

The Sociology of Civil Wars: Warfare and Armed Groups

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4 November 2003

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Abstract

This paper approaches the sociology of civil wars from an overlooked dimension: warfare. I introduce a distinction between three different types of civil war based on how they are fought: conventional warfare, irregular warfare, and “symmetric non-conventional” warfare. The first type displays frontlines, regular armies on both sides, and set battles; the second one entails a conflict between a regular army and an irregular one in the absence of frontlines; and the third type is characterized by irregular actors on both sides and the presence of frontlines. I trace the origins of each type and, then, turn warfare into an independent variable in order to discuss possible links between warfare and violence, using a brief review of seven cases as an illustrative device. Last, I connect the empirical with the theoretical discussion and propose a research agenda. This paper suggests that the study of civil wars ought to take warfare seriously, whether warfare turns out to be a significant independent variable in its own right or just a proximate one.

The Sociology of Civil Wars: Warfare and Armed Groups

Wars vary enormously across many dimensions and the sources of this variation are highly complex. Clausewitz (1976:609-10) remarked that the conduct of war is determined by the nature of societies, “by their times and prevailing conditions;” in other words, he pointed to their sociology. The same variation can be observed in civil wars. However, while the sociology of wars has made substantial progress in the course of the last decades,¹ the same is not true of the sociology of civil wars—an indicator of the more general lag in the study of civil wars as compared to interstate ones. Recent research on civil wars is quickly closing the gap, but this research focuses primarily on the determinants of civil war onset, duration, and termination, and its effects, rather than civil war per se. In approaching the sociology of civil wars, it is important to specify a dependent variable of interest. In this paper, I focus on violence.

Consider Northern Ireland. Although British authorities have committed human rights abuses including the systematic practice of torture, they “have not ruthlessly and brutally suppressed the population which explicitly or tacitly supports insurrection in the manner experienced by Algerian Muslims, Afghan peasants, Iraqi Kurds, Kashmiri Muslims, Palestinian Muslims and Christians, South African blacks, Sri Lankan Tamils, and Vietnamese peasants.”² As an IRA man was told after his arrest by the security forces: “If this was Beirut we would just take you out into that yard and shoot you.”³ At the same time, the IRA “sought to avoid any operations which had obviously sectarian overtones: a policeman could be justified as a legitimate target, his non-combatant Protestant family could not.”⁴ In short, the conflict in Northern Ireland is

¹ The classic is Gaston Bouthoul, *Traité de polémologie. Sociologie des guerres* (Paris: Payot, 1970). Recent advances include contributions from what is known as the “new military history” field.

² Brendan O’Leary and John McGarry, *The Politics of Antagonism: Understanding Northern Ireland* (London: The Athlone Press, 1993), p. 19.

³ Eamon Collins (with Mick McGovern), *Killing Rage* (New York: Granta Books, 1999), p. 188.

⁴ Collins, *Killing Rage*, p. 295.

characterized by considerable reciprocal restraint.⁵ Such restraint has been absent in many civil wars. How can we explain this variation?

This variation is staggering, both across and within civil wars. The form and intensity of violence used by the Russian Reds and Whites during the Russian Civil War, the Serbs, Moslems, and Croats in Bosnia, or the various competing factions in Liberia, vary significantly across many dimensions. In some civil wars, the majority of abuses are committed by the incumbents (e.g. Guatemala); in some, there is a balance of violence between incumbents and insurgents (e.g. Peru); and in some others, insurgents seem to carry out the worst atrocities (e.g. Sierra Leone; Mozambique). The causes of the crossnational variation in levels, types, and practices of violence are multiple and complex and include the specific profile of political actors and their political ideology,⁶ their organizational structure, underlying social basis, and military culture,⁷ their resources, their national and local leadership and strategies,⁸ the type of challenges they face, the domestic and international context in which they operate (including prevailing international norms of war),⁹ the specific internal and technological dynamics of the war, the degree of militarization of the conflict, and factors such as geography and climate. It is plausible to surmise that all these factors have an impact on violence. Ernesto “Che” Guevara expressed this point with cogency:

The enemies of the people act in a more or less intensely criminal fashion according to the specific social, historic, and economic circumstances of each place. There are places where the flight of a man into the guerrilla zone, leaving his family and his house, does not provoke any great reaction. There are other

⁵ Kevin Toolis, *Rebel Hearts: Journeys Within the IRA's Soul* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1997), p. 21.

⁶ Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). Note, however, that ideology often fails to fit with observed violence. Communist violence was centralized and bureaucratic in the Russian and Greek Civil Wars, but decentralized and “anarchic” in the Finnish and Spanish Civil Wars.

⁷ Jonathan E. Gumz, “Wehrmacht Perceptions of Mass Violence in Croatia, 1941-1942”, *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (2001), p. 1015-1038.

⁸ Ben Shepherd, “Hawks, Doves and *Tote Zonen*: A Wehrmacht Security Division in Central Russia, 1943”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (2002), p. 349-369.

⁹ James Ron, “Boundaries and Violence: Repertoires of State Action Along the Bosnia/Yugoslavia Divide”, *Theory and Society*, Vol. 29 (2000), p. 609-640.

places where this is enough to provoke the burning or seizure of his belongings, and still others where the flight will bring death to all members of his family.¹⁰

Given the current state of our theoretical and empirical knowledge, specifying and testing crossnational models accounting for this variation in violence remains challenging to say the least. Conceptual clarification and theoretical development seem to be the wisest starting points. Elsewhere, I take an analytic approach and specify the microfoundations of selective violence.¹¹ In this paper, I take a different approach and explore whether a better understanding of how civil wars are fought can help account for their violence.

I begin by explaining why the study of civil war requires a solid theoretical understanding of warfare; I then introduce a distinction between three different types of civil war based on how they are fought and trace the origins of each type; two types are well known (conventional and irregular warfare), while the third one tends to be mischaracterized: I describe it as “symmetric non-conventional” warfare; in turn, these types are linked to three distinct processes: failed military coup or secession in a federal state; peripheral or rural insurgency; and state collapse. Last, I consider warfare as an independent variable and discuss several possible links to the violence of civil war. I rely on a (very) rough discussion of seven cases chosen to vary across warfare type and the ethnic/non-ethnic dimension: Algeria 1954-1962, Angola 1961-75, Lebanon 1975-90, Liberia 1987-2003, Nigeria-Biafra 1967-70, Oman 1965-75, and Spain 1936-1939. I conclude by identifying a research agenda. The purpose of the paper is primarily conceptual and “theory-generating” rather than “theory-testing.”

Warfare in Civil War Studies

It is no exaggeration to say that war has generally been absent from the social scientific study of civil wars and revolutions. The great majority of research in the social sciences has privileged instead the study of social and political factors that are thought to be associated with the onset or termination of a civil war or revolution. In overlooking war, social scientists have made a mistake that mirrors its equivalent, namely the reduction of civil wars (and wars in general) to

¹⁰ Ernesto Che Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), p. 75-6.

¹¹ Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Manuscript, Yale University, 2003).

the exhaustive treatment of their military details—their tactics, techniques, and firepower, while their political and social content is ignored. The study of war has been marginalized and relegated to specialized (typically descriptive) case studies, while the politics of civil wars are often treated as if they were just “normal” peaceful politics where people make choices much as they would do in normal electoral contexts—rather than situations deeply embedded in and shaped by armed combat.

However, as Mao Zedong observed, “war has its own particular characteristics and in this sense it cannot be equated with politics in general.”¹² Indeed, the importance of warfare in structuring politics, impacting on the social and economic environment, shaping incentives, and defining the relevant political actors cannot be underestimated—especially for micro-level work that seeks to uncover the mechanisms of recruitment, defection, and violence. Viewed from this perspective, war is a social and political environment fundamentally different from peace in at least two crucial ways. First, it entails far more constraints and far less consent; and second, the stakes are incomparably higher for the individuals involved. It is one thing to vote for a party, and another one to fight (and possibly die) for it. In times of war, “the ambiguity that normally characterize[s] everyday common sense and practice [is] simply no longer acceptable: one [has] to choose between one of two sides.”¹³ During the American Civil War, “normal expectations collapsed, to be replaced by frightening and bewildering personal and cultural chaos. The normal routes by which people solved problems and channeled behavior had been destroyed. ... Ordinary people, civilians as well as soldiers, were trapped by guerrilla war in a social landscape in which almost nothing remained recognizable or secure.”¹⁴ In short, the key contribution of war is the primacy of violence as a resource, “the virtual equation of power and injury.”¹⁵ Again, as Mao Zedong put it, “politics is war without bloodshed while war is politics with bloodshed.”¹⁶

¹² Bruno Shaw, “Selections from Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung” in Sam C. Sarkesian (ed.), *Revolutionary Guerrilla Warfare* (Chicago: Precedent Publishing, 1975), p. 223.

¹³ Ted Swedenburg, *Memories of Revolt: The 1936-1939 Rebellion and the Palestinian National Past* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), p. 170.

¹⁴ Michael Fellman, *Inside War: The Guerrilla Conflict in Missouri During the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. xvi.

¹⁵ Mary Elizabeth Berry, *The Culture of Civil War in Kyoto* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. xix.

¹⁶ Quoted in Shaw, *Selections*, p. 223-224.

The implications of overlooking the war and of subsuming it under the political conflict with which it is associated are considerable. Phenomena such as collective action, mobilization, and violence, are automatically linked to prewar political and social variables that are posited to have motivated the conflict in the first place; the civilian behavior and collective identities that inform the war are, likewise, seen as reflections of prewar conflicts; civilian collaboration with an insurgent political actor easily becomes interpreted as an indicator of civilian preference for this actor; individual participation may be wrongly interpreted as a risky choice and raise the specter of the collective action problem, when in fact non-participation may turn out to have been much riskier. Hence an analysis of the dynamics of war is essential in understanding how civil wars endogenously affect (and even transform) the strategies and identities of the political actors as well as the individuals involved in the war. At the same time, the analysis of warfare makes sense only if it is ultimately integrated into a comprehensive treatment of civil war. This paper makes the case for bringing the study of warfare in the study of civil war as a first step toward this comprehensive treatment.

Warfare in Civil Wars

Any discussion of warfare and civil war must begin by stressing the essential distinction between *type of war* and *type of warfare*. Wars can be classified in many ways: some stress the primary actors involved (e.g. international or domestic), their goals (e.g. offensive or defensive), their worldviews and societal projects (“greed and grievance”), and so on. The analysis of warfare starts from a different point, namely the form and type of warfare used in a given war.

A common empirical observation in the literature on civil wars is that most of them are fought by means of irregular (“guerrilla”) rather than conventional warfare. A few civil wars mix irregular and conventional warfare (e.g. Russia, China, Vietnam), while a very small number are fought fully or predominantly as conventional wars (e.g. Spain). All in all, conventional civil wars are “rare instances appearing only under specific and rather exceptional circumstances.”¹⁷ In

¹⁷ Jean-Pierre Derriennic, *Les Guerres Civiles* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2001), p. 166. Smith challenges this point, but he does so on the basis of three examples only. See M. L. R.

contrast, almost all interstate wars are fought conventionally.¹⁸ In short, there is a high degree of overlap between civil and non-conventional war on the one hand, and interstate and conventional war, on the other. It follows that any analysis of civil war must incorporate a thorough understanding of non-conventional forms of warfare, as well as account for this variation.

The distinction between irregular and conventional war is common and widely accepted, though the terminology varies. Like all distinctions, it is an ideal-typical one with the two types' edges blending into each other;¹⁹ nevertheless, it remains an essential one. The existing terminological and conceptual confusion and the difficulties in operationalization should not be taken to imply that irregular war is just a figment in some authors' imagination.²⁰

Conventional warfare entails face-to-face confrontations between regular armies across clear frontlines. This type of warfare requires a commonly shared perception of a balance of power between the two sides. In the absence of some kind of mutual consent (which entails some reasonable belief in future victory), no conventional battle can take place.²¹ On the other hand, irregular war is a type of warfare that requires a choice by the strategically weaker side "to assume the tactical offensive in selected forms, times, and places"²²—in other words to refuse to match the stronger side's expectations in terms of the conventionally accepted basic rules of warfare. A stylized description of irregular war goes as follows: the state (or *incumbents*) fields regular troops and is able to control urban and accessible terrain, while seeking to militarily engage its opponents in peripheral and rugged terrain; challengers (rebels or *insurgents*) "hover

Smith, "Guerillas in the Mist: Reassessing Strategy and Low Intensity Warfare", *Review of International Studies*, No. 29 (2003), p. 22.

¹⁸ The very few irregular interstate wars consist mostly of low intensity border skirmishes, such as the Libya-Chad war and the war between Belize and Guatemala. See Robert E. Harkavy and Stephanie G. Neuman, *Warfare and the Third World* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 18-9.

¹⁹ For example, the Russian and Chinese civil wars entailed weak regular armies operating in huge territory under conditions approximating irregular war. See Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891-1924* (New York: Penguin 1996), p. 557.

²⁰ As claimed by Smith, *Guerillas in the Mist*, p. 20.

²¹ André Beaufre, *La guerre révolutionnaire. Les formes nouvelles de la guerre* (Paris: Fayard, 1972), p. 12.

²² Samuel P. Huntington, "Guerrilla Warfare in Theory and Policy", in Franklin Mark Osanka (ed.), *Modern Guerrilla Warfare. Fighting Communist Guerrilla Movements, 1941-1961* (New York: The Free Press), 1962, p. xvi.

just below the military horizon,” hiding and relying on harassment and surprise, “stealth and raid.”²³ Such wars often turn into wars of attrition, with insurgents seeking to win by not losing while imposing unbearable costs on their opponent.²⁴ As a Vietnamese communist told an American official in 1975: “One side is not strong enough to win and the other is not weak enough to lose.”²⁵ There are many variations to this stylized scenario, involving outside intervention or assistance that may lead the insurgents to gradually switch from irregular war to conventional war (e.g. China); conversely, the progressing deterioration of the state may force incumbents to opt for irregular war as well (e.g. Liberia).

In short, irregular warfare is a manifestation of military *asymmetry* between actors—both in terms of their respective power and their ensuing willingness to fight on the same plane: the weaker actor refuses to directly face the stronger one. The main empirical indicator of irregular war is the dearth of large-scale direct military confrontations or “set battles” and the absence of frontlines. Contrary to what is sometimes claimed or implied,²⁶ irregular war is not wedded to a specific cause (revolutionary, communist, or nationalist) but can be deployed to serve a very diverse range of goals. Of course, asymmetry is not an exclusive feature of irregular war; it is also compatible with other forms of violence, including “terrorism.”

While asymmetry is predominantly expressed in irregular war, the converse is not the case, as often implied: symmetry (or parity) is not synonymous to conventional war. Rather, it is possible to point to a type of warfare that often gets confused with irregular war, which I call “symmetric non-conventional warfare.” This type of warfare is often described as “primitive” or

²³ Anna Simons, “War: Back to the Future”, *Annual Reviews of Anthropology*, No 28 (1999), p. 84; Fellman *Inside War*, p. 23.

²⁴ Thomas H. Henriksen, *Revolution and Counterrevolution: Mozambique’s War of Independence, 1964-1974* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1983), 141; John Shy, *A People Numerous and Armed: Reflections on the Military Struggle for American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 12.

²⁵ Quoted in Thomas C. Thayer, *War Without Fronts: The American Experience in Vietnam* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1985), p. 97.

²⁶ e.g. by Carl Schmitt, *Théorie du Partisan* (Paris: Flammarion, 1992).

“criminal” war²⁷ and entails irregular armies on both sides in a pattern resembling pre-modern war.²⁸ Table 1 maps the three types along the two dimensions of parity between the actors and the resources of the incumbents.

Table 1
Types of Warfare in Civil War

		Resource level of incumbents	
		High	Low
Parity between the actors	Yes	Conventional	Symmetric non-conventional
	No	Irregular	

The next step entails turning the type of warfare into a dependent variable and identifying the processes that produce them. I offer the following conjecture (which I am in the process of testing): conventional civil war emerges either out of failed military coups or secession attempts (the latter in federal or quasi-federal states);²⁹ irregular war results from peripheral or rural insurgencies; and “symmetric non-conventional warfare” takes place in civil wars that accompany processes of state collapse.

First, conventional civil wars take place when an existing army splits either because of a failed coup (e.g. Spanish Civil War) or because a unit of a federal or quasi-federal state, which can claim control over a substantial part of the state’s armed forces, attempts to secede (e.g. the American Civil War, the Biafran War).³⁰ High levels of external support or external intervention

²⁷ Mueller contrasts this type of war to “disciplined warfare.” See John Mueller, “Hatred, Violence, and Warfare: Thugs as Residual Combatants,” Paper Presented at the 2001 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, August 30-September 2.

²⁸ Timothy Earle, *How Chiefs Come to Power: The Political Economy in Prehistory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 108.

²⁹ By “quasi-federal” states, I mean states that have devolved a substantial degree of their military authority, particularly through the creation of extensive local and regional militias.

³⁰ The Russian Civil War took place after the Bolshevik coup failed to establish control over the entire territory of the Russian Empire while the civil war in Bosnia is a variant of attempted

in favor of the rebel side, may turn an irregular war into a conventional one: this was the case during the late phases of the Chinese Civil War and the Vietnam war. The relative dearth of conventional civil wars is then accounted for by the lack of resources on the rebel side.

Second, irregular civil wars emerge incrementally and often slowly from the periphery. They entail a slow and patient process of state building by rebels who lack the state's resources.³¹ Geography plays a key role in their onset and conduct. An extensive body of research exists on this type of war. Examples include civil wars in Malaya, Mozambique during the Portuguese colonization, Kashmir, Aceh (Indonesia) and elsewhere.

Third, symmetric non-conventional wars are much less studied and understood: this is where the haphazard use of the term "guerrilla war" can be particularly misleading. These wars are fought on both sides by irregular armies following a process of state collapse that reflects the fundamental weakness and eventual implosion of the incumbent actor. This entails the disintegration of the state army and its replacement by rival militias which typically equip themselves by plundering the arsenal of the disbanded army.³² Several ground-level descriptions of these wars point to similarities with irregular warfare (most notably the absence of regular armies), but they also emphasize key features that set the two apart. This type of warfare differs from conventional civil war because it lacks regular armies and set-battles. From an analytical as well as an empirical point of view, it is the presence of frontlines that endows this type of warfare with its distinct feature vis-à-vis irregular warfare and provides the most cogent way to differentiate it from it. The presence of frontlines, which takes various forms (including roadblocks and checkpoints), has been stressed in many descriptions of symmetric non-

secession. See Susan L. Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy. Chaos and Dissolution After the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1995), p. 272.

³¹ A key condition for the emergence of irregular war appears to be a combination of low GDP, dispersed rural settlement, and rough terrain. See James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War", *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 97, No 1 (2003).

³²e.g. Valery Tishkov, "Ethnic Conflicts in the Former USSR: The Use and Misuse of Typologies and Data," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 36, No. 5, (1999), p. 585. The process of disintegration is often swift, though some times it may be slower.

conventional wars.³³ Examples include the Lebanese Civil War, the wars in Congo-Brazzaville, Liberia, the Mozambique during independence, and most civil wars that erupted in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse.

Links Between Warfare and Violence

In what follows, I turn warfare type into an independent variable. I review seven civil wars covering the entire range of warfare as identified in this paper in order to explore whether they correlate with particular patterns of violence. The relation between warfare and violence is not a trivial issue because most victims of civil wars are civilians rather than soldiers. These cases were chosen randomly to vary their political and social basis (ethnic and non-ethnic, secessionist and non-secessionist). They are: Algeria 1954-1962, Angola 1961-75, Lebanon 1975-90, Liberia 1987-2003, Nigeria-Biafra 1967-70, Oman 1965-75, and Spain 1936-39. Obviously this is not intended as an exhaustive discussion but rather as a very rough and tentative first-cut overview based mainly on ground-level descriptions.³⁴

Conventional Civil Wars

One of the best known (and most studied) conventional civil war is the Spanish Civil War which caused a substantial number of civilian casualties. A striking fact is that the greatest deal of violence against civilians took place in the initial months of the war when high uncertainty and the presence of real or suspected "fifth-columnists" (a term invented during that war) behind

³³ Gladys Mouro, *An American Nurse Amidst Chaos* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1999), p.:32; Lina Mikdadi Tabarra, *Survival in Beirut: A Diary of Civil War* (London: Onyx Press, 1979), p. 11; Rémy Bazenguissa-Ganga, "The Spread of Political Violence in Congo-Brazzaville", *African Affairs*, Vol. 98, No. 390 (1999), pp. 37-54; Stephen Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy: The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimension of an African Civil War* (New York: New York University Press, 1999); Christian Geffray, *La cause des armes au Mozambique: Anthropologie d'une guerre civile* (Paris: Karthala, 1990), pp. 128; 206; Anthony Loyd, *My War Gone By, I Miss it So* (New York: Penguin, 2001); Michael Ignatieff, *The Warrior's Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998); Tishkov, *Ethnic Conflicts in the Former USSR*, p. 576; Thomas Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary. A Rogue Reporter's Adventures in an Oil-Rich, War Torn, Post-Soviet Republic* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1998); Catherine Dale, "The Dynamics and Challenges of Ethnic Cleansing: The Georgia-Abkhazia Case," *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (1997), p. 80-81.

³⁴ I would like to thank Rhea Myerscough for her research assistance in this section.

one's back subverted the logic of frontlines.³⁵ Once the frontline was stabilized, fatality rates declined.³⁶ In other words, violence was used to eliminate known opponents and terrorize their potential sympathizers so as to securitize the army's rear and ensure that a proper conventional war could be fought. Once the frontlines stabilized the rates of violence went down and rival supporters were given the opportunity to switch sides.

A more recent conventional civil war was the Biafran War (1967-70), the result of the attempt by the Southern Igbo leadership to secede from Nigeria. The Igbo leadership opted against waging a guerrilla war and relied instead on those segments of the national army that had joined the secession to fight a conventional war. Though there were reports of massacres of civilians, this does not seem to have been the predominant form of violence. In fact, massacres (in the context of mass riots) preceded the war and served as one of its justifications, but stopped while the war was still ongoing. By far, most civilians fatalities resulted from the blockade imposed by the Nigerian Army: they were indirect rather than direct victims.

These two cases suggest that once a conventional war is ongoing, fatalities tend to be primarily military rather than civilian and indirect ("collateral") rather than direct—resembling the patterns observed in modern interstate conventional wars. Hence, it is possible to state that the form of warfare correlates with the patterns of fatalities with the causal arrow apparently going from the former to the latter. At the same time, turning the war into a conventional conflict may require high levels of violence in the initial stages if the population is intermixed, i.e. when people of questionable loyalty live on the wrong side of the frontline. Put otherwise, conventional war may itself be an outcome of high prewar polarization (individual identities credibly signal action) and high visibility (identities are highly and publicly visible)—coupled with a high level of resources for both actors. Yet, the small number of conventional civil wars suggests that only a

³⁵ The most recent reference work on this topic is Santos Juliá (ed.), *Víctimas de la guerra civil* (Madrid: Temas de Hoy, 1999).

³⁶ José Luis Ledesma Vera, "Espacios de Poder, Violencia y Revolución: Una Perspectiva Política de la Represión en el Aragón Republicano Durante la Guerra Civil", in Antonio Morales Moya (ed.), *El Difícil Camino a la Democracia* (Madrid: Sociedad Estatal España Nuevo Milenio, 2001), p. 256; Enric Ucelay da Cal, "La guerre civile espagnole et la propagande franco-belge de la Première Guerre mondiale", in Jean-Clément Martin (ed.), *La guerre civile entre histoire et mémoire* (Nantes: Ouest Éditions, 1995), p. 84.

subset of civil wars with high levels of polarization and visible identities turn conventional—underlining the importance of resources. In short, it is impossible on the basis of this evidence to say whether warfare has an independent effect on violence, or whether it is just an intervening variable between other variables, such as polarization and visibility, and violence.

Irregular Civil Wars

What is certain is that high levels of polarization and visible identities do not appear to explain why some wars become irregular and why others do not. This is clear in the case of the War of Algerian Independence where there was arguably high polarization between French settlers and native Moslems, and where identities were highly visible.

The war of Algerian independence (1954-62) was a classic war of decolonization which was fought as an insurgency, that is to say irregularly. It was a civil war both in strict terms (Algeria was under French jurisdiction, hence this was a domestic conflict) and in a more general sense (Muslim Algerians fought on both sides and the French were also divided with many leftists taking the side of the independentists). Violence against civilians was plentiful and exercised by both sides. The Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) used violence against French settlers, local competitors, and mainly against ordinary Algerian peasants who for one reason or another refused to collaborate. For instance, the massacre of 123 people (71 of whom were Europeans) on August 20, 1955, in the coastal city of Philippeville was intended to stir up mass support for the revolution by creating a climate of intercommunal tension and induce a mindless repression by the French which would bring international opprobrium while pushing Algerians to join to the FLN.³⁷ After this and similar tactics failed, the FLN resorted to the systematic use of terrorism, targeting the civilian population, whether it was Algerian Muslims who were known to be “friendly” to France, or Europeans. As a pro-FLN author recalls, “it is legitimate to say that it was the violence of terrorism that jolted a good number of us out of our complacency and our reluctance to think about things.”³⁸ However, while the FLN could easily intimidate the countryside, it was having difficulty organizing the population in urban areas, where it

³⁷ Mouloud Feraoun, *Journal 1955-1962: Reflections on the French-Algerian War* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), xvii.

³⁸ Feraoun, *Journal 1955-1962*, p. 44.

eventually resorted to tactics such as random bombing. This led to the famous battle of Algiers which ended with a French victory. On the other side, the French tried various tactics in the countryside, ranging from collective punishment to mass population displacement. While they won in narrowly military terms, they were unable to sustain the political and economic cost of the war and were forced to negotiate an end to the conflict. The Algerian case provides a snapshot of two functions of violence: the demonstration or signaling function, whereby violence is used to signal capability, induce mobilization, and attract international attention and the terrorist function, whereby violence is used to deter civilians from collaborating with the enemy. The outcome is suggestive: high levels of violence from both sides. What is particularly interesting is that although one would expect the violence to follow the ethnic divide (native/Muslim versus settler/Christian), it did not: intra-ethnic violence appears to have been more common than inter-ethnic violence, in a pattern that recurs in many civil wars that are fought irregularly.³⁹

The Angolan war of independence (1961-75) is similar to the Algerian war: a decolonization conflict fought irregularly. The war began on February 4, 1961 with initial attacks by the independentist MPLA, aimed at freeing political prisoners held by the Portuguese. The immediate Portuguese retaliation was severe: 3,000 Angolan civilians were killed in the streets and in their homes in Luanda and 5,000 civilians were massacred in the Malange district. Further, the Portuguese mobilized an army of 80,000, organized local militias and armed the white settler population. Villagers were reportedly napalmed and survivors were executed on the spot. Prairie fires were ignited to prevent the escape of refugees, tens of thousands of whom streamed toward the borders, seeking sanctuary in the Congo.⁴⁰ Little occurred during the next three years as the MPLA regrouped and opened a new front in 1964 near the Congo border. The MPLA opened a third front in 1966. There were many rumors of Portuguese atrocities, but the insurgents also proved very brutal both against white settlers and the native population.⁴¹ The

³⁹ Stathis N. Kalyvas, "The Logic of Violence in Civil War: Ethnic and Non-Ethnic Civil Wars", Unpublished Paper, The University of Chicago, 2002.

⁴⁰ Don Barnett and Roy Harvey, *The Revolution in Angola: MPLA, Life Histories, and Documents* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1972), p. 2.

⁴¹ Barnett and Harvey, *The Revolution in Angola*, p. 119, 200; Al J. Venter, *The Terror Fighters: A Profile of Guerrilla Warfare in Southern Africa* (Cape Town: Purnell, 1969), p. 112.

Angolan case matches the Algerian one in that when violence began it contained a strong demonstration effect along ethnic lines, but then switched to terrorization and assumed a substantial intra-ethnic character.

Less known is the war in Oman (1965-67) which was fought mainly in the Dhofar region of Southwestern Oman. Although the British played an active role, this was more of a domestic insurgency fueled by the cold war than a classic decolonization war. For both sides, the insurgents and the Sultan's forces and their British allies, the war was one of attrition, described as a war "for the hearts and minds" of the local population, the Jabalis.⁴² The insurgents tried several times to open another front in Northern Oman but were unsuccessful each time. This resulted in the fighting being concentrated strictly in the Dhofar region which, although hard to navigate, was a relatively small area in which the government forces soon were able to construct large barricades blocking supply routes to the insurgents (most notably the Hornbeam line). Their main objective was, "...to isolate the insurgent both physically and politically from the population." To achieve this objective, they burned villages that were not pro-Sultan and hang up the corpses of insurgent fighters to rot in the center of Dhofar towns.⁴³ Additionally, the government organized the so-called *firqat*, groups of defectors from the insurgents who were assigned to fight in the mountainous terrain of Dhofar, where government troops were not performing. The *firqat* were organized on a tribal basis and assigned to their tribal area which resulted in better information connections.⁴⁴ The insurgents became nearly eradicated at the war's end. This case differs from the previous two in that the insurgents were eventually defeated. Violence, however, was plentiful displaying both an intra-ethnic and an terrorist aspect.

All three cases of irregular war suggest that while the signaling character of violence cannot be ignored, violence was primarily used by both sides to terrorize the population and shape its behavior. In other words, violence is a key resource in irregular wars: it is generally strategic

⁴² Fred Halliday, *Mercenaries: Counter-Insurgency in the Gulf* (Nottingham, UK: Russell Press, 1977), p. 48.

⁴³ Halliday, *Mercenaries*, p. 49-54.

⁴⁴ John Akehurst, *We Won a War: The Campaign in Oman, 1965-1975* (Wilton, Salisbury, Wiltshire: Michael Russell Publishing, 1982), p. 77.

rather than gratuitous or driven by atavistic motivations, as suggested by its strong intra-ethnic character. What distinguishes these civil wars from the conventional kind (and possibly from the symmetric non-conventional ones) is the willingness of at least one actor to be discriminant, i.e. to try to separate those among the population allegedly supporting their rival to do so actively and systematically from those who do not—and in doing so, shape the population's incentives. Although it is impossible to predict rates of violence on the basis of this kind of evidence alone, it is still possible to discern a fundamental difference in the patterns of violence between conventional and irregular war, suggesting a potentially independent effect of warfare.

Symmetric Non-conventional Civil Wars

I now turn to the last type of warfare and examine two cases, Lebanon and Liberia. Unlike most irregular wars, the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) was equally (if not more) urban as it was rural. A key aspect of this war was the presence of visible boundaries separating sectarian enclaves controlled by various militias. Initially, the frontline at the center of Beirut shifted for months until it finally settled down and remained pretty much fixed for the rest of the war, dividing the city between eastern and western sectors, along the notorious Green Line. The war went through at least five different phases. The first phase lasted one year (1975-6), entailed heavy fighting, and eventually ended with a “ceasefire.” Subsequently, the war was characterized by sniper-style, sporadic fighting between militias (1976-82). The Israeli invasion of Lebanon brought additional complications and provoked an escalation both in terms of fighting and violence (1982-5). This was followed once more by sporadic militia violence (1985-9) and the so-called rebellion of General Aoun (1989-90) which was accompanied by heavy shelling. Violence was considerable with a lot of looting, but it fluctuated wildly and was not easily traceable. “Uncontrolled elements” (*anassir ghair bundabita*) were allegedly responsible for much (apparently random) violence against civilians. However, many civilians suspected that these men were merely a good excuse for useful activities that could not be openly condoned but were centrally planned and organized by the competing factions.⁴⁵ It is estimated that no more than 10 percent of the casualties involved combatants and combats were rare.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Jean Said Makdisi, *Beirut Fragments: A War Memoir* (New York: Persea Books, 1990), p. 58.

⁴⁶ Jonathan C. Randal, *Going All the Way: Christian Warlords, Israeli Adventurers, and the War in Lebanon* (New York: The Viking Press, 1983), p. 76.

Violence was widely reported as being produced along ethnic lines, though reliable data are lacking.

Similar features emerge from descriptions of the civil war in Liberia (1987-2003): the violence was considerable, allegedly motivated by ethnic hatred and taking place under territorial segmentation defined by frontlines. The government army quickly turned into an undisciplined ethnic militia, practically undistinguishable from competing ones. Massacres and torture were common and practiced by all sides.⁴⁷ One of the most vicious attacks of the entire war was the massacre of over 500 civilians that took place on 5-6 June 1993, targeting mostly women and children at a displaced persons camp outside Harbel. Augustine Mahiga, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, described the massacre as follows: “They cut throats, they cut heads, threw out brains, opened stomachs and threw out intestines, broke legs and shot, so many bullet wounds that you cannot understand why.”⁴⁸ Like the Lebanese Civil War, the Liberian one produced mass civilian displacement and ethnic segregation.

While the Liberian war has been described as a “new” civil war, the same is not the case for Lebanon. Yet, the two wars display considerable similarities: state collapse, seemingly gratuitous violence across ethnic lines, and expulsion of populations rather than attempts to win them over. The type of warfare appears to correlate with the patterns of violence and suggests violence that is, on its surface, more ethnically-motivated and indiscriminate than the violence of irregular wars. A first point is that the features of “new” civil wars are not new.⁴⁹ Put otherwise, the “new civil war” category may be systematically capturing symmetric non-conventional wars.⁵⁰ A second point, is that the seemingly ethnic and indiscriminate character of the violence (assuming this observation survives systematic tests) may represent a lack of resources for collecting finer-grained information about the population rather than specific ideologies or forms of organization.

⁴⁷ Stephen Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy: The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimension of an African Civil War* (New York: NYU Press, 1999), p. 80cf.

⁴⁸ *The Independent*, June 7, 1993.

⁴⁹ Stathis N. Kalyvas, “‘New’ and ‘Old’ Civil Wars: A Valid Distinction?”, *World Politics*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (2001).

⁵⁰ But note that not all recent civil wars are symmetric non-conventional ones. The Colombian Civil War is a case in point.

What kind of hypotheses about the crossnational variation of violence suggest themselves? When both political actors enjoy access to informational resources they will both try to be discriminant and violence should be limited. If one actor has informational resources while the other lacks them, we should observe a skewed pattern of violence. Last, if both sides lack informational resources, violence should be plentiful on both sides. These patterns are consistent with the observation that conventional wars generally tend to be less violent and that symmetric non-conventional wars tend to be very violent; they are also consistent with the observation that in irregular wars information is closely associated with violence.⁵¹ If this is correct, it would mean that warfare is a proximate or intermediate variable between information and violence. Obviously, this begs the question of what determines the distribution of informational resources in the first place. I will leave this question for another paper, and point out that this paper suggests the need to identify the factors that account for variation in the availability of information and the ways in which these factors also correlate with the type of warfare.

Having proposed this conjecture, I derive from the case literature three distinct accounts of violence. The first one (which I call the *sociological* thesis), connects violence to deep prewar divisions and conflicts (also referred to as “polarization”); in this view, both violence and warfare are just an expression of these pre-existing conflicts; in fact, warfare is a simple intervening variable between polarization and violence that does not deserve to be studied but on narrow empirical grounds; the second one (the *Hobbesian* thesis) imputes causal force to the collapse of order that tends to characterize civil wars; warfare under these conditions tends to be inherently barbaric because of the absence of the structures and authorities that have either the incentive or the predisposition to civilize war; finally, the third account (the *military* thesis) points to vulnerability as the causal mechanism behind mass civilian victimization. This is the thesis that places most causal force squarely on warfare, though it appears to be mispecified.

The main theorist of the polarization thesis, Carl Schmitt, stressed the heavily ideological character of the “National Liberation” movements of the decolonization and cold-war era with

⁵¹ Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*.

deep divisions.⁵² In his “theory of the partisan,” he argued that the “limited and domesticated” hostility of conventional war turned into the “real hostility” of partisan warfare because of ideological enmity—an insight that is found in many subsequent works, and has been adapted particularly to ethnic conflict.⁵³ However, Schmitt was generalizing from a particular historical period and failed to recognize that violence and irregular war have a broader historical connection. Contrary to what was widely believed in the 1960s, irregular war was not invented by Mao Zedong or Che Guevara; as a practice it is as old as warfare, while its theorization as a military doctrine goes back to the late 18th century;⁵⁴ the fact that irregular war has survived the end of the Cold War is another indicator of its instrumental (as opposed to ideological) character. In addition, the obvious limitation of this argument is that it cannot explain the extreme violence of the many civil wars that are not motivated by ideology (even when understanding religion and ethnicity to be ideological differences). Indeed, most symmetric non-conventional wars appear to be highly violent even though they do not seem to be motivated by ideological precepts. Formulated in a falsifiable way, this argument predicts that the deeper the divisions (or the more acute the degree of *polarization*), the highest the level of violence. The evidence is scant and mixed. From an impressionistic point of view it seems difficult to account for the extreme violence of many recent civil wars in Africa by pointing to patterns of prewar polarization. I know of only two studies that examine the link between polarization and violence in a systematic way. Ledesma Vera provides some tentative results showing a relation between levels of prewar polarization and levels of violence across villages of Aragón during the Spanish Civil War.⁵⁵ In a recent paper, Chacón (2003) found that prewar polarization as measured by electoral returns at the municipal level in Colombia is a good predictor of violence during the first phase (1946-50) of the civil conflict in this country, known as *Violencia*. This was a period during which the conflict was not militarized and looked a lot like a generalized riot. However, polarization ceases to be a good predictor of violence in the second period of the *Violencia* (1958-1963), once the situation evolved into a militarized conflict. During this period, geographical and military

⁵² Schmitt, *Théorie du Partisan*.

⁵³ e.g. Kalevi J. Holsti, *The State, War, and the State of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 39.

⁵⁴ Walter Laqueur, *Guerrilla Warfare: A Historical and Critical Study* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1998).

⁵⁵ Ledesma Vera, *Espacios de Poder, Violencia y Revolución*, p. 249-268.

variables appear much more significantly related to violence.⁵⁶ This finding supports the conjecture that in a militarized conflict, warfare has an effect on violence that is independent of polarization.

The Hobbesian thesis, in the form of an argument stressing the “medievalization” or criminalization of war, emerged to tackle various problems in the sociological account. Because irregular warfare presupposes a relative absence of formal structures it causes a breakdown in military discipline, thus turning war into a cover for decentralized looting, banditry, and all kinds of violence against civilians. The absence of professional armies indicates the disappearance of the “warriors’ honor” and its replacement with barbarism.⁵⁷ According to van Creveld, contemporary guerrilla wars “from Colombia to the Philippines” is nothing more than “the work of ragtag bands of ruffians out for their own advantage, hardly distinguishable from the *ecorcheurs* (“skinners”) who devastated the French countryside during the Hundred Years’ War.”⁵⁸ The weakness of this argument is obviously its failure to account for the violence of conventional civil wars. Formulated in a falsifiable way, this argument predicts that the most irregular the armies, the highest the violence. In Selesky’s formulation: “The greater the distance away from centralized monitoring, and probably also the smaller the numbers involved, the greater the opportunity for men to use violence to settle some personal score which may or may not have anything to do with the goals of the society that has authorized them to use purposeful violence in the first place.”⁵⁹ However, empirical support for this contention appears limited. For instance, we know that in many civil wars (e.g. El Salvador, Guatemala) the greatest amount of violence is produced by highly disciplined regular armies rather than insurgent irregulars. The behavior of the Nazi and Japanese armies in occupied countries during the Second World War is another obvious case. In terms of systematic evidence, it turns out that during the English Civil War atrocities were more common during in times and areas where professional armies operated,

⁵⁶ Mario Chacón Barrero, *Dinámica y Determinantes de la Violencia Durante “La Violencia :” Una Aproximación Desde la Econometría Espacial* Unpublished Paper, Universidad de los Andes, 2003.

⁵⁷ Ignatieff, *The Warrior’s Honor, Mueller, Hatred, Violence, and Warfare*.

⁵⁸ Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), p. 60.

⁵⁹ Harold E. Selesky, “Colonial America”, in Michael Howard, George J. Andreopoulos, and Mark R. Shulman (eds.), *The Laws of War: Constraints on Warfare in the Western World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 85.

rather than where local militias held sway.⁶⁰ The single worst massacre in Bosnia, in Srebrenica, was executed in a highly organized fashion by regular troops rather than paramilitary thugs. Recent econometric analysis of evidence from Africa also seems to support the contention that violence against civilians is used to achieve military advantage as opposed to loot and prey.⁶¹

Last, the military thesis, stressed in many studies of guerrilla warfare, contends that violence results primarily from the acute feeling of vulnerability that combatants experience in the context of irregular war. According to the psychological version of the argument, the absence of frontlines and the presence of the enemy behind one's back cause uncertainty, fear, and even panic, often reaching "endemic" proportions.⁶² In turn, this facilitates trigger-happy reactions, particularly among troops that lack training for irregular war.⁶³ Violence by disciplined troops, such as the massacre of Vietnamese peasants by U.S. servicemen in My Lai, is often linked to these processes.⁶⁴ The problem with this account is that it privileges expressive motivations and conflates levels of analysis. We know that armies do not just behave expressively: there are several incentives at various levels that typically constrain the indiscriminate expression of emotions (such as fear) from the rank-and-file.

The rationalist variant of vulnerability appears more satisfactory by linking violence specifically to an army's inability to identify the enemy. In an environment where it is impossible to tell civilian from enemy combatant apart, it pays to err on the side of violence. Hence the inevitable "dirty violence" of counterinsurgency. If the enemy refuses to fight in standard ways and if they prove "difficult to subdue using the techniques of "civilized" war, then uncivilized means must be used instead.⁶⁵ In short, it is not just that combatants kill people haphazardly out of sheer frustration (though this may well be the case on the ground and at the level of individual

⁶⁰ Will Coster, "Massacre and Codes of Conduct in the English Civil War", in Mark Levene and Penny Roberts (eds.), *The Massacre in History* (New York: Berghahn Books 1999), p. 95.

⁶¹ Paul Azam and Anke Hoeffler, "Violence Against Civilians in Civil Wars: Looting or Terror?", *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (2002), p. 461-485.

⁶² Matthew Cooper, *The Nazi War Against Soviet Partisans, 1941-1944* (New York: Stein and Day, 1979), p. 92.

⁶³ Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1995).

⁶⁴ Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai* (New York: Penguin, 1992).

⁶⁵ Selesky, "Colonial America", p. 61-2.

motivations), but that violence addresses a basic problem of irregular war. Note that, in spite of its application, this argument applies equally to both incumbents and insurgents since the latter face a similar identification problem with informers and suffer from betrayal and infiltration. Formulated as a testable hypothesis, this argument would make violence a function of the degree of vulnerability that a military actor faces. Evidence from the Spanish Civil War, where it is possible to hold other factors constant while varying vulnerability, tends to support this argument: recall that most of the violence against civilians during this war took place in the initial months of the war under high uncertainty and fluidity. At the same time, the vulnerability argument predicts that violence will reach its highest level in the most contested areas where political actors are most vulnerable. However, there is empirical evidence suggesting that this is not necessarily the case.⁶⁶ A better version of the rationalist version of the military thesis awaits specification.

An obvious connection between the theoretical speculation about the causes of violence and the empirical discussion of warfare is the observation that each mechanism appears to be related to a different type of warfare. Accordingly, the sociological thesis fits best with conventional civil wars, the military thesis with irregular war, and the Hobbesian one with symmetric non-conventional war. Such a fit would suggest that the different types of warfare reflect different types of civil war. The obvious questions concern the direction of causality and the causal mechanisms at work. It seems fair to think that the features of irregular warfare cause military vulnerability, symmetric conventional warfare produces a Hobbesian logic on the ground, while conventional, with its neat division between two states, provides a territorial embodiment of polarization.

Conclusion

This paper is open-ended. What I hope to have accomplished is demonstrate the necessity for a research agenda that combines systematic empirical research based on data that captures the key elements of warfare with theoretical analysis that elucidates key concepts and causal mechanisms. In other words, we should not think of ground-level empirical analysis and abstract theoretical reflection as divorced or mutually exclusive. Furthermore, this paper points to

⁶⁶ Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*.

information (and the resources necessary for its collection and assessment) as a crucial variable in the study of violence, and suggests the need to identify the factors that account for variation in the availability of information both across and within wars. Last, I hope to have shown that the social scientific investigation of civil wars ought to take warfare seriously, whether warfare turns out to be a significant independent variable on its own or just a proximate one. Clearly, the payoff from focusing on warfare is simultaneously substantive, theoretical, and methodological.

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