How Enemies Are Made

MAXPLANCRESEARCH: Professor Schlee, your book Wie Feindbilder entstehen (How Enemies Are Made) is intended to refute a variety of clichés. You are particularly opposed to the theory that ethnic and religious differences have been the main cause of wars and crises since the 1990s. How did you reach this conclusion?

SCHLEE: I am not the first to maintain that ethnic groups are not naturally occurring entities. Ethnic groups are social constructs – that has been the prevailing opinion among social scientists for years. It is also generally recognized that religious boundaries can be drawn more narrowly or more broadly, and that religion, while not itself a cause of conflict, is often instrumentalized in varying ways in political rhetoric.

MPR: And yet the media is full of reports about ethnic and religious factors that cause states to collapse and civil wars to erupt ...

SCHLEE: If you consider such conflicts empirically, you will discover that ethnicity is something that develops and changes in the course of a conflict – for example, in response to the imposition of boundaries, to exclusion, or to the need to form alliances. This is how concepts of enmity arise. In times of conflict, one delimits one’s own group much more strictly than would otherwise be the case. Unfortunately, the social scientific insight that ethnic groups are not naturally distinct does not appear to have made much headway either in popular understanding or in some scientific theories of conflict. Recently, it has become fashionable among conflict analysts to distinguish between identity-based conflicts and resource-based conflicts. I consider this distinction to be nonsensical.

MPR: Why?

SCHLEE: In the broadest sense, every conflict is a battle for resources. But that does not answer the question of who the opposing parties are, and where the front lines are drawn. The fact that some conflicts are fought over oil or water does not itself determine who is allied with whom and who is opposed to whom. One way or another, the weaker side will have to seek allies with whom it might later have to share the spoils of success. That is as far as you can go with an explanation that deals exclusively with the value of resources and with the cost of the effort made to acquire or defend them. In this way, you might be able to explain why any given party needs a certain number of allies. But who these will be is not subject exclusively to such economic logic. The choice of allies is also determined by a shared sense of identity. We tend to pick allies with whom we share a common language, culture or religion.

MPR: The Balkan wars have often been attributed to historical differences between ethnic groups and religions. However, back in the 1970s, the communities lived together peacefully in what was then Yugoslavia, as you show in your book. How do you explain the bloody conflicts of the nineties?

SCHLEE: It is helpful to consider the beginning of these conflicts topographically. The breakup of Yugoslavia started in the northwest and progressed toward the southeast. The first republic to break away was Slovenia. The area that was most advanced economically had every reason to keep its resources for itself and to stop sharing them with others. Of course, there had been nationalisms and even micro-nationalisms in the Balkans since the 19th century, but the mere existence of such tendencies did not necessarily mean that they were bound to prevail politically. First, the relevant groups of actors had to be confronted with particular circumstances and corresponding incentives, and only then could all sorts of nationalist feelings be instrumentalized in order
to usher in a new political order. Under such conditions, there is an interplay between calculated economic interests and social processes of inclusion and exclusion. These factors color every political decision regarding al-Qaeda, the most recent example for such a conflict – for example, cost-benefit calculations within the framework of rational choice theory – must always be supplemented by a theory of social identification. Actually, it is rather improbable that decisions will be made strictly according to individual interests. This can be observed on a small scale. For example, most decisions regarding one’s career are group-dependent – that is to say, they are made in consideration of one’s family. Staunch nationalists or adherents of religious communities take these group demarcations further and apply them on a larger scale.

**MPR:** How, then, do concepts of hatred, fear and enmity arise at the level of the state? Are they generally prompted by members of an elite who see war as a way to increase profits or expand their power?

**Schelle:** The creation and dissemination of stereotypes regarding enemies are frequently controlled by elites. However, the elite controlling such processes need not be composed of those with economic influence or a higher level of education. Terrorism, too, has a highly polarizing effect. Just shooting into a crowd can be enough to prompt extreme reactions.

**MPR:** Scholars speak of the asymmetry of contemporary wars and conflicts.

**Schelle:** Although it is by no means a modern phenomenon! Even in classical antiquity, the effects of terror and political murder were well known. The fact is that it takes only a few individuals to put millions in fear for their lives and cause political crises to escalate. As we have seen in Yugoslavia, the actions of a few snipers can make the members of particular populations turn to ethnic militias for protection, even in situations in which religious or ethnic divisions had long been forgotten by many and first had to be re-established. Such processes can easily be triggered by radical minorities. Today, in Afghanistan and Iraq, they occur frequently. It takes much less effort and is less costly to commit a specifically targeted political murder or assassination than it does to prevent such attacks. The advantage always lies with the aggressors, no matter how horrifying their methods are. They are not unduly disturbed by the deaths of innocent bystanders who happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

**MPR:** To what extent has the character of conflicts changed since the end of the Cold War? Is it noticeable that the script of ideology is almost entirely absent in your book?

**Schelle:** The conflict between East and West ended some time ago, but now we have new fronts opening up to replace it. Since 1990, and especially since September 11, 2001, NATO has sought new enemies, with Islam specifically being cast in an unfavorable light. Western policies have, for their part, contributed to the construction of new enmities. In this way, they are playing into the hands of ideologists in opposing camps – for example, among militant Islamic fundamentalists – who seek to promote the polarization and radicalization of conflicts. As radical forces gain momentum, it becomes apparently more difficult for politically moderate Muslims to live in peace. In my book, I explained the process of “purification” in this context. An increasingly strict and narrow definition of who is a true Muslim or a true Christian is used to determine which social groups should be excluded from power, simply by insinuating that they do not exhibit the proper purity. This process of purification is not just about authoritative theological interpretations – that is, matters of belief. Often, tangible worldly interests are involved – for example, the struggle for political power and the elimination of possible opponents.

**MPR:** Your description might well fit present-day Iran, where a caste of religious leaders seeks to monopolize authority, both in religion and in politics.

**Schelle:** I believe so. But the concept is also applicable to many traditional African societies in which the chief or ruler is required to adhere to and oversee certain morals with the aggressors, no matter how horrifying their methods are. They are not unduly disturbed by the deaths of innocent bystanders who happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

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**MPR:** What can conflict research, and indeed what can western scholars, learn from an encounter with Africa?

**Schelle:** The basic forms of conflict can be studied in all human societies – large or small, agricultural or industrial, past or present. In order to gather sufficient material for our analyses, it is advantageousto draw on and compare a wide variety of cases. The societies that are usually studied by ethnographers do not constitute a separate category: betrayal, exclusion from power, changes of allegiance, demagogy, and the complex relations between leaders and followers can also be found in African villages, while expelling groups that are less popular is a procedure that is only less common in the African context. The causes are often of the same kind: the struggle for political power or the elimination of possible opponents.

**MPR:** Political scientists, for whom the state is still a very important factor, are likely to have problems with such diversity.

**Schelle:** Well, in many of these countries, the boundary between governmental and non-governmental spheres is fluid, not least because, alongside these qua-si-governmental agencies, pre-governmental power structures such as clans, lineages and tribes are still in place. The experience of the former colonial rulers shows how difficult it is to define political boundaries in these regions. The British in Kenya drew district boundaries and, in the face of resistance from many sides, attempted to sort out the groups of inhabitants and assign them to specific territories. Now, however, actors involved in violent disputes appeal to rights or claims that date back to the colonial era if they were part of the natural order. Politicians, too, contribute to the creation of arbitrary boundaries by gathering potential supporters in their electoral districts, while expelling groups that are less likely to vote for them. On the one hand, local conflicts are influenced by the modern administrative system and competition for political offices; and on the other hand, the causes can often be found in traditional disputes over pastures and water. Different groups have different perceptions of the issues at stake. Being on the same side does not mean sharing the same goals.

**MPR:** Are these the sort of conflicts that took place in Europe centuries ago?

**Schelle:** Of course. A clan chief or the leader of an armed band fighting in an African civil war is entirely comparable with the warfare of the early Middle Ages. In the Europe of those days, there was no state monopoly on violence. However, the organized crime families of one era eventually became the aristocracy of the next. It was a long and often violent process of transformation from rubber barons to a stable feudal system, and then to the nation-state. England’s rise to world power status, for example, could scarcely have taken place without piracy in the name of the crown. Even today, organs of the state are often closely intertwined with economic interests and criminal elements – consider the example of states that live off drug-related violence. But this is not a new phenomenon. The Europeans played an ignoble role during the Opium Wars in 19th-century China.
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MPR: Why did the collapse of state institutions take such an extreme form in Somalia?

Schlee: First, there was a pronounced fragmentation. None of the remaining political forces managed to establish a national government or to bring the country under control. Somalia fundamentally consisted of autonomous de facto states that existed side by side or in opposition to one another: there was Somaliland in the northwest and Puntland in the northeast. Both of these parts of the country retained a degree of statehood, confined mostly to matters of security. Neither the legal system nor the educational system functioned with the aid of state revenues – in other words, they weren’t financed through taxes. In the south, the fragmentation took on an entirely different dimension such that, in Mogadishu, wars were being waged between rival districts of the city.

MPR: Why do African states have so much difficulty with democracy and the rule of law?

Schlee: That’s a complex question. Coordinated action within a shared legal system must be worthwhile to the people involved – in other words, they weren’t financed through taxes. In the south, the fragmentation took on an entirely different dimension such that, in Mogadishu, wars were being waged between rival districts of the city.

The consequences were quite serious. Those who see no opportunities for themselves will not bother going to school. And a civil servant whose salary is only enough to cover the first few days of each month will tend to seek alternative sources of cash. So corruption is frequently a concomitant of this hopeless situation. The state must have something to offer; it must be in a position to reward loyalty. Otherwise, people will either withdraw from the state or subvert it.

MPR: As in Somalia.

Schlee: That’s right. In Somalia, in the 1990s, there was nothing left to divide up, apart from UN aid. So, ultimately, development aid became the resource that was being fought over. The warring factions wanted to take control of the state so they could channel this aid – into their own pockets. Somewhere along the line, the international community lost interest in Somalia. As a result, the state became less important as a prize over which rival groups competed. Instead, a mosaic of smaller groups developed, with the warlords maintaining a wary respect for another at a relatively low level of violence. Without question, if development aid is poured indiscriminately into areas where peace has yet to be restored, it can often be counter-productive.

MPR: In your book, you yourself are critical of the Somalia peace conference. Instead, you advocate decentralized development aid for specifically defined projects.

Schlee: If individual groups can “qualify” for participation in a peace conference through the conspicuous display of violent behavior, then the system of incentives is entirely wrong. At the conference in Eldoret, Kenya in 2002, a conscious attempt was made to bring the actual “firepower” – that is, all of the warlords – to the negotiating table. The result was that, prior to the conference, the warlords set about trying to eliminate one another. These ring leaders wanted to demonstrate their capabilities, both to their own clientele and to their competitors. Even during the conference in Kenya, they were still directing skirmishes by mobile phone.

MPR: As a researcher working in Africa, you have direct contact with people there. How should an anthropologist proceed in this region?

Schlee: The most important research tool is open conversation. You won’t get far by handing out standardized questionnaires to groups that have never even seen such a thing. More particularly, you never know precisely which questions are most pertinent in the local situation: anthropologists must be able to respond to the realities on the ground. It is thus most important to possess language skills and to observe existing social conditions with care. Diaries and detailed records of conversations are part of the daily routine of a field researcher.

MPR: How many languages do you speak?

Schlee: Ten, of which I’m fluent in seven or eight. But when working in regions where I have no language knowledge, such as central Asia, which is another important focus of research in my department, I speak a little Arabic with the Imam in a mosque and make a good impression. But I speak neither Russian nor any of the Turkic languages, and when I visit our research projects there, I am soon lost without my colleagues.

In the 1990s, warring factions in Somalia attempted to seize control of development aid by force – now the UN distributes aid only in the presence of security forces.

In 1952, Serks killed 79 Muslims and Crusas in Beka – although ethnic tensions had been all but forgotten in Yugoslavia.

INTERVIEW: CHRISTIAN MÖRS

CONFLICT

SOCIETY IN CONFLICT