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“NEW” AND “OLD” CIVIL WARS: IS THE DISTINCTION VALID?

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Two related trends have attracted attention to civil wars. First, the decline of interstate armed conflict since the end of the cold war has turned civil wars into the prevalent form of armed conflict (even though the number of internal wars *has not* increased markedly since the end of the cold war). Of the ninety-six armed conflicts which have taken place between 1989 and 1996 only five have been wars between states (David 1997). In addition, civil war has staged a come-back in Europe. Second, civil wars classified as “ideological” or “political-economic” have declined since the end of the cold war, while wars classified as “identity” or “ethnic” have increased (Brubaker and Laitin 1998). These trends have prompted an “unprecedented” new wave of interest in both civil wars and ethnic conflicts (David 1997:552-3).¹

Together with this new attention have come two trends: an emphasis on ethnicity as a source of conflict and the perception that recent civil wars are fundamentally different from past civil conflicts--especially those of the cold war era. I will not deal with the first question, which has effectively been addressed by Fearon and Laitin (1996): they have shown that out of all possible ethnic conflicts only an extremely small number ever result in civil war. Instead, I will address the second issue: is the distinction between “new” and “old” civil wars, a valid one?

“New” and “Old” Civil Wars

It is possible to trace the distinction between new and old civil wars to two influential works, both by journalists--one in Europe and the other in the United States. In Europe, the argument was propounded with forcefulness by Hans Magnus Enzensberger in 1993. In the United States a year later, the journalist Robert D. Kaplan, the author of *Balkan Ghosts*, a book on the Balkans, published an extremely influential book about Africa, with the telling title *The Coming Anarchy: How Scarcity, Crime, Overpopulation, and Disease are Rapidly Destroying the Social Fabric of our Planet*. These works both reflect, and in turn greatly are shaping, a widespread perception, namely that post-cold war civil wars are fundamentally a

¹Although the number of internal wars has not increased markedly since the end of the cold war, their relative importance has, because interstate wars have declined. As a result, those interested in contemporary warfare, mainly students of International Security, have focused on civil wars, a striking contrast to the previous consignment of civil war studies to those interested exclusively in domestic politics. However, David (1997:553-4; 560) warns that “just as domestic politics is not international politics writ small, so too internal war is not simply a scaled-down version of international war.”

different phenomenon from cold war civil wars. Indeed, the distinction between old “grievance-based” and new “loot-based” civil wars is at the center of much semi-journalistic arguments (e.g. Lutwack 1995), serious academic work (Duffield 1998; Keen 1998), even a new multi-million dollar research program financed by the World Bank (Azam and Hoeffler 2000; Collier and Hoeffler 2000).

The essence of this distinction is this: the most appropriate framework through which one can understand (and, even more, deal with) the new civil wars is criminality rather than politics. This is reflected in the rise of human rights ideology, supported by the requisite infrastructure of humanitarian and non-governmental organizations and lobbies which vigorously promote a legal/criminal approach as a way to understand or even resolve those wars. The most recent example is, of course, the civil war in Sierra Leone.

The July 1999 peace agreement in this country was opposed by many activists and journalists on the grounds that it was immoral for criminals to be allowed to participate in the country’s government (and, of course, to be granted amnesty): as a human rights worker put it, “amnesty is inadmissible; I am sickened” (quoted in Ourdan 1999b). In fact, a UN official went as far as to describe the desire of the majority of the population for amnesty and peace as being representative of a peculiarly African (and rather despicable, it seems) understanding of justice (Ourdan 1999a)! Interestingly, the same issues of *Le Monde*, where these articles appeared, criticized the British right-wing press for condemning the peace agreement in Northern Ireland on similar grounds: namely the nomination in the government of a former IRA commander suspected of many murders; indeed, Patrice Claude (*Le Monde*, 4 December 1999), praised the British journalist Hugo Young for arguing that without this nomination “there would be no peace agreement,” precisely the same argument which is condemned in Sierra Leone and described as representative of a peculiarly African sense of justice! Likewise, the recent breakdown of the peace agreement has led some commentators to argue that this agreement should have never have been made in the first place, since the rebels had no intention to honor it: “from the rebel’s point of view, why have peace when it is the absence of law and order that enables one to loot? ... In fact the rebels never had any intention of honoring the peace accord; they were only interested in waging war and looting the country” (Reno 2000).² Yet the same argument

²The same author calls for a war in Sierra Leone, to be (conveniently) waged by Nigeria: “Unconstrained by the rules of peacekeeping, the Nigerians can wage war against the rebels.” Reno seems to ignore that Nigeria has been part of the problem and that, while peacekeeping in the recent past, its troops have been found guilty of substantial human rights violations.

could have been (and was) made about the peace agreement in Mozambique, which has since been widely hailed as a success story.

Hence the question is: is the distinction between old and new civil wars warranted? In this paper I argue that it is not. Although, arguments based on this distinction take a variety of forms, are rarely clearly spelled out, and are made implicitly rather than explicitly, one can distinguish four strands:

1. Old civil wars were fought over well-defined and articulated ideological causes. In contrast, new civil wars, are motivated by tribal and ethnic hatreds at best, or plundering at worst.

2. Whereas old civil wars erupted because of accumulated and genuine popular grievances, new civil wars are exclusively motivated by greed and loot.

3. Old civil wars were based on popular support for at least one side, the rebels, whereas new civil wars are fought by political actors who have no popular basis.

4. In most old civil wars, violence was controlled and disciplined, especially when it came to the rebels. Not so in new civil wars, where violence is gratuitous, senseless, and purely wanton. Related to this point, old civil wars were fought in centralized and disciplined ways (and could be won), whereas new civil wars are fought in decentralized ways by undisciplined militia and independent warlords (and tend to linger on forever).

These four strands are meant to only establish an ideal-typical distinction between old and new civil wars rather than describe all such arguments--particularly since this distinction tends to be made implicitly and vaguely. Table 1 summarizes these differences.

Table 1: “Old” and “New” Wars

| “Old” Civil Wars | “New” Civil Wars |
|--|---|
| Broad, well-defined, and articulated ideological cause | Narrow, tribal and ethnic hatreds, or no cause whatsoever |
| Grievance-based | Greed-based |
| Popular support | Lack of popular support |
| Controlled violence; centralization of war | Gratuitous violence; decentralization of war |

This paper is based on a “re-reading” of evidence from both new and, particularly, old civil wars and proposes the following two-pronged argument: the propensity to see major differences between old and new civil wars is based, first on an overestimation of their particular characteristics and, second because on a misinterpretation of old civil wars.

WELL-DEFINED AND ARTICULATED IDEOLOGICAL CAUSES VERSUS TRIBAL AND ETHNIC HATREDS OR NO CAUSE

Old civil wars, the argument goes, were motivated by broad, well-defined, clearly-articulated, universalistic, ideologies. In contrast, new civil wars are based on (often purely local), tribal and ethnic motivations—if on nothing at all. Enzensberger (1994:30) summarizes this perception in one sentence: “What gives today’s civil wars a new and terrifying slant is the fact that they are waged without stakes on either side, that they are wars *about nothing at all*” (original emphasis). These wars are distinguished by “the complete absence of conviction;” “in today’s civil wars there is no longer any need to legitimize your actions. Violence has been freed from ideology” (Enzensberger 1994:20-21). Likewise, Kaplan (1994) reduces civil wars in Africa to criminal actions by bandits and disenfranchised soldiers, teenage hooligans, child-soldiers on drugs, and assorted “juju-warriors.” *Le Monde* (2 December 1999) quotes an inhabitant of Sierra Leone, who argues

that the civil war in this African country ought not to be compared to the wars in Kosovo or East Timor: "There, people are fighting for their independence, their survival. Here, we had a senseless war, a war without any meaning." This argument can be pushed one step forward. It is not just, Enzensberger (1994:29) tells us, that political actors in new civil wars lack ideology; more than that, they have an innate inability to think and act in terms of past and future: "In the collective running amok, the concept of 'future' disappears. Only the present matters. Consequences do not exist" (Enzensberger 1994:29).

However, this view has been aptly described as paying "scant regard to the insurgents' own claims concerning the purpose of their movement ... and [preferring] instead to endorse a view widespread among capital city elites and in diplomatic circles" (Richards 1996:xvii). Indeed, Gourevitch (1998:182) aptly criticizes this perception: "By denying the particularity of the peoples who are making history, and the possibility that they might have history, [they] mistake [their] failure to recognize what is at stake in events for the nature of these events."

In fact, most journalistic writings tend to be biased. They quote uncritically city-dwellers and members of pro-governmental organizations: "These arrogant and illiterate rebels return here to preach their truth" points out an opponent of the peace agreements in Sierra Leone, quoted in *Le Monde* (Ourdan 1999b). The anthropologist Christian Geffray, who studied the civil war in Mozambique, begins his book as follows (1990:19):

A horde of bloodthirsty murderers has been spreading terror, destruction, and death in the Mozambique for the last thirteen years. This image of the war and of the armed organization that conducts it reflects the views of the urban elites, national intellectuals, and foreigners who live in Maputo, the capital of Mozambique, and the big cities of the provinces. Journalists cannot investigate [the war] on the ground, and the international media reproduce the information and analyses produced in these circles. Even scholars have, up to now, contributed to accredit this perception of the war--the little research carried out displays the same informational gaps, only worsened by a certain propagandist naiveté. After all, this image is not completely false, and it has the merit of sensitizing international public opinion to the dramatic fate of millions of people. But this image is insufficient, and its passionate character masks the complexity and depth of the social and political processes taking place in the Mozambican countryside; it hinders the understanding of their nature and impact.

Researchers who have studied these wars by actually conducting fieldwork in war zones (as opposed to interviewing victims and government officials), provide very different accounts: rebels are not simply bandits; they are often *also* motivated by ideological

concerns. Many rank-and-file members of the African rebel movements which have been stigmatized as lacking any ideology appear to have a sophisticated political understanding of their own involvement, as Peters and Richards (1998) have convincingly shown. Often their ideology is not easily visible to the uninformed observer looking for “Western” patterns of affiliation and discourse. Just because these organizations use religious idioms and discourses and local cultural practices to mobilize people (Young 1997:136-7; Weigert 1996) instead of universalistic ideological or easily identifiable appeals, does not mean they lack an ideology or popular support. For instance, Chingono (1996) shows how the RENAMO rebels in Mozambique relied on local religious appeals to generate popular support. Chingono (1996:55) is emphatic: “The claim that Renamo has no ideology has no basis. By resuscitating and defending peasant outlooks of the world, which had been suppressed by Frelimo, Renamo was articulating peasant ideologies.”

Conversely, the importance of ideology in old civil wars has been greatly overstated. To begin with, we now know how superficial was the adoption of the cold-war ideological cleavage (expressed in complicated acronyms) across a range of civil wars. Furthermore, when not “disguising” ethnic or local cleavages, these ideologies were propagated by means of traditional cultural idioms not unlike those used by movements in new civil wars. For example, Lan (1985) has shown how the “progressive” Zimbabwean rebels who fought against the country’s racist regime used traditional religion (and its practitioners) to mobilize peasants.

More generally, there is a clear epistemic bias in favor of the assumption that old civil wars (as well as most individuals participating in them) were motivated by grand ideological concerns. Because ‘urban’ scholars tend to be primarily motivated by ideology, they often assign overwhelmingly (and clear) ideological motives to both participants and civilians in non-ethnic civil wars.³ As Barrington Moore (1966:480) puts it: “The discontented intellectual with his soul searchings has attracted attention wholly out of proportion to his political importance, partly because these searchings leave behind them written records and also because those who write history are themselves intellectuals.”

Moreover, it is a mistake to infer from the motivations of rank-and-file members from their leadership’s ability to articulate ideological messages. As a historian of French Fascist movements (Jankowski 1989:ix; xii) points out: “The protagonists in the debate have

³In fact, it turns out that political violence is not directly caused by (radical) ideologies even in urban environments, as Della Porta (1995:196) shows in her study of Italian and German ‘terrorist’ organizations.

focused almost obsessively on ideology;” yet, what is needed, he adds, is to apply existing theories “to the unknown thousands supposed to fit them—to ask who they were and what they did and what happened to them, in one place over time and under the stress of events; and if in the process fascism should evaporate of itself, so be it.” In other words, inferences from the elite level about the mass level are problematic.

A common finding in numerous studies is that local considerations often trump ideological ones (Kedward 1993:152-3). Dallin et al. (1964:336) point out that in the German occupied Soviet Union, the individual’s decision to side with Germans or partisans was not determined by “abstract considerations and evaluations of the merits and demerits of the two regimes, nor even by likes and dislikes or experiences under the Soviet regime before the occupation.” Swedenburg’s (1995:169-70) subtle analysis of collaboration with the British during the 1936-39 Palestinian rebellion demonstrates that

“collaboration” and its representation in popular memory are quite complex and contradictory phenomena... Shaykh Rabbâh and Abû Fâris represented their motivations for turning against the revolt as being rooted in local ideology and custom, in particular, feudal loyalty and the desire for revenge. Their testimony contained no hints that they joined up with the British out of admiration for colonial traditions or for the Zionist project of settling Palestine.

Similarly, McKenna’s (1998:194-5) focus on the “unauthorized narratives” of Muslim rebels and supporters in the Southern Philippines revealed “that ordinary Muslims’ perceptions and representations of the war were often conspicuously independent of the ideological influences of any separatist leaders or, for that matter, of any elite group.”

Likewise, observing good insurgent performance in combat has often led to the erroneous inference that rebels are (depending on partisan preferences), either fanatics or highly dedicated to an ideological cause. However, numerous studies have concluded that men in combat are usually motivated *not* by ideology but by group pressures and processes involving (1) regard for their comrades, (2) respect for their leaders, (3) concern for their own reputation with both, and (4) an urge to contribute to their success of the group (Grossman 1995:89-90).⁴ Indeed Laqueur (1998:272) points out that “the history of guerrilla warfare is replete with examples showing that men fight for many years and face great hardships with little apparent personal motivation. Throughout history it has been strong

⁴Obviously, this does not answer the question of how and why an organization capable of providing such training and leadership emerges (Berman 1974:5).

leadership, the personal example of the commander, the ethos and the esprit de corps which have kept guerrilla movements going and not just ideological motivation” (see also Moyar 1997:28). Finally, the war itself provides powerful attractions.

Recent sociological research on religious conversion, a “choice” even more amenable to ideological considerations than politics, shows that doctrinal appeal (i.e. people hearing the message, finding it attractive, and embracing the faith) does not lie at the heart of the conversion process: most people do not really become very attached to the doctrines of their new faith until after their conversion (Stark 1997:14-7). Usually, processes of joining are rooted in network dynamics: Stark found that social network ties (especially friendship and kin ties) are the best predictors of conversion. Wickham-Crowley (1992:152) and Petersen (forthcoming) reached a similar understanding about Latin America, and the Balkans and Baltic respectively. As Hart (1999:209;264) points out about Ireland:

The question, then, is not: why did certain men become nationalists? It is, rather: why did certain nationalists become Volunteers?... The most important bonds holding Volunteers together were those of family and neighborhood. Indeed, IRA companies were very often founded upon such networks... Twelve of the thirteen veterans I interviewed had fought on the republican side. None could remember making a specific choice to do so. ‘I hadn’t a clue’; ‘It was very confusing altogether’. Judging by the recollections of Cork veterans, the Treaty itself and republican ideology were rarely discussed within their ranks. ‘The politics of it was second place at times’. Most couched their decisions [about which side to take in the Civil War] in the same collective terms they used to describe their joining the organization.

This is consistent with a number of observations by revolutionary leaders in Latin American who complained about the low level of political “consciousness” of the peasant guerrilla recruits and the efforts made to raise it *after* they have joined (Wickham-Crowley 1991:52)⁵ and extensive research about the motivations of Vietcong recruits who were not committed revolutionaries when they entered the organization, but had to be “socialized,” “molded” and have “their consciousness raised” through elaborate processes of political and ideological training (Berman 1974).

⁵Likewise, sales of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, rose in Germany after membership in the Nazi Party had increased, not before; apparently possession of the book was a badge of loyalty more than a tool of conversion (Wickham-Crowley 1991:129).

In short, the ideological content of old civil wars, especially at the mass level, appears to have been greatly overstated very much like the dearth of ideology in new civil wars.

POPULAR SUPPORT VERSUS LACK OF ANY SUCH SUPPORT

Old civil wars are said to have been based on broad popular support (for at least one side, the rebels), whereas new civil wars appear to have been fought by political actors who display a noticeable absence of any such support. For example, Nordstrom (1992:271-2) describes the Mozambican rebels of the RENAMO as “a particularly lethal rebel movement that has virtually no ideology or popular support,” formed by foreign powers intent on destabilizing the country, and responsible for “over 90 percent of all atrocities committed.” Similar statements abound about Sierra Leone (e.g. Reno 2000). According to Pécaut (1999), the war in Colombia is not a civil war precisely because the population does not support any political actor at all.

However, this sort of statement is often the result of inadequate research rather than a reflection of reality. For instance, Nordstrom’s account, based exclusively on interviews with refugees in areas “recently liberated from RENAMO control by government forces” and information provided by pro-governmental organizations (such as the Organization of Mozambican Women), relays the government’s view of the rebels: she reports, for instance, in seemingly neutral terms that “in Mozambique, [the RENAMO] is generally referred to as *bandidos armados* (armed bandits)” ignoring that incumbents in all civil wars use such terms to describe insurgents.⁶ In fact, a number of recent studies (Young 1997, Chingono 1996) demonstrate that RENAMO enjoyed a considerable level of popular support. For example, Chingono (1996:4) points out that “while Renamo would not have survived without external support, exclusive focus on external factors equally distorts the reality and denies the Mozambicans own history; they are reduced to mere passive victims of manipulations and machinations of powerful external forces.” Yet, this support was to be found in rural areas controlled by RENAMO, where researchers and journalists rarely traveled, rather than in the cities under governmental control. Often support, takes local forms which are not easily identifiable by outsiders. For example, the use of traditional

⁶In a subsequent account, Nordstrom (1995) provides a more nuanced portrayal of the situation in Mozambique.

processes of initiation turns out to be central in generating support and commitment for insurgent organizations (Richards 1996:xix). Finally, every war produces both winners and losers. Winners are likely to support one party, losers its opponent; in other words, support is often endogenous to the conflict.

Conversely, the perception that rebellions in old civil wars were based on widespread popular support has been repeatedly called into question. If, as Pécaut suggests, we were to call civil wars only those in which the majority of the population supports the war, I suspect that we would quickly be faced with a drastic shortage of civil wars. The fact of the matter is that most people don't like wars and don't support them.

To begin with, the (often politically biased) view that left-wing rebellions, in Latin America and elsewhere, was based on popular support has been called into question by careful micro-oriented research (e.g. Stoll 1999). Furthermore, we now know that individual loyalties in civil wars are often informed less by impersonal messages and more by fluid, shifting, and often local cleavages which are not very different from those found in the context of new civil wars. For example, many studies describe messy and fluid processes, often characterized by a disjunction between underlying cleavages, on the one hand, and violent conflict and identities, on the other. For example, Hart (1999:220) analysis of Cork County in Ireland (1916-23) unearths a high level of variation in political attitudes at the micro level, an "array of--often conflicting--local loyalties [which] turned every part of Cork into a political patchwork."

[P]olitical attitudes could change abruptly with a parish boundary. One community might produce a strong [IRA] company but their neighbours over the hill or down the road could be apathetic or actively hostile. To return to the example of the Valley Rovers and Knockavilla GAA clubs, it may well be that the officials of the latter did not join the IRA because the former, their long-standing rivals, did.

When, in 1923, Irish nationalists fought a civil war, the decision about which side to join was, according to Hart (1999:265-6) "shaped, as always, by group loyalties and rivalries. Factional divisions became political battle lines."

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.

The American Civil War in Missouri was basically the expression of a lingering conflict between the states of Kansas and Missouri. In May 1862, Major General John M. Schofield (quoted in Fellman 1989:90) stated this “widely held opinion” in arguing for the replacement of all Kansas Union troops: “This appears to me to be a necessity, resulting from the bitter feeling existing between the border people, which feeling is the result of old feuds, and involves very little, if at all, the question of Union or disunion.” Likewise, during the Palestinian rebellion of 1936-39, Swedenburg (1995:131-3) reports,

In some villages the rebel military structure reflected rather than transcended existing divisions in rural areas... [B]asing bands in particular families or *hamâ'il* [clans] could lead to internal disputes and antagonism... [T]hese preexisting divisions within the village were the bases for certain disputes that erupted during the revolt... On other occasions local divisions were simply exacerbated in the course of the revolt, and a village would splinter into armed factions aligned with different rebel leaders... According to British records, a serious split of this sort occurred in the village of Al-Râma in the Galilee where a thirty-year-old feud between the Hanna (Greek Orthodox) and the Nakhla (Greek Catholic) families was played out in the course of the *thawra* [revolt]. Each village group tried to exploit rival rebel factions for its own purposes; each group occasionally denounced a member of the opposing family alliance as a spy in order to incite the rebel *qâ'id* [chieftain] with whom it was aligned to punish the other side.

A U.S. officer who participated in the Filipino guerrilla against the Japanese occupation (St. John quoted in Lear 1961:28) pointed out that: “When war came, and when the Japs took over the northern part of [Leyte], the southern people naturally got mad at the northern people. There were old feelings against the Tacloban people anyway. There probably was jealousy because the Tacloban people lived better.” In a similar fashion, the South Vietnamese village of Binh Nghia displayed a “lukewarm attitude toward the Viet Cong” because the local Communist movement had originated across the river, in the Phu Long hamlets; as it turned out, West (1985:146-7) points out,

The hostility between the Phu Longs and Binh Nghia was generations old, focused on a feud over fishing rights. It was natural that the Phu Longs and Binh Nghia was generations old, focused on a feud over fishing rights. It was natural that the Phu Longs assumed economic as well as political power when the Viet Cong were on the rise and this was done at the direct expense of fishermen from Binh Nghia. So later when the Viet Cong came across the river to spread the gospel, there were many in Binh Nghia who resented them and any cause they represented. The police chiefs had fed this resentment with money and had built a spy network.

Likewise Manrique (1998:204-5) describes how, in the central Peruvian valley of Canipaco, the population enjoyed a “kind of honeymoon” with Shining Path which ended when a dispute erupted between two communities over the distribution of lands previously usurped by haciendas:

The participation of armed Shining Path cadres on the side of one of the communities in a massive confrontation against a confederation of rival communities provoked a rupture with the latter, who decided to turn over two senderista cadres they had captured in the scuffle to the authorities in Huancayo. This action provoked Shining Path reprisals, which culminated in the execution of thirteen peasant leaders. The victims were kidnapped from their communities and assassinated in the central plaza of Chongos Alto.

Because rebellions are often articulated in the language of national cleavages, many observers code them erroneously as mobilizing popular support along those national cleavages. For example, in his analysis of the Cultural Revolution in a Chinese village, Hinton (1984:527) reports that warring factions used the language of class struggle, each claiming that their opponents represented landlords and counterrevolutionary elements. However, Hinton found that the conflict was polarized around competing clans: the Lu family, dominating the northern and larger section of the village, and the Shen family which played a major role in the southern section of the village.⁷ The same discovery was made by the writer of a report on the 1927 Haifeng uprising in South China, a region which was polarized into competing alliances of villages, known as Red Flag and Black Flag, which had grown out of lineage struggles (quoted in Marks 1984:263): “When the Red Army arrived flying red banners, the troops were greeted by landowners and peasants alike from Red Flag villages who thought they were allies in the struggle against the common enemy, the Black Flag villages.” Marks adds that “recognizing that the villagers had rallied to the right flag for the wrong reasons, Communists informed skeptical peasants of the goals of the land revolution. “This propaganda was not always so skillfully conducted’, a cadre reported, ‘and in some cases did not lead to the desired results’.”

Locally segmented cleavages often aggregate in misleading ways: wealthy peasants may support one political actor in one region and its rival in a neighboring region (Close 1993; Geffray 1990; Hofheinz 1967); wealthy merchants can be targeted by poor right-wing death

⁷These family differences were intertwined with personal conflicts: Fast Chin, the militiaman who was the closest ally of the Lu family and a leader of the “loyalist” faction, bitterly resented Little Shen, the rebel leader, because Little Shen had married (in Chin’s view stolen), the woman Fast Chin had wanted to marry (who also happened to be the widow of Chin’s brother) (Madsen 1990:185-6).

squad members in an otherwise class polarized conflict (Paul and Demarest 1988:128; 150); sets of diverse (overlapping or not) regional and local cleavages, such as socio-economic, factional, lineage, clan, tribal, gender, or generational⁸ cleavages, combine to produce misleadingly uniform aggregate cleavages; vertical relationships (patron-client) and vertical ties (communities, neighborhoods, townlands, parishes, corporations, factions, clans, or kin) often trump horizontal cleavages (Hart 1999:177; McKenna 1998:162; Kriger 1992:8; Hinton 1984:527; Marks 1984:264). Group interests are often “localistic and region-specific” (Young 1997:138-142; Chingono 1996:16; Wickham-Crowley 1992:131); individual motivations are not necessarily informed by impersonal cleavage-related grievances, but often by local and personal conflicts (e.g. McKenna 1998; Swedenburg 1995; Paul and Demarest 1988), even by common crime (Mueller 1999; Paul and Demarest 1988; Henderson 1985). As Tilly (1964:191) has observed about the Vendée, “the most microscopic information we have on communal politics in southern Anjou resists forcing into categories of class and locality alone, and calls for hunches about kinship, family friendships, the residues of old feuds, and the like.” The same applies for societies which are sharply polarized in terms of class (Stoll 1999) and ethnicity (Richards 1996:6; Hamoumou 1993; Gross 1988). Social relations and the connections that had formed identities before the war become a matter of “constant reformulation” (Berry 1994:xxi). In many ways, civil wars provide a medium for a variety of grievances to be realized within the space of the greater conflict and through the use of violence. As Lucas (1983) argues about the counterrevolution in southern France, “the revolutionary struggle provided a language for other conflicts of a social, communal, or personal nature.”

In short, micro-oriented studies of both old and new civil wars offer a ground-level view of civil wars as “welters of complex struggles” (Harding 1984:59) rather than simple binary conflicts among organizations crystallizing popular support along well-defined categories.

⁸Many observers have noticed the emphasis that insurgent movements place on recruiting young people (e.g. Pike 1966:287 about Vietnam), as well the willingness of young people to join them (e.g. McKenna 1998:184 about the Philippines; Wickham-Crowley 1992:20-1 about Latin America). Fewer observers, however, have pointed out that this strategy can produce a generational cleavage between the newly empowered youth and the dispossessed elders (Kriger 1992). White (1989:295-302) demonstrates the importance of the generational cleavage for understanding the Cultural Revolution in Shanghai; Degregori (1998:134) describes how in many Andean villages, “the youthfulness of the Shining Path authorities was upsetting.” Hart (1999:169) writes about the Irish revolution: “It was young people who embraced the ‘Cause’ and ‘the older crowd’ who opposed them. As one Bandon veteran told me, it was the ‘old fellas—the farmers’ who were the main obstacle to the movement in his area. A Bantry IRA man recalled that ‘our fathers and mothers were more or less against us at the time, but we all joined up, all the neighbours, all the young fellas’.”

In most civil wars, old and new alike, popular support is shaped, won, and lost during the war, rather than being immutable and fixed once and for all.

CONTROLLED AND RESTRAINED VERSUS GRATUITOUS, SENSELESS, AND WANTON VIOLENCE; CENTRALIZED VERSUS DECENTRALIZED FIGHTING

The violence of new civil wars is consistently described as both horrific and senseless. Human rights organizations and the press described the gruesome massacres that took place in Algeria, in 1997, as “senseless,” “wanton,” and “incomprehensible” instances of “random butchery” (Ganley 1997; Smith 1998:27; Amnesty International 1997; *Time*, 6 October 1997). Likewise, when in the last days of September 1998, twenty-one women, children, and elderly people were massacred by Serb soldiers near the village of Gornje Obrinje, in Kosovo, a detailed journalistic account concluded that “the practice of taking violent revenge is a time-honored tradition in the Balkans” (Perlez 1998). Indeed, the Kosovo crisis has been described as “a worsening but predictable Balkan cycle of attack and reprisal” (*The New York Times*, 7 March 1999). These descriptions are often complemented by arguments that “explain” acts of violence by simply stating their effects. For example, a psychologist who treats the maimed victims of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone said that “it was the goal of the rebels to take away their role as men, fathers and husbands” (quoted in Onishi 1999). Nordstrom (1995:142) states that “Renamo, with its tactics of severing the noses, lips, and ears of civilians, seems to reclaim the original sense of the absurd.” Enzensberger (1994:20) points to “the autistic nature of perpetrators, and their inability to distinguish between destruction and self-destruction. A book which is quoted ad nauseam in this accounts is certainly Joseph Conrad’s, *Heart of Darkness* (e.g. Ourdan 1999a).

Such senseless violence just wasn’t present in old civil wars if we are to believe Enzensberger (1994:15), who argues that in the American, Russian, and Spanish Civil Wars “there were regular armies and fronts; the central command structures attempted to carry out their strategic objectives in a planned way through strict control of their troops. As a rule there was political as well as military leadership, following clearly defined goals, and ready and able to negotiate when necessary.”

Yet, a quick perusal of the evidence from old civil wars brings up a quite different image. “Cruelty is the steady companion of civil wars” points out Petitfrère (1981:50). “Civil war, the most ravaging of all kinds of war!” laments Gunther (1949:129). The centrality of violence in civil wars has been stressed by observers and participants alike, since at least Thucydides (III:81), who describes the civil war in Corcyra as a situation in which

There was death in every shape and form. And, *as usually happens in such situations*, people went to every extreme and beyond it. There were fathers who killed their sons; men were dragged from the temples or butchered on the very altars; some were actually walled up in the temple of Dionysus and died there (emphasis added).

Recently, the violence of ethnic conflicts has received sustained attention. However, violence is the central component of all kinds of civil war. Billard de Veaux, a nineteenth century French counter-revolutionary leader, remarked that “excesses are inseparable from wars of opinion” (quoted in Dupuy 1997:237). Madame de Stael (1979 [1798]:10) observed that “*Toutes les guerres intestines se ressemblent plus ou moins par leur atrocité, par la fermentation dans laquelle elles jettent les hommes et par l' empire qu'elles donnent aux passions violentes et tyranniques.*” Latin America has been a privileged setting of mostly non-ethnic civil wars laced with incredible violence. As Rosenberg (1992:7) puts it: “To the average newspaper reader in the United States, Latin America seems overwhelmingly, numbingly violent, marked by political disappearances, repressive dictatorship, torture, death squads, and revolutions that invariably seem to bring more of the same.” In fact, the connection between civil war and violence is one of the most consistent observations (Fridja 1994:267). For example, descriptions of the civil war in Western France during the French Revolution (the Vendée war) include all those elements that make contemporary human rights reports such sad reading: killing of prisoners; hostage-taking and execution of real or suspected collaborators of the opponent; arrest, torture, mutilation, and killing of suspected “traitors” and “enemy agents;” vicious cycles of terror and counterterror; punitive raids and reprisals against villages, including systematic destruction of property, rape and torture of women, and killing of children. Dupuy’s formulation (1997:255) is telling: the Vendée war “was a civil war before anything else, hence violence was its essential component.” It is enough to read descriptions of the violence in such old civil wars as the Russian and Spanish ones (e.g. de la Cueva 1998; Figes 1997) to lose any faith in human nature.

Finally, the abduction of children to turn them into fighters is generally associated with recent “greed” rebellions in Africa. But it was consistently used in many ideological rebellions, such as the Afghan insurgency after the Soviet invasion (Borovik 1991:25) and the Shining Path insurgency in Peru (Del Pino 1998:171). During the (supremely ideological) Chinese Cultural Revolution, the most violent groups were composed of young Red Guards, ranging in age from eight to fifteen (White 1989:280-1).

Turning to new civil wars, it is important to emphasize that the understanding of violence is culturally defined (Zulaika 1988). For example, killings by knife and machete tend to horrify us more than (the often incomparably more massive) killings by aerial and field-artillery bombings (Kalyvas 1999b). As Crosier (1960:158) put it a long time ago: “The violence of the strong may express itself in high explosives or napalm bombs. These weapons are no less discriminate than a hand-grenade tossed from a roof-top; indeed, they will make more innocent victims. Yet they arouse less moral indignation around Western firesides.”

Moreover, the “senseless” violence of new civil wars often appears not to be gratuitous at all. For example, the violence used by RENAMO appears to have been far from senseless. Young (1997:132-3) found that the most extreme atrocities were part of a carefully drawn (and largely successful) plan to battle-hardened young, mostly forcibly conscripted, young guerrillas. Likewise, atrocities committed against the population at large were concentrated in Southern Mozambique, where the FRELIMO government had a strong base, hence

by virtue of the numbers involved, the elimination of its supporters could not be achieved by simply picking off a handful of local party officials. Such violence was less evident in areas where FRELIMO influence and presence had been eliminated and RENAMO was relatively well established. In the Gorongosa region there was reasonably good and co-operative coexistence with the civilian population and little apparent fear. The RENAMO presence in the Zambezia seems to have been less brutal and better organised from its first arrival in the area.

Likewise, Paul Richards (1996:xx), an anthropologist who studied the civil war in Sierra Leone, provides an analysis of rebel violence that is far more nuanced than the conventional descriptions:

Take, for instance, a spate of incidents in villages between Bo and Moyamba, in September-October 1995 in which rebels cut off the hands of village women. What clearer instance could there be of a reversion to primitive barbarity? Images flood into the mind of hands cut off for the

manufacture of magic potions. But behind this savage series lay, in fact, a set of simple strategic calculations. The insurgent movement spreads by capturing young people. Short of food in the pre-harvest period, some captives, irrespective of the risks, sought to defy the movement and return to their villages where the early harvest was about to commence. How could the rebels prevent such defections? By stopping the harvest. When the news of rebel amputations spread in central Sierra Leone (the rice granary of the affected region) few women were prepared to venture out in the fields. The harvest ceased... Having decided not to take part in the February 1996 elections the rebels then started to use the same tactic to scare away would-be voters—cutting off the hands that might otherwise cast a vote.

In my own research (Kalyvas 1999a) I likewise found that the massacres in Algeria could be understood as rational. To summarize, both the perception that violence in old civil wars is somehow limited, disciplined, or understandable and the view that violence in new civil wars is senseless and gratuitous are not supported by the evidence.

POPULAR GRIEVANCES VERSUS GREED AND LOOT

In a recent paper, Collier and Hoeffler develop two models of rebellion, informed by the dichotomy between old and new civil wars. According to the first model, “rebel motivation is private greed: the rebel organization is a group of bandits.” The second is a model in which “rebel motivation is political, in that it faces a collective action problem, and in which the public good to be provided by rebellion is the assuagement of grievance” (Collier and Hoeffler 2000:2-3).⁹

To begin with, it is not clear whether organizations go to war in order to loot or loot in order to keep fighting. To say that the civil war in Sierra Leone is only about diamonds is a wild oversimplification—and an erroneous one to boot (Richards 1996). Furthermore, the leaders of organizations which fight in new civil wars are often described as “warrior gangs” (Enzensberger 1994:22) or warlords (e.g. Reno 2000). In fact, there is a literature on the phenomenon of warlordism, and it comes from historians of China. What we learn from this literature is instructive: warlords are no mere bandits. These historians define as warlords men who were lords of a particular area by virtue of their capacity to wage war

⁹Collier and Hoeffler also produce a number of mixed greed-grievance models; my point is that they begin from an assumption inspired by the recent writings on civil wars.

(Sheridan 1966:1). Rule is, indeed, a key feature of warlordism—as opposed to mere plunder. Whereas bandits (in China and elsewhere) have to loot and run in order to survive as bandits, warlords levy taxes, administer justice, maintain some degree of order, and generally assume the burdens of government for the areas they control (Sheridan 1966:19). Many rebel organizations in Africa, often dismissed as mere gangsters develop a complex apparatus ruling over the areas they control which, while less visible, is not as different from that deployed by ‘justice-oriented’ rebels as is often thought (Duffield 1998; Geffray 1990). They also engage in organized, systematic, and sophisticated economic interactions with foreign firms which buy raw materials and sell weapons (Reno 1998), an activity at odds with the extreme decentralization implied by conventional views. In fact, the very act of having to control (and hence administer) territory turns bandits into something fundamentally different.

On the other hand, “ideologically-oriented” actors in old civil wars have typically engaged into criminal activities and large-scale looting. Indeed, looting is a constant element of civil wars, including the most ideological ones (Li 1975:229). For example, Cribb (1991:54) demonstrates the central role played by the gangsters of Jakarta in the “highly ideological” anticolonial insurrection against the Dutch in Indonesia, in 1945. Consider the following description of the paradigmatic ideological political actors, those of the Revolutionary armies during the French Revolution. They were often described by their contemporaries as highwaymen, bullies, ravenous wolves, vagrants, adventurers, bankrupts, lackeys without employment, robbers, deserters, vagabonds, wretches, vicious, bloodthirsty hooligans (Cobb 1987:5). Likewise, their adversaries, the counterrevolutionaries, often descended into cheer banditry (Tilly 1964:6). The members of a Fascist party (the PPF) in German-occupied France were described by fellow Fascists as consisting of “highly dubious activists, [and] in which the procurer rubs elbows with the thief, and murderer with the swindler.” The Prefect of the Indre-et-Loire pointed out that “Some of the agents ... of the PPF have behaved like veritable gangsters and have not hesitated, under the pretense of maintaining order and policing the population, to carry out veritable gangster operations for their own profit” (quoted in Jankowski 1989:126; 135). Likewise, Moyar (1997:168) reports that among South Vietnamese militiamen one could find former criminals specifically recruited “who preferred fighting to sitting in jail” while American advisers often allowed the members of the CIA-sponsored Provincial Reconnaissance Units to “keep money captured during their operations.” One can find similar descriptions in almost all “ideological” civil wars.

CONCLUSION

In sum, a “re-reading” of the evidence from both new and old civil wars suggests that the widespread distinction between old and new civil wars (which is often a codeword for “good” and “bad” civil wars or “bad” and “worse” civil wars) is not warranted. However, it would be equally wrong to assert that all civil wars are the same. They are not. But there are better ways to study them than through facile dichotomies. First, we need to base our comparisons on careful empirical research rather than anecdotal statements and fragmentary observations. Second, we need to focus on factors which are more important (though less visible) than ideology: for example, we need to ask how is the comparative availability of resources for fighting a civil war affecting its nature and shape. Third, we need to disaggregate civil wars. Some civil wars may be mostly about looting but at the same time their violence may be constrained—or vice versa. Violence does vary within civil wars—both across time and space. Big dichotomies, such as between old and new civil wars may sound impressive; they are, however, a bad way to analyze and understand complex and multifaceted phenomena such as civil wars.

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