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25 Years of *Civil Wars*: Identifying Key Developments Through the Reviews Section

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ABSTRACT

This introductory essay to the Reviews Section of *Civil Wars* 25th Anniversary Special Issue explores key paradigms in the field of conflict studies, and how they have evolved, ranging from new and critical approaches to knowledge production; to conceptualisations of political violence and civil war as dynamic, relational, and potentially order-making and a new demand to centre research ethics in our work. Among other things, this introduction calls on scholars of civil wars to cultivate and maintain spaces for critical dialogue and reflection – not just on methods and findings but also on broader questions of the processes and politics of knowledge production – to ensure the health and advancement of our sub-field.

Introduction

The past quarter of a century has seen significant developments in the field of conflict studies, many of them fundamentally shaped by an evolving US security agenda. In broad brush strokes, the end of the Cold War ushered in a comparatively placid security environment for the United States, and in turn, some US analysts began pointing to fragile state structures as the greatest security threat (Mazarr 2014, p. 113). Resultant programmes for peace and development proscribed centralised state administration, separation of powers, individual rights and representative democracy, and labelled states that deviated from this design as ‘fragile’ and ‘failed’. With the terrorist attacks of 9/11, so-called ‘failed states’ became a threat not only to achieving international peace but also to domestic US security. This spurred over two decades of military intervention paired with maximalist liberal peacebuilding approaches in Iraq and Afghanistan. In another region of the Global South, the United States continued and expanded its War on Drugs, encouraging militarised approaches to illicit drug markets that similarly overlooked the power and politics of non-state actors. These

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counterinsurgency and liberal peacebuilding interventions frequently met with abject failure, often further contributing to the expansion of armed violence and the proliferation of non-state armed groups (Lessing 2017, Dodge 2021). A demand emerged for new methodological and theoretical approaches that could account for local and non-state actors and organisations and their role in the causes and consequences of intra-state violent conflict.

In this context, broad trends in research on conflict reflect an evolution towards an emphasis on exploring the origins, evolution and strategic environment of armed actors and their involvement not only in fostering violence but also in contributing to ‘good enough security and stability’ (Stepputat 2018, p. 405). Departing from top-down approaches focused on *fixing* failed states following pre-made institutional recipes, much of the academic literature on armed violence has shifted to a micro-based *understanding* of violent conflict, and the complex interplay between state and non-state actors. While such an approach is not new *per se*, the ‘micro-turn’ has been significantly popularised since the late 2000s. As illustrated by the reviews in the 25th Anniversary Special Issue, a micro-politics approach delves into the relationship between individual motivations for engaging in armed conflict, as well as broader political, economic, and social structures. In doing so, it has contributed to a broadening of the scope of conflict studies to non-violent activities (i.e. armed governance) and to encompass diverse types of political violence (e.g. large-scale trafficking-related violence). At the same time, clear continuities remain: the purpose of the field remains centred on explaining violent conflict – a phenomenon that in many senses seems inherently to elude reason.

The Reviews in this Section

The reviews section of this 25th Anniversary Special Issue can be situated in and speak to these broader trends. The reviews herein highlight important implications, ranging from how we conceptualise the field, to methodological preferences and ethical questions, to how we theorise the nature of armed violence itself.

Situating Knowledge Production in the Field

Several reviews speak to knowledge production in the field of civil wars, together highlighting both opportunities and limitations. Matthijs Bogaards’ review examines how certain ideas gain and retain prominence, even in the light of widely accepted methodological or analytic critiques. Read in the context of key developments in the field of conflict studies, his take highlights how it is essential to revisit accepted knowledge and update the record, especially as methodological and theoretical fashions change. In a different and complementary register, Stéphanie Perazzone draws on the work of bell hooks¹ to trouble what work has, to date, been considered

paradigmatically ‘conflict’ studies – and what types of ‘violences’ have been excluded from this discussion (Perazzone 2023). In that sense, hooks problematises the emplaced and gated nature of academic knowledge production, arguing that (academic) knowledge can and should be produced and circulated beyond university walls. Our own contribution, which appears at the end of this reviews section of the Special Issue, takes stock of the reviews section in *Civil Wars* since its inception (Tapscott and Machón 2023b). In doing so, it highlights how the journal itself reflects these broader trends – for instance, in its focus on US-produced scholarship and the prevalence of reviews on peacebuilding, insurgency, ethnic conflict and humanitarian intervention. While Bogaards offers an internal critique, Perazzone draws an external critique; our contribution seeks to situate the journal and more especially, its reviews, therein. Taken together, these three contributions point to how particular hierarchies of knowledge production can be both influential and potentially limiting.

War and Political Ordering

The three other reviews in this section speak more directly to the evolution of key substantive and methodological debates in conflict studies. José Gutiérrez discusses the seminal work of Charles Tilly and the provocative and poignant popularisation of the notion that war makes states (Gutiérrez 2023). Contrary to previous understandings of war as inherently chaotic and destructive, this approach set the scene for researchers to conceptualise war as a social ordering process in which conflict and governance are inherently interconnected. As Nicholas Barnes (2023, pp. 569–570) notes, the debate on ‘armed governance’ has gained particular traction in the field, searching for explanations for ‘how and why a variety of both state and non-state armed groups not only use violence but implement rules, develop institutions, adjudicate disputes and provide goods and services to local populations’. These systems of regulation that emerge during conflict can become the building blocks of a post-conflict social order. This is not to say that political violence is normatively good or even acceptable, but that its occurrence should be understood not only as conducive to chaos but instead as a force that also restructures social relations – in ways that may or may not be morally desirable.

War as a Dynamic Process

Beyond initiating a new focus on governance and political ‘order’ during war, these reviews also point to a view of civil war as a dynamic process of ongoing interaction. In fact, violence itself is understood in Lee Ann Fujii’s work as ‘a process that changes the meaning of social categories, to assert new social orders’ (Shesterinina 2023, p. 582).

Gutiérrez's reading of Tilly's theory on state-making as war-making offers an instructive point of comparison: Tilly's model of centralised nation-states evolving as the by-product of competition among armed actors has been highly influential in the debate outlined above. As illustrated by Gutiérrez, while the applicability of Tilly's theory in today's world has important limitations, we can still draw analytical power from Tilly if we separate *effect* (state consolidation) from *process* (the link between war making, capital accumulation, and consolidation of structures of governance).

Rationalist and Interpretivist Approaches

The contributions in this section also represent distinct approaches to studying the micro-dynamics of violence, including rationalist understandings of violence (e.g., Kalyvas's work) contrasted with interpretivist approaches (e.g., Fujii's scholarship). While this remains an important divide in political science, we instead wish to read these as complementary approaches that together help elucidate the complexities and contingencies of violence. For Kalyvas, as outlined by Barnes, wartime violence has an independent logic separate from 'political structures' such as ideology, religion, ethnicity, or class. Committing atrocities can be explained by looking at replicable factors, namely the degree of territorial control of armed groups. For Fujii, violence must be understood in the context of broader categories and structures. Anastasia Shesterinina highlights how Fujii brought to the fore the malleability of social categories previously used to explain wartime violence, addressing how macro-level ethnic structures are negotiated and reframed at the local level. By looking at the lowest-level participants in atrocities, Fujii illustrated how 'small community level social ties shape people's participation in violence and the unfolding of violence shapes the meanings of social categories' (Shesterinina 2023, p. 4). The performance of violence actualises social categories that are, *per se*, ambiguous, contributing to asserting and crystallising imagined social orders.

Bogaards's intervention also points to broader questions about knowledge production and accumulation inherent to the positivist tradition (Bogaards 2023). By tracing the enduring influence and popularity of Mansfield and Snyder's substantive argument, despite significant methodological limitations, Bogaards's discussion suggests that research on civil war and political violence may be less akin to a gradual accumulation and progression of knowledge, but rather closer to the process of continuous paradigm shifts described by Kuhn (2012[1962]). We further posit that accepted wisdom, even once rejected, can go on to shape how we develop and use concepts and theories in the present

and future – which demands that scholars adopt a critical approach to their concepts and theories.

Looking Beyond Formal and State Actors, Institutions, and Interactions

The popularisation of the micro-dynamics of violence approach has further extended the types of actors, institutions, and interactions that are seen as relevant to these questions, demanding that scholars look beyond formal state institutions to study non-state actors and their (complex and dynamic) contributions to political violence. As Barnes discusses, the emergence of a literature on governance during armed conflict has brought non-state armed groups and their multi-faceted relationships with state structures (from competition to cooperation) to the fore of analysis of political violence. Barnes also shows how Kalyvas's work helped shift scholarship from an exclusive focus on combatants and political elites to include civilian agency. Rather than considering civilians to be passive observers (and victims) of armed violence, Kalyvas recognised the key role of civilians in 'shaping the course of the conflict and its outcomes by variously resisting, collaborating, and defecting, sometimes shifting their own identities in the process' (Barnes 2023, p. 571). Fujii's work meanwhile extends the analysis beyond simplistic categories of ethnicity to account for social ties and how this defines the possibilities of exercising violence.

Ethics in Conflict Studies

Methodologically, the micro-turn has favoured designs based on individual-level data, which often rely on comprehensive qualitative fieldwork. We have at the same time seen an increased preoccupation with the ethics of so-called 'human subjects research', where interaction with people is required for data collection, and regulatory oversight has become widespread – even recognising that many of these institutions are derived from a biomedical model and do not address concerns of conflict scholars (see Tapscott and Rincón Machón 2023a). As Shesterinina outlines, Fujii's work has been key in problematising ethical review and re-conceptualising ethical responsibility in conflict studies. Indeed, research ethics is an 'ongoing responsibility', not 'a discrete task to be checked off the researcher's "to do" list in accordance with institutional review board requirements' (Shesterinina 2023, p. 587). Using a relational approach based on 'ethics in practice', Fujii claimed that ethical dilemmas are context-specific, they develop and mutate as part of the relationship with research participants, and as such, they should be met with constant ethical reflexivity.

From Macro-Structures to Micro-Processes – and Back

The focus on the micro-dynamics of conflict does not force macro structures into the background. On the contrary, Perazzone's reading of renowned feminist theorist bell hooks stresses the importance of looking beyond the direct instances of overt violence to the structural conditions of domination that make violence possible in the first place. Following her example on disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration programmes, policy prescriptions often forget 'the unequal power dynamics at work in the society combatants are expected to reintegrate, leaving intact the existing socio-political order [...] that may have led many to pick up arms' (Perazzone 2023, p. 601). It thus remains of utmost importance to account for structures of oppression in the study of conflict. This involves not only being mindful of social structures such as race, gender, coloniality, and class in our analysis of the individual motivations of armed actors for engaging in violence and the social processes that emerge from it; but also, of the ways in which the production of academic knowledge on civil wars is mediated by these structures. hooks not only points to the problematic 'domination structures' that underpin knowledge production but also proposes solutions, namely re-constituting power as a life-affirming force rather than as a hierarchically ordering and coercive device.

Conclusion

The reviews section of this 25th Anniversary Special Issue charts numerous paths for future research agendas that engage deeply with complexity and contingency, as well as the continually unfolding and relational nature of violent conflict. They also clearly set out the need for scholars to reflect critically on where we have come from as a sub-discipline, and in particular, call on scholars to recognise and interrogate our close links to (US and Global North) policy and security concerns. These links have gone beyond the important task of setting research priorities to shape theoretical, conceptual, and methodological preoccupations. While this insight suggests a need to be open to or even embrace alternative theoretical traditions and diverse epistemologies, we wish to approach this with a note of caution. While plurality can enrich scholarly debate, it remains susceptible to diverse forms of political capture – whether direct or the more diffuse and wide-ranging dynamics described here. Looking to the future, to a world characterised by rising multipolarity, ever-increasing global inequality and corporate capture, the expansion of artificial intelligence systems, and associated trends towards automation and increased production of misinformation – and, above all, climate collapse, it is evident that the need to understand violence and its drivers has never been more pressing. This reviews retrospective of some key works in our field, therefore, calls for scholars of civil wars to maintain a healthy

scepticism towards our vocation and how it is embedded and implicated in (diverse, multiple, and potentially competing) political and policy agendas. In particular, cultivating and maintaining spaces for critical dialogue and reflection – not just on methods and findings but also on broader questions of the processes and politics of knowledge production in our field – may allow us to better see and understand the assumptions and interests that underpin our endeavours. These spaces are necessary – if not sufficient – for the field to progress. We hope that, under our editorship and in the context of the journal's wider mission, the reviews section of *Civil Wars* will be a home for critical, stimulating and even unorthodox reflections. In our final contribution to this reviews section (Tapscott and Machón 2023b), we propose some ideas for how we aim to take this forwards, recognising that these ideas will change and evolve in relation to the interest and appetite of both our contributors and readers.

Note

1. The author bell hooks wrote her name in lowercase because she wanted people to focus on what she wrote rather than who she was.

Disclosure Statement

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