

Paul R. Brass, *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003.

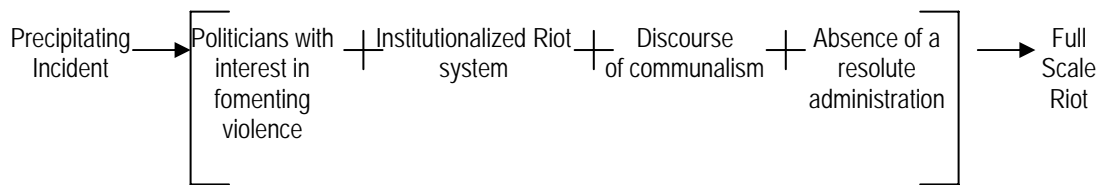
Review for the *Journal of Asian Studies* (forthcoming) by Kanchan Chandra

The study of Hindu-Muslim riots in India is one of the most striking examples in recent years of the development of a cumulative research program in political science. The question of how and why these riots occur has long preoccupied scholars of Indian politics across disciplines. But what is unique to the last ten years is the emergence of a body of work by three political scientists – Paul Brass, Ashutosh Varshney and Steven Wilkinson – that asks the same questions, using data that is complementary and often shared, and engages in a sustained dialogue on methods and results (Brass 1998, Varshney 2002, Wilkinson 2004). Paul Brass's *Theft of an Idol* (1998) was the opening statement in this research program. In *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India*, Brass pushes that program further.

In this most recent book, Brass asks four questions: Why do Hindu-Muslim communal riots persist in India? What explains variation in the incidence of Hindu-Muslim riots across time and space? How do large scale violent events, in which, according to Brass, mostly Muslims are killed, mostly by the police, get classified as riots rather than pogroms? And whose interests are served by the acceptance of such "riots" as routine events in Indian politics? He addresses these questions by focusing his gaze closely and intently on the northern Indian town of Aligarh. The book examines variation in the incidence of riots across space and time in Aligarh – riot activity in Aligarh has typically concentrated in only 29 (12%) of the city's 241 mohallas (Brass, 162), and periods of calm have alternated with periods with an increasingly large number of riot-related deaths (Brass 68-69). This "controlled" study of variation yields "findings" that the author believes "can be generalized to other parts of India and to other times and places in the world." (p. xvi).

The first two questions – why do riots persist and why do they occur in some places and some times but not others -- are causal questions. And despite the strong denunciation of the search for causal explanations in the introduction to the book, about which I will say more subsequently, its most important contribution is its causal explanation for ethnic riots. Brass notes, for instance, of the riot-inducing factors in riot-prone localities: "I demonstrate [also] that, while there are demographic, economic, and caste/communal differences the distinguish the populations in such localities, it is political activity, organization and leadership that demarcate most clearly the riot-prone or riot-affected from the less affected localities." (p. 28). He then identifies a causal sequence that links these variables (political activity, organization and leadership) in the process that leads to the production of a riot. An enterprise which explains variation in a dependent variable (riot-proneness) by variation in a few key independent variables, links the two sets of variables by a sequence of events, and believes that the result can be "demonstrated" as truth surely falls within mode of causal analysis within political science that Brass would like to distance himself from.

The causal sequence leading to a riot, distilled from several chapters, is summarized below.



First, there must be a precipitating incident with the potential to become transformed into a riot. Second, there must be politicians with an interest in fomenting violence. Third, these politicians must be aided by an “institutionalized riot system” that makes it possible to orchestrate violence. Fourth, these politicians must operate within a discursive framework which makes it possible to some precipitating event as a communal incident. Finally, the state administration must not be resolute or competent in preventing violence. Given these factors, a full scale riot should result with high probability. Indeed, most of the riots described in this book appear to follow this process (see for instance Chapter 5).

This causal sequence, first introduced in *Theft of an Idol* and is developed in this book, has by now become hegemonic in the cumulative research program within which others work.<sup>1</sup> Both Varshney (2002) and Wilkinson (2004) take this sequence for granted and formulate an explanation for variation in Hindu-Muslim riots by identifying the conditions that lead to variation in, and connections between, one or more of the variables that lead from a precipitating incident to a full-scale riot. In *Votes and Violence*, Wilkinson develops a theory about the conditions under which politicians will have an interest in fomenting violence and directing the administration to quell it. In *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life*, Varshney searches for the conditions under which institutionalized riot systems are likely to exist and the conditions under which the state administration is likely to be competent in quelling the violence, and proposes that strong civic networks make the first less likely and the second more likely. To be sure, there are important differences between all three bodies of work in the relative importance of these three variables and in how they interact with each other – differences that the authors have noted and debated in their own work. But the shared conceptual framework within which these debates take place has gone relatively unnoticed and constitutes an important advance in our collective understanding of how riots occur (Chandra 2001).

Yet, *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India* has a puzzling introduction that argues against the ability of political scientists to propose causal explanations. In a discussion that is hard to reconcile with the empirical analyses in much of the book, Brass argues that the search for causes is misplaced for several reasons: First, it “cannot be separated from the values of the observer, whether politician, judicial enquiry commissioner, scholar, or journalist” (p. 20). But this is less a reason to reject causal analysis and more a plea for value-conscious research from multiple perspectives, which would identify whose interests are served by each type of explanation – and show which some explanations, if any, remain robust across perspectives. Indeed, Brass

<sup>1</sup> For a review of Varshney (2002), which describes this common framework, see Kanchan Chandra, “Civic Life or Economic Interdependence.” *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*U. Vol 39 (1): 110-118.

does appear to believe that there is a “kernel of truth” that can withstand the perspective of the observer (p. 31). Second, according to Brass, these values can often lead the “impartial” social scientist to participate in the assignation of blame. (p. 20). But while this argument points to the unconscious and possibly malign consequences that causal analyses of violence can have, it does not provide grounds to question the conclusions arrived at through those analyses. It suggests simply that those who engage in causal analyses of violence must be conscious about who is blamed and who exonerated and what policies could result from their conclusions. Third, Brass argues that causal analyses ignore or downplay human action and struggle. But causal explanations of ethnic violence can acknowledge the role of human action, and many do, by explicitly theorizing about the individual microfoundations that lead individuals to participate in acts of violence (e.g. Kalyvas 2006). And finally, Brass argues that “The true causes will always remain elusive, that they do not exist.” (p.22). But this goes against the arguments made in the book. Above, I alluded to the kernel of truth” that Brass believes can be distilled from most explanations of riots. Consider another typical statement. Describing the failure of a riot to break out in Aligarh in December 1992, Brass notes: “Had Muslims in Aligarh not shown restraint on this occasion, it is likely – if not certain – that the BJP and RSS network would have activated and further killings such as those that occurred in 1990-91 would have taken place.” (141). Statements such as these, which attribute a “certain” role to political activity and an institutionalized riot system in causing a riot cannot be reconciled with a belief in the elusiveness of true causes.

The result is that *The Production of Hindu Muslim Violence* is not a fully integrated book. It is written in two voices -- the voice of the author proposing a causal explanation and the voice of the critic, undermining the assumptions that underlie this explanation. But in the long run, this flaw in the construction of the book as a whole may be its deepest contribution to the research program of which it is a part. The criticisms of causal analysis, while not fully developed, demonstrate a rare capacity on the part of an author to see below the foundations of the structure on which his book stands. A fuller excavation of these half-uncovered foundations, by Brass or others, may transform the research program that this book has helped to define.

## References

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