Symposium: Bridging the Gap? Connecting Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in the Study of Civil War

Introduction

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Civil wars—and the violence, death, destruction and displacement they cause—have become a central concern in the post-Cold War and post-9/11 worlds, even as we witness a more general decline in armed conflicts and related fatalities (Human Security Report Project 2006). Indeed, a new generation of scholarship has placed the study of such wars squarely in the academic mainstream, generating an array of findings on all phases of civil conflict (Tarrow 2007).

For readers of this newsletter, the particular way in which this knowledge has been generated will be of interest, as well. With a few important exceptions—Petersen (2002), Kalyvas (2006)—these findings flow from the rigorous application of quantitative methods, based on datasets of increasing power and sophistication (Gleditsch 2007; Humphreys and Weinstein 2006, among many others). Scholarship of this type is an outstanding example of the best that quantitative methodologies can offer—large, cross-national, as well as sub-national, disaggregated samples that yield “new insights into the causes of civil war, the forces impacting its duration, and the factors shaping its termination” (Weinstein 2007: 366).

This symposium does not dispute such claims, but instead asks how we can improve or build upon them. In particular, how can the application of mixed methods—quantitative and qualitative—consolidate and push forward the civil war research program? The contributions presented below suggest advances in three related areas: (1) a move from Humean or correlational accounts of cause to more robust mechanism-based understandings; (2) greater understanding of dynamics and processes; and (3) an argument to put quantitative and qualitative techniques on a more equal footing.

Nome’s contribution nicely illustrates how mixed methods can move work on civil war from correlation to causation. As he notes, causal mechanisms are not simply intervening variables or variables at lower levels of aggregation, but recurrent processes connecting specified initial conditions and outcomes. Nome then goes on to argue that Gerring and Sea-
reflection. First—and echoing concerns raised by Gates in his contribution—methods are no substitute for theory. Put bluntly, what kind of theory results when we mix methods? Reading across the contributions—with their invocation of contingency, complex causal chains, scope conditions and mechanisms—one gets a sense that these dissertations will not produce broad, generalizable theories. Instead, we would appear to get middle-range theory (Johnston 2005), or what sociologists call grounded theory. If this is so, users of mixed methods might do well to connect their efforts to an earlier generation of middle-range theory building (Glaser and Strauss 1967) so as not to repeat past mistakes. More generally, is the civil war research program best served by a collection of complex theories, where the parts may not add up to a (unified) whole? Is there a trade-off to be considered: mixed methods mechanisms and dynamics coherent, general theories of civil war?

Second, are there epistemological limits to multi-method work? Multi-method designs typically use some combination of formal models, quantitative techniques, and qualitative methods such as process tracing or case studies—all of which have an epistemological basis in positivism (Symposium 2007: 9-11). While qualitative methods could in principle include post-positivist techniques such as ethnography, discourse analysis or genealogy, these are rarely employed by practitioners of multi-method research (Symposium 2006). Are they irrelevant for understanding the complexity of civil war? Recent work would seem to suggest otherwise (Wood 2003; Hansen 2006). Perhaps, though, the problem is more fundamental: Many would caution that we simply cannot combine methods from differing epistemological traditions. Yet, in practice, several scholars have engaged in precisely such epistemological boundary crossing, and with significant empirical and methodological payoffs (Hopf 2002; Klotz 2008). Moreover, newer work in the philosophy of social science indicates that these epistemological dilemmas are not nearly as great as some once feared (Katzenstein and Sil 2008).

Third, mixing methods is but a means to an end, and that end is more complete theoretical accounts of civil war. However, multi-method work in this area seems to build theory whose roots are overwhelmingly anchored in rationalist social theory. Indeed, the rational choice language of constraints and incentives looms large in the contributions by Arjona, Jung, and Steele in this symposium; this is much in keeping with the political economy origins of much contemporary work on civil war. Yet students of mixed methods might also explore how their methodological toolkits can help bridge another gap—between rational choice and its constructivist/sociological competitors.

Theoretical bridge building of this sort has become a cottage industry in recent years (Fearon and Wendt 2002). What role do social norms, feelings of community, and emotion, say, play in civil war? While we have hints of how to address such questions (Kaufman 2006; Kalyvas n.d.), much work remains. Multi-method research, with its problem-driven, pragmatic focus, seems well placed to bridge this other–theoretical–gap. This double bridging exercise of methods and social theory would not only generate richer theoretical accounts of civil war. By incorporating instrumental and non-instrumental causal mechanisms, it would also contribute to central disciplinary debates.

References


The type of relations between insurgent and counter-insurgent armed groups on the one hand, and the civilians with whom they interact on the other, is subject to wide variation. At times, armed groups try to approximate the behavior of states by extracting taxes, imposing new social norms, establishing predictable and routinized systems of rule enforcement, and supplying public goods. Yet, at other times, armed groups interact with civilians only through the use of violence. There is variation not only across wars and armed groups, but also within these organizations. Civilian populations, for their part, also vary in how they respond to the presence of such groups. Some stay and collaborate, some choose to leave their hometowns and become refugees or internally displaced persons, some fight back by forming self-defense groups, and some enlist as full-time combatants. What explains a group’s decision to employ a specific strategy towards civilians? How can a civilian’s response to the presence of armed groups in her hometown be explained?

My dissertation sheds light on these questions by examining the ways in which both sets of actors interact in a context of irregular warfare. I start from the premise that civilians’ behaviors—collaboration, displacement, recruitment—cannot be understood in isolation from the very context in which their choices are made. I argue that this context varies not only across local territories, but also through time. The strategies of armed groups cannot be understood without taking into account three facts: (1) the essential nature of civilian collaboration for the warring sides in an irregular war; (2) the advantages that armed groups gain by bringing about local order in war zones; and (3) the possibility of institutional learning, which allows these organizations to fine-tune their strategies depending on the context in which they operate.1

In this essay, I discuss the ways in which combining quantitative and qualitative methods allows me to test the different components of my theory. In particular, I stress the importance of relying on qualitative methods not only to test the causal mechanisms that I claim to be at work, but also to explore the validity of several of the assumptions on which the argument is built (see also Steele, this symposium). By causal mechanism, I mean the underlying rationale of the causal link between the independent and dependent variables. As Jon Elster (1998: 45) has argued, “mechanisms are frequently occurring and easily recognizable causal patterns that are triggered under generally unknown conditions or with indeterminate consequences. They allow us to explain but not to predict.” Put differently, a causal mechanism complements a general claim about causality of the form “if X then Y,” by providing an answer to the question “why is Y occurring when X has taken place.”2

The value of combining qualitative and quantitative methods is that the latter are usually better at showing general correlations, but rarely can offer a way to test our claims about the underlying rationale of such correlations. Qualitative methods, by contrast, allow us to illustrate the specific rationale we offer for the alleged causality— that is, the mechanism (or mechanisms) that we claim to be at work.

I start with a brief discussion of the research question and the approach I offer to theorize it. I then summarize the components of the research design, and the advantages of relying on both quantitative and qualitative methods. I conclude by arguing that further advances in the civil war research program require that we take micro-level variation more seriously. To do this, collecting more fine-grained data and giving importance to causal pathways—rather than only correlations—is a must.

Theoretical Discussion

Research Question: What explains the variation in armed groups’ strategies towards civilians? Why do some local communities react differently to the strategies of armed groups? How does the interaction between civilians and combatants shape the behavior of both through time? To explore these questions, I define my dependent variables as follows. First, the behavior that the armed group adopts towards any given local community can vary along a continuum that goes from the exclusive use of violence to the creation of an encompassing system of governance. Second, local communities may provide different levels of support to the armed groups that are present in their territories. I differentiate between obedience and endorsement as well as between limited and full collaboration, and propose a typology that goes from resistance to full endorsement.

Theoretical Approach: Civil wars can be fought in very different ways. In some cases, victory relies on success in the battlefield—the so-called regular wars—as in most international conflicts. In others, the fight consists of controlling territories, with the armies rarely having direct encounters. This type of war is generally known as irregular, and is the most common type of civil war (Balcells and Kalyvas 2007). Even though the exact formula for gaining and maintaining territorial control in these wars remains disputed, most scholars and practitioners agree on the crucial role that civilian collaboration plays (Mao 1997; Guevara 1978; McColl 1969; Kalyvas 2006). I argue that in their quest for control and civilian collaboration, armed groups have strong incentives to create order in the territories where they are present, which shapes both their strategies and