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The “Levels of Analysis” Approach to the Study of Foreign Intervention in Civil War

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Abstract

This paper argues that the “levels of analysis” approach offers a promising framework for the study of civil war and, in particular, the impact of foreign intervention in civil war. By surveying the literature and extracting patterns, the paper submits that it is useful to conceptualise three levels of abstraction in civil war: the system, communal, and individual levels. The paper concludes by showing that, unlike in other areas of political science, during civil war, anarchy is the defining characteristic at every level of analysis. This feature further highlights the distinctive character of civil war as a political, economic and social event.

Introduction

There are many compelling reasons to study civil war. Civil wars are common, being over two and half times more likely to occur than interstate wars (Sarkees, et al, 2003, 60); they are long, lasting on average seven years compared with only 11 months for international wars (Collier, et al, 2004, 253); and they are deadly, killing over 25 million people since 1945 (Hironaka, 2005, 2), while being indirectly responsible for the deaths of many millions more (Ghobarah, et al, 2003, 189-202). For these reasons, since the end of the Cold War there has been a sharp increase in academic interest in civil war.

The proliferation of civil war research across many different academic disciplines has created a sprawling literature, with work focusing on a diverse range of topics and employing many different methodologies. The diversity of the literature on civil war raises two questions. First, what is the best analytical tool for drawing synergies and linkages from such a diverse body of literature? And second, considering the sprawling nature of civil war research, to what extent can research on civil war be considered a single, coherent, and clearly demarcated field? In other words, what makes the study of social phenomena during times of civil war significantly different from politics during more normal times? In this paper I submit that the “levels of analysis” approach offers a sharper, more inclusive, and thus analytically superior framework for the study of civil war than those previously suggested. A survey of the literature shows that regardless of subject or methodology, most studies can be separated into one of three different levels of abstraction: system, communal, or individual. There are many advantages of using this framework. Foremost among these is its ability to “cut across” a diverse field and thus create analytical connections. In addition, the levels of analysis approach offers an important insight into the nature of civil war that has not previously been identified. As this paper will reveal, in civil war, the defining characteristic of each level of analysis is anarchy. This ontological insight highlights the distinctive character of civil war, and thus offers a powerful argument for the separate study of civil war from the examination of politics under peaceful conditions.

Drawing upon previous research in the field, this paper will propose a new scientific framework for the study of civil war, and will use the literature on the impact of foreign intervention on civil war to demonstrate the applicability of this approach. The paper is divided into two sections. The first section briefly outlines the advantages of the levels of analysis approach over the alternative “theoretical paradigms” division. The second section draws the analytical lines of distinction between the three levels of analysis and empirically demonstrates their utility by reviewing the literature on foreign intervention.

The Case for the “Level of Analysis” Framework

Previous attempts to analyse the literature on civil war have generally followed a framework based upon the “four main theoretical paradigms” of the field; namely rational choice theory, international relations theory, economic theory, and constructivism (Sambanis, 2002, 215-243). I, however, argue that there are advantages to developing a levels of analysis approach to the study of civil war. This is because there is greater variation in the units of analysis than the “theoretical paradigm” framework fully allows. Individuals and communal groups will frequently

have to decide whether to support the incumbent, the insurgent, or both, and the extent to which they wish to do so. Indeed, Kalyvas (2000; 2006) has shown that cleavages frequently do not translate across levels of analysis (also see DeWalt, 1985); for example, it is conceivable that during the Turkish-Kurdish conflict, certain Kurdish townships could have decided to support Ankara, while individuals within these towns could have decided to collude with the rebels, or vice-versa (Kalyvas and Kocher, 2007, 209). In the anarchy that civil war produces, individuals and social groups possess agential power. The difficulty for the researcher is judging the relative agency of each level of a particular phenomenon, which will largely determine a study's level of analysis. As such, each of the "theoretical paradigms" operates differently depending on the subject of analysis. In other words, any one of the "four paradigms" could be applied to explain the behaviour of the belligerents, communal groups, or individuals with different results at each level. Finally, the levels of analysis framework aids synergy between different academic fields, which is especially important in light of civil war research being highly inter-disciplinary. This contrasts sharply with the paradigmatic approach which tends to segregate different academic disciplines on the basis of their respective subject areas and methodologies. In sum, the levels of analysis is both an underdeveloped and promising method for the conceptualisation of civil war and as a framework for future research.

A civil war is defined as a prolonged, large scale, "armed conflict that pits the government and national army of an internationally recognized state against one or more [indigenous] armed opposition groups able to mount effective resistance" (Doyle and Sambanis, 2006, 31). This definition places a clear geographical and political boundary around each case of civil war. Hence, civil war is best understood as a bounded system, and like other systems, whether a marine ecosystem or a central heating unit, its boundary can be located by defining its physical structure, which in practice will be the borders of the civil war state (Little, 1975, 56). Thus, the components of the civil war system operate within the physical boundary of the state.

Defining civil war as a system restricts the type of observations that can be considered a dependent variable while remaining within the scope of the study of civil war. Hence, what should be included within the field of civil war studies becomes a question of causality. When, for instance, returning refugee populations or foreign powers influence the civil war, the civil war itself becomes the dependent variable. However, if the direction of causation is reversed and, for example, civil war causes a refugee crisis, sparks foreign intervention, or influences the dyadic relationship between two third-party states, these phenomena will not strictly be within the gamut of studies on civil war and are probably more comfortably grouped with studies on international relations and foreign policy (Carment, 1993; Regan, 1998; Beloff, 1968; Pearson, 1974; Ayres and Saideman, 2000; Carment and James, 1996).

The Levels of Analysis and the Study of Foreign Intervention in Civil Wars

An awareness of the levels of analysis is vital for any scientific study to accurately conceptualise phenomena. As Forbes pointed out, those "who study leaves and twigs may with effort keep the whole tree in view, but they are likely to lose sight of the forest" (Forbes, 2001, 356). Thus, the first task of any scientific study is to critically and deliberately identify the dependent variable's level of abstraction. Thus, an

understanding of the levels of analysis is essential. Two leading theorists on civil war have attempted to develop a levels of analysis approach to the study of civil war. Separately, Sambanis and Weinstein have divided the civil war literature into “macro” and “micro” studies (Sambanis, 2004, 273; Weinstein, 2007, 17 and 20-21). The macro-micro distinction reflects the traditional separation in economics between macroeconomics that “studies the functioning of the economy as a whole” and microeconomics which “analyzes the behavior of individual components like industries, firms, and households” (Samuelson and Nordhaus in Ray, 2001, 359). When applied to the study of civil war, macro studies presumably focus upon the whole civil war system, while micro studies focus on the choices “leaders make about how to recruit soldiers, groups’ decision about whether to centralize or decentralize command, and the structures movements set in place to ensure that foot soldiers act in accordance with objectives” (Weinstein, 2007).

There are, however, difficulties with applying the macro-micro distinction to civil war theory. Foremost among them is reconciling the macro-micro levels of analysis with the literature on civil war. As suggested earlier, and will be shown below, research on civil war tends to study either the behaviour of the strategic interaction between the belligerents, communities, or individuals. As such, in an attempt to better reflect the literature and capture more of the complexity of civil war, this paper will follow a three-tiered framework (Kalyvas, 2006; 2003).

The System Level of Analysis and Foreign Intervention

The system level of analysis is the highest plain of abstraction within the civil war. At this level, scholars treat the incumbent government and its political challenger(s) as unitary, rational actors operating in the anarchic environment brought on by the civil war. Conceptually, the system level merges the various elites, sub-groups, and individuals into a single actor. For example, at this level of analysis the Confederates, the Viet Cong or the Kuomintang are treated as unitary actors in spite of actual internal political, social, or personal fractures. The system level of analysis assumes that there are similarities in the political objectives, structure, and composition of incumbent and insurgent actors. Fundamentally, all belligerents seek to safeguard their own survival and enhance their security, interests, and political objectives. Furthermore, although the system level of analysis does not deny the existence of other political entities, studies conducted at this level of abstraction rarely bestow any actor, besides the belligerents, with substantial agential power. Therefore, at this level, the only significant political actors are the incumbent and insurgent. Thus, for the scholar, the system level of analysis offers “both advantages and disadvantages; the former flow from its comprehensiveness, and the latter from the necessary dearth of detail” (Singer, 1961).

At the system level of analysis, the emphasis is placed on studying the strategic interaction between the incumbent and insurgent and, by doing so, “arrives at a purely positional picture” (Waltz, 1979, 80; Wolfers, 1959). It is assumed that the relative capabilities of the belligerents is the key facilitator and constraint of their behaviour. By stressing structure over agency, the system level creates a situation where the “balance of capabilities” is instrumental in predicting the course, duration and outcome of civil war. As such, measuring variations in the balance of capabilities and how it affects different characteristics of conflicts becomes the principal puzzle. For instance, some studies have argued that a parity of capabilities between the

belligerents will prolong civil wars as neither side will possess the ability to “disarm the other” (Fearon, 2004). In contrast, other studies have hypothesised that an even distribution of capabilities will create a “mutual hurting stalemate” and thus increase the likelihood of a negotiated settlement (Zartman, 1989; 1995; Likerlider, 1995; Touval, 1992).

The majority of system level research on the impact of foreign intervention on civil war has focused on duration. Generally, these studies have been built upon the proposition that one-sided intervention will usually shorten the length of a civil war. Betts, for instance, was one of the first scholars to propose that “impartial” or “neutral” interventions will be ineffective as they require the foreign power to supply sufficient forces to completely dominate the battlefield, which is a level of commitment few states would ever contemplate (Betts, 1994). In contrast, biased interventions have the potential to successfully tilt the balance of capabilities with significantly less resources. Regan’s study attempted to empirically test, and theoretically develop, several of Betts’s hypotheses on intervention in civil wars. Regan predicted that external assistance to the incumbent “should in the norm shift the balance of capabilities towards preponderance” and thus shorten duration, whereas foreign intervention on the insurgent’s side “should, in the norm, shift the balance of capabilities towards parity,” resulting in longer civil wars (Regan, 2002, 60-61; Hironaka, 2005; Fearon and Laitin, 2003). Regan found some support for each of these hypotheses. However, the results were marginal because the study found that *all* types foreign intervention prolonged the duration of civil wars. Regan’s findings have subsequently been replicated by later studies (Elbadwai and Sambanis, 2000). A rare dissenting finding was produced by Collier, Hoeffler and Söderbom (2004). In this study, the authors found that foreign intervention on the incumbent’s side had no effect, while assistance to an insurgent shortened duration. After reviewing their data, the authors inferred that a “possible interpretation is that with sufficient military support for rebels, government forces can be defeated...[but], because rebel groups have the option of concealment, military support for the government may not produce a decisive military outcome” (Collier, Hoeffler and Söderbom, 2004, 264).

Mason, Weingarten and Fett’s (1999) examination of the effect of foreign intervention on civil war termination is the most prominent study that supports the “hurting stalemate” thesis. In this examination, the authors found that timing had a significant influence on the impact of foreign intervention on the course of civil wars. The study concluded that early intervention tended to prolong civil wars, whereas later intervention had a “positive effect on the probability of a negotiated settlement” (Mason, et al, 1999, 264). The authors interpreted these results as suggesting that belligerents that received early foreign assistance fancied their prospects of ultimate military victory and thus pursued the military option for longer. Furthermore, each recipient had little motivation to change their original assessment while the foreign power continued to subsidise the cost of fighting. On the other hand, “war wary” belligerents that received foreign intervention later in the civil war had already arrived at the realisation that decisive military victory was unlikely, but with newly-acquired foreign support could enter peace talks from a strong negotiating position. An important, and rarely acknowledged, contribution of this study was its implicit assumption that the balance of capabilities does not directly determine the strategies of the belligerents, but rather the belligerents’ estimation of the balance of capabilities

acts to shape the belligerents' *perception* of the risks and likelihood of success of different strategies.

Although system-level studies on the effect of foreign intervention on civil war duration and resolution have produced fruitful findings, they have largely failed to generate robust theory and explanation of these results. The key reason for this is methodological. Generally, these studies have considered a large numbers of cases over an extended time frame, which has proven to be an excellent method to produce robust, reproducible and significant results. However, the method only produces correlations and does not uncover the specific mechanisms of how foreign intervention interacts with the belligerents and the balance of capabilities.¹ Indeed, this approach required the authors to interpret country-level data as an approximation of local phenomena and then generate system-level explanations without suitable data on the specific mechanisms of the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. The limitations of this approach have been acknowledged by several scholars and, as a consequence, recent research has begun to include qualitative case studies with their "thick descriptions" to "help identify the causal mechanisms through which the independent variables" interact with the units of analysis (Collier, et al, 2005, 1). Alternately, other studies have attempted to overcome this problem by focussing on the communal level of analysis.

The Communal Level of Analysis and Foreign Intervention

The communal level of analysis focuses upon the behaviour of groups within the boundaries of the civil war. Broadly, the communal level includes all social aggregates, including families, villages, tribes, classes, and ethnic groups. Communal groups caught in disputed areas of a civil war state will be forced to make decisions, such as which side to support and how much support to provide. Once made, studies at this level of abstraction assume that the decision holds for all members. In other words, agential power is held by the community and not by the individual. For instance, one communal level study of Mexican Civil War observed that once "a vote of confidence in the EZLN...[was] passed by the community assembly [it] in effect became ideological binding on all the members of the peasant community itself" (Saavedra, 2005, 538). In the Vendée, although the small retailers and artisans did not hold the same grievances as other sections of the community, "as a small group in the village community they could not easily avoid taking sides with the party of the majority" (Petitfrère, 1988, 202). Therefore, although the units at the communal level can range in size from family groups through to entire ethnic groups, studies at this level share two characteristics. First, the aggregate communal unit must navigate the uncertain politics created by the existence of two opposing centres of authority, and second, the communal group is monolithic and thus individuals and sub-groups do not possess significant agency.

At the communal level of analysis, the forces of the incumbent and insurgent attempt to convince ethnic groups, tribes, and villages to support their cause, or at least not to support their opponents. In Mexico, for instance, one communal level study argued that "the success or failure of the EZLN strategy...depended ultimately on its capacity to turn those at the rural grassroots into what might be termed 'armed communities in rebellion'" (Saavedra, 2005, 534). As such, EZLN forces travelled from village to

¹ This is not solely a criticism of large-*N* studies with many instrumental case studies being confronted by a similar problem. See for instance Rasler (1983).

village attempting to convince the traditional village leadership that supporting them was in the village's best interest. However, frequently a communal group's decision-making will not be based solely upon the political message of the belligerents. There are ontological differences between the cleavages at the communal level and those at the system level. Communal-level studies have frequently shown that the behaviour of communal agents will be influenced by historical relations with other families, tribes and ethnic groups. For example, during the Irish Civil War,

Family and faction dictated the course of the IRA split in units all over Ireland, often in highly predictable fashion. Once again, it was the Brennans against the Barretts in Clare, the Hanniganites against the Manahanites in east Limerick, and the Sweeneys versus the O'Donnells in Donegal as all the old feuds were reignited (Hart, in Kalyvas, 2001, 111).

In Mexico, peasant communities "had old debts to settle, and the *guerrilla* movement gave them not only the weapons to do so but also a new political outlook" (Saavedra, 2005, 532). Hence, a communal group's decision-making will be a function of the new political reality of the civil war and historical social cleavages. Finally, a group may decide not to support either belligerent. In areas where both incumbent and insurgent control is limited, villages and other communal groups can choose to create their own militia groups for protection. In Sierra Leone, for example, Richards (2001, 67) reported that "rural civilians turned increasingly to civil defense. A number of militia bands were formed, drawing on initiates to local hunting guilds." However, in areas where fighting is more intense, neutrality is frequently more difficult. In Basra, the Shaykhiya Shiite minority "was the target of brutal attacks, strived to remain neutral but was compelled to establish its own militia while simultaneously joining a non-aggression pact with the main parties" (ICG, 2007, 10).

The study of foreign intervention at the communal level of analysis has generally concentrated on uncovering the differences between foreign intervention in ethnic and ideological civil wars. Customarily, conflicts have been designated as "ethnic" when one of the belligerents is comprised principally of one communal group and is ethnically distinct to their opponent. In the literature, ethnic civil wars are regularly assumed to be fundamentally different from ideological civil wars (Horowitz, 1985; Sambanis, 2001, Kalyvas, 2005, Cooper and Berdal, 1993). Kaufmann, for instance, has argued that there are important differences between ethnic and ideological civil wars which alter the impact of foreign intervention. The author argued that foreign intervention in ideological civil wars is ineffective because the conflict is primarily a test of the political competency, which no quantity of financial or military aid can influence. Furthermore, like the incumbent's forces, foreign powers will be operating in a war zone with no frontlines and will be unable to identify the political affiliation of the population. In contrast, when the belligerents are constituted by different ethnic groups, Kaufmann surmised that there are clear territorial boundaries between the groups, affiliation is clearly identifiable by physical characteristics, and the belligerents will generally engage in conventional warfare. As such, the outcome of ethnic civil war is "determined by the balance of forces, which outside powers can alter radically" (Kaufmann, 1996, 81).

There are problems with Kaufmann's assertions. First, subsequent studies have shown that there is no significant correlation between ethnic civil wars and conventional

warfare. Consider, for example, the guerrilla warfare in the ethnic civil wars in Kashmir, Turkey, Chechnya, Sudan, and Ethiopia (Kalyvas and Kocher, 2007). Second, there is evidence to suggest that ethnic defection is more common than Kaufmann assumes (Kalyvas, 2008). Indeed, to date, in comparison with the system and individual levels, the communal level of analysis has produced few robust hypotheses on the impact of foreign intervention in civil wars.

The Individual Level of Analysis and Foreign Intervention

The behaviour of individuals is the ultimate devolution in the study of civil war.² Civil war creates a political and social environment that is fundamentally different from peace time. During the American Civil War, for example, “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” (Fellman, 1989, xvi, in Kalyvas, 2003, 6). Similarly, Mao (1975, 223) observed that “war has its own particular characteristics and in this sense it cannot be equated with politics in general.” Hence, generally individual-level studies share an emphasis upon the uncertainty, fear, and opportunity that the anarchy of civil war produces. Individuals are faced with similar choices as group aggregates, such as, whether to actively participate; whether to denounce personal enemies; whether to flee; and/or what side with which to collaborate.

On balance, these questions are incompatible with the system and communal levels’ assumption that their aggregate units are unitary actors. As such, Cornelius (in Dewalt and Pelto, 1971, 3) stated that “there remain substantial doubts about the long-term promise of research seeking to make statements about personal political predispositions or psychological traits on the basis of aggregate data for macro units such as cities, states or provinces.” Kalyvas’s research supports this view. He has argued that ethnic identities are not necessarily reliable predictors of individual behaviour. Hence, for example, Kurdish rebel groups invest as much energy identifying defectors, collaborators, and denouncers, as fighting against their opponents (Kalyvas, 2005; Hironaka, 2005). In sum, individual level studies “offer a ground level view of civil wars as ‘welters of complex struggles’ rather than as simple binary conflicts between organizations crystallizing popular support and collective grievances along well-defined cleavages” (Kalyvas, 2001, 113). These findings, and others, suggest that the mechanisms driving individual behaviour are different to those at other levels.

Overall, there has been a paucity of research conducted at the individual level of analysis that solely considers the impact that foreign intervention has on the course of civil war.³ However, two distinct directions to the study of foreign intervention at the individual level have developed. The first school had stressed the decentralised appearance of many rebellions when viewed from the individual level’s perspective. The second line of thought has analysed the decision-making process.

² Typical of this level of analysis are, Richards (1996), Wood (2003), Bax (2000), Justino (2007).

³ The same is true for developmental studies, as economists generally study the impact of foreign aid at the level of the national economy. An exception includes Hendry (1960).

The first direction has emphasised the chaos and disorder of civil war at the individual level of analysis. Individual level studies have regularly pointed out that it “is not the case that the entire population necessarily wage the wars. Just as we normally do not understand wars between states to be wars between every citizen, internal armed conflict also rely on a certain class of people – the armed forces – to do the actual fighting” (Angstrom, 2001, 105). In addition, the individuals that engage in the fighting are frequently depicted as “opportunistic, sadistic, and often distinctly nonideological marauders” (Mueller, 2000, 2004). In one study from Kenya, for instance, it was reported that the Mau Mau were “children and boys wondering about in the markets and towns” who, according to one observer, formed “terrorist gangs” and “deceived others to enter the forest” (Bernard Ngari Harrison quoted in Branch, 2007, 309). Drawing upon evidence such as that from Kenya, Mueller argued that every society contains small numbers of criminals, thugs and sadists. However, under the conditions of anarchy arising from civil war, these elements trickle up to assume positions of authority. Small bands of these individuals congregate around particularly brutal leaders and proceed to rape, loot, and murder their way across the country. These groups only very occasionally take time out of their orgies of violence to fight other like units from rival ethnic, criminal, or business groups. Under these conditions, it is assumed that a foreign military intervention will have an immediate and sweeping impact. In the Bosnian Civil War, for instance, Mueller suggested that because the fighting was “carried out chiefly by small, ill-disciplined, and essentially cowardly bands of thugs and bullies, policing the situation would probably have been fairly easy for almost any organized, disciplined, and sizable army” (Mueller, 2000, 43-44).

The second, and related approach, has examined the motivations of individuals who decide to join in the fighting. Weinstein’s research has shown that the presence of externally supplied resources – along with natural resources – tends to attract recruits that are drawn to short term gains (“consumers”) rather than individuals that are willing to endure high costs and risks for a possible future payoff (“investors”). Weinstein argued that insurgent actors that attract “consumers” participate in greater levels of indiscriminate violence and looting than insurgent actors populated by “investors”, which are generally more disciplined, politically motivated and frugal (Weinstein, 2005; 2007; Humphreys and Weinstein, 2006). Thus, foreign assistance, by making available greater quantities of weapons, cash and equipment, may attract larger numbers of “consumers” than “investors” into the insurgent’s ranks.

The individual level has recently experienced a sharp increase in academic popularity, with these studies producing much of the currently accepted theory on the dynamics of civil war. However, large gaps remain in the literature on the impact of foreign intervention on individual preferences and behaviour during civil war.

Conclusion

As suggested by the preceding discussion, although there is a rapidly-expanding literature on civil war and on foreign intervention, there remains much research to be completed. The aim of this paper was to propose a framework with which to analyse previous research on civil war, which would assist the ordering of data and improve synthesis between academic fields. The paper argued that the levels of analysis approach offers a better analytical structure than the “theoretic paradigms” distinction for the future scientific study of civil war. By drawing analytical distinctions along the

lines of research areas and methodologies, the theoretical paradigms approach makes possibilities for collaboration and linkages across academic fields more difficult to identify. In contrast, the levels of analysis approach, by emphasising the unit of abstraction rather than the field of research, can potentially overcome this problem.

Second, the paper asserted anarchy is the defining characteristic of civil war at all three levels of analysis. Indeed, even in secure areas, communal groups and individuals must consider the possibility of the frontline shifting in the future. The major implication of this observation is that political, economic, and social cleavages will not necessarily remain constant between units of analysis. That is, there are different realities of civil war depending upon the level of analysis. Therefore, to outside observers, civil wars have frequently seemed messy affairs, with the politics and violence apparently containing no discernable pattern. This has resulted in the behaviour of individuals, collective groups, and the belligerents being described by outsiders as senseless, barbaric, wanton, and emotional. However, the levels of analysis approach explains some of the supposed randomness to civil war violence by providing a mechanism through which to understand the changing preferences of belligerent, groups, and individuals under the conditions of anarchy. Indeed, it seems that much of the confusion surrounding the analysis of civil war is due to observers unconsciously moving between levels of analysis.

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