
15

Questions for Laitin and Grin

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At first glance, the papers by David Laitin and François Grin seem to be fundamentally opposed. Laitin argues that the costs of diversity maintenance through language recognition and accommodation are exceptionally high: policies of language accommodation are correlated with insurgency, violence, and civil war. Grin argues that the costs of diversity maintenance through language recognition and accommodation are much lower than expected; even if they were higher, he says in his conclusion, justice would seem to require their payment.

On more careful scrutiny, however, the diametrically opposed conclusions can be resolved. Laitin's conclusions apply mainly to what he calls "pattern II" states, or to weak states overwhelmingly in the southern hemisphere. Grin's conclusions apply only to industrialized countries in North America and Western Europe. Limited to considering only "pattern III" states — the states the Grin considers — Laitin concedes that diversity maintenance is not correlated with violence and civil war. And if Grin were forced to deal only with Laitin's "pattern II" states, I expect he'd tell a much different story about the costs of language recognition and accommodation. In short, Laitin's punchline is really about the southern hemisphere, Grin's about the northern hemisphere.

To put these paper presenters into conversation, and to stimulate further reflection on the broader theme of the conference, I should like to ask a question that is simply stated though difficult to answer. The question is this: What is the role of normative and empirical analysis in the two papers, and how ought our normative concerns be tempered by empirical findings?

The question, then, for David Laitin: This paper is wholly descriptive, though it contains what I take to be a controversial claim. The claim is that the extension of language rights to minority groups is not a result of the demands of justice but a result of the weakening

of the central state. For pattern II states, this may very well be true, but for the pattern III states, I can imagine a different explanation that focuses on normative concerns. Laitin suggests that moves toward a transnational European Union and globalizing phenomena such as the internet have weakened the nation-states of Western Europe. But I take it that the main thrust of the work of multicultural theorists over the past 20 years has been to argue that justice demands that strong central states be weakened insofar as they ought to provide various kinds of rights and accommodations for minority groups. Weakened states are therefore the result of the demands of justice. Justice and weak or weakening states are not mutually exclusive; to the contrary, they coincide. Or, to put this more generally: where are the normative concerns in Laitin's paper? Why are they absent?

The question for François Grin: In spite of the fact that the majority of the paper is taken up with empirical questions concerning the cost of diversity maintenance programs, the last few pages make plain that normative concerns about justice might trump the empirical questions about cost. Grin argues, for instance, "[E]ven if diversity maintenance were to be deemed a costly indulgence...the distributive problem would remain because diversity is a given, and being different (particularly if difference results from a non-elective trait) is not only legitimate: it also something that cannot always be privatized." But in the face of Laitin's empirical evidence in pattern II states, would Grin be so willing to assert that claims of justice trump the possibly destructive and violent consequences of diversity maintenance? Do the normative arguments about the "legitimacy of difference" trump empirical concerns? Or, in short, what role do the empirical findings about the low costs of diversity maintenance play in Grin's paper? In light of his strong normative claims, they appear to be no more than happy window dressing.