cultural survival of Catalonia because the government knows that the exit of Catalonia from Spain is not legally feasible in the current constitutional framework, and that this framework is extremely difficult to change. The question is whether, following Buchanan's theory, these policies can be considered unjust enough to legitimize the right of secession. In other words, we can wonder what are the exact limits over which injustices make secession legitimate. According to Catalan nationalists these limits have long been surpassed in Catalonia; those against secession nonetheless challenge this notion.

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[1] Fearon, James, and David Laitin. 2003. Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War. *American Political Science Review* 97 (1): 75-86.

[2] Habyarimana, J, M. Humphreys, D. Posner and J. Weinstein. 2009 *Coethnicity: Diversity and the Dilemmas of Collective Action.* New York: Russell Sage Press.

[3] Kaufman, Chaim. 1998. "When All Else Fails. Ethnic Population Transfers and Partitions in the Twentieth Century" *International Security* 23(2): 120-156 ; Downes, Alexander. The holy land divided: Defending Partition as a Solution to Ethnic Wars. *Security Studies* 10/4 (Summer 2001): 58-116.

[4] Sambanis, Nicholas. 2000. "Partition as a Solution to Ethnic War: An Empirical Critique of the Theoretical Literature." *World Politics* 52: 437-83. Sambanis, Nicholas and Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl. 2009. "What's In A Line? Is Partition the Solution to Civil War?" *International Security* 34 (2): 82-118.

[5] Buchanan, Allen. 1997. "Theories of Secession" *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 26(1): 36-61.

The study of secession is still quite minimal in social sciences and, when it takes place, the discussion is somewhat contaminated by what can be called an "anti-secessionist bias." Indeed, secession is often conceived as the last of the remedies (e.g., in Sudan), as a possible source of new conflicts (e.g., in the Balkans), or as a disastrous solution to intractable conflicts (e.g., in Iraq). There are few instances of accounts taking secessionism as a neutral phenomenon and studying their causes and consequences, freed from normative considerations.[6] The origins of this bias are manifold. First, there is the influence of the United States in academia: the US was marked by a secessionist civil war in its origins as a state, and secessionism was in that case related to the willingness to preserve an unfair *status quo* (i.e. slavery). So people tend to associate secessionism with conservatism. Second, there is the neoliberal influence on the idea that competition among governance units is positive in order to achieve optimal tax rates. This makes secessionism to be perceived with suspicion among leftist spheres. In addition, the existence of secessionist demands in relatively wealthy territories such as Catalonia or Flanders make this to be conceived as a movement led by selfish ethnic entrepreneurs and/or territories. Yet, the existence of social-democratic and extreme left factions in contemporary secessionist movements or the existence of secessionism in relatively poor regions such as Corsica or Quebec constitute solid evidence against the hypothesis that secessionism is motivated only out of selfish motives (i.e. unwillingness to redistribute). Finally, secessionism has been perceived as the main cause of violent conflict in the world. The correlation between secessionism and civil war is high: 46% of all civil wars taking place between 1944 and 2004 involve a secessionist movement.[7] Nonetheless, the mechanisms underlying this relationship are not clear: on the one hand, self-determination movements get involved in violent conflict very often as a response to repressive actions perpetrated by states.[8] On the other hand, lack of access to power by ethnic minorities (and not secessionism *per se*) is often explaining the onset of violent conflict.[9]

It is extremely important to establish regularities and to study secessionism analytically. Yet, this phenomenon should not be conceived monolithically. I would argue that, in the same way that scholars have identified different types of nationalism, [10] we should be able to identify different types of secessionism. It is almost unnecessary to say that the current secessionist movement in Texas cannot be matched to the one in Quebec, for

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[6] An example of non-normative type of work on this topic is: Sambanis, Nicholas and Branko Milanovic. 2011. Explaining the demand for sovereignty. The World Bank. Development Research Group.

[7] Balcells, Laia and Stathis Kalyvas. 2012. The Marxist Paradox. National liberation versus ethnic insurgencies. Unpublished Manuscript, Duke University and Yale University.

[8] Sambanis, Nicholas and Annalisa Zinn. 2005."From Protest to Violence: An Analysis of Conflict Escalation with an Application to Self-Determination Movements" Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Marriott Wardman Park, Omni Shoreham, Washington Hilton, Washington, DC.

[9] Cederman, Lars-Erik, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and Nils B. Weidmann. 2011. "Horizontal Inequalities and Ethnonationalist Civil War: A Global Comparison." *American Political Science Review* 105 (3): 478-495.

[10] As Hechter has explained, patriotism cannot be equated to peripheral nationalism. He also distinguishes *irrendentism*, *state building nationalism*, and *unification nationalism*. (Hechter, Michael. 2000. *Containing Nationalism.* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.)

example. Also, there are important differences between groups constituting a secessionist movement. For example, in the case of Catalonia, the secessionism represented by the liberal political party *Convergencia i Unio* (CiU) cannot be equated to that of the extreme left-wing coalition *Coalicio d'Unitat Popular* (CUP), whose members label as a "liberation movement".[11]

Finally, we need to be aware of the anti-secessionist bias in mass media, and not only in academic research. It has been only recently that important newspapers and magazines have started to take seriously secessionist movements such as the ones going in Catalonia and Scotland (e.g. *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *The Huffington Post, Reuters*). But some other media outlets are highly skeptical of these movements and therefore indirectly or directly supportive of the *status quo* of the existing national states. Nonetheless, journalists are likely to become less biased towards this issue once academics become so, and once the reality of the facts such as those taking place in Catalonia, Flanders, and Scotland shows that secessionism is not necessarily connected to disastrous events. Indeed, in all of these cases, secessionism is civic, democratic, pacific, and highly unlikely to escalate into an armed conflict anytime in the future.

In a nutshell, I would argue that it is important to approach the issue of secessionism with analytical lens, and to do it by exploring all of its complexity. By opening the black box of secessionism the so-called anti-secessionist bias should be dismantled. This should allow us not only to provide better explanations for this phenomenon, but also for more appropriate policy recommendations regarding these movements and the states confronting them.

[11] Catalan secessionism is a complex phenomenon, with much internal fractionalization and heterogeneity. As Hilari Raguer explains, there are two main branches of Catalan nationalism: a Catholic and right wing, and a Republican and left wing. But they both share a common ground, which is its civic character and its pacifist nature.

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