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Towards an Understanding of Contemporary Intrastate War

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Review Articles

Towards an Understanding of Contemporary Intrastate War

Richard Jackson

Cynthia J. Arnson and I. William Zartman (eds), *Rethinking the Economics of War. The Intersection of Need, Creed, and Greed*, Washington, DC, Woodrow Wilson Center Press, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005, 300 pp., hardback £, ISBN 0-8018-8297-4; paperback £, ISBN 0-8018-8298-2.

Understanding the causes of contemporary intrastate war is a critical enterprise for a number of reasons. First, intrastate war, in which a variety of state-based and non-state groups engage in organized military conflict primarily within the confines of a single state and employing mainly light weapons and unconventional military strategies, is now the dominant form of military conflict in international politics. Empirical studies demonstrate that since 1945, more than 70 per cent of wars have been intrastate rather than interstate in origin;¹ moreover, intrastate wars have comprised more than 90 per cent of all international conflicts since the early 1990s,² and there are 30 to 40 intrastate wars underway around the world at any given moment. Traditional interstate war between hierarchically organized state militaries fighting for national interests, which for so long has been the central concern of international relations and security studies, is now in fact, increasingly rare.

Second, and more importantly, contemporary intrastate war is an enormous social evil and the cause of immense human suffering. The destructive costs and harmful effects of war over the past few decades are almost incomprehensible in any meaningful way: 20–30 million people have perished in war since 1945;³ nearly 50 million people have been displaced from their homes;⁴ human rights violations during war, including mass rape, systematic torture, deliberate mutilation, forced detention, genocide, and the exploitation of child soldiers, have caused misery on a truly horrendous scale;⁵ and the economic, cultural, environmental and social costs of war are simply incalculable. In short, there is an urgent ethical-normative imperative to find more effective ways of controlling and transforming the devastating effects of intrastate war. Such a task will prove impossible in the absence of a better understanding of its nature and causes.

Third, despite the magnitude of the human costs it engenders, contemporary intrastate war remains under-studied, poorly understood, and prone to a great many basic misconceptions. At a fundamental level, it is not uncommon to see intrastate war described in the security studies literature as 'small wars', 'irregular war', 'peripheral wars', or 'low intensity conflict'. This terminology serves to trivialize the impact and importance of intrastate wars, nearly all of which take place in the developing world. Such an approach is untenable both intellectually and politically: not only is it contradicted by the historical record and the evident geo-political impact of many of these so-called 'peripheral wars' on the course of international politics (such as the effects of the Vietnam insurgency on American foreign policy and the Afghan rebellion on the Soviet Union), but there is an increasing likelihood that these misconceived 'small wars' will spill over into Western countries in highly destructive ways – as they clearly already have, not least through the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001.

More importantly, intrastate wars pose epistemological and ontological challenges to the core categories and theories of orthodox international relations. Notions such as the unitary

sovereign state, national security, military–civilian distinctions, the national interest, balance of power, deterrence, territoriality and internal/external boundaries – all central concepts in neo-realism – break down and lose their relevance in the context of intrastate conflict. In most cases of intrastate war, vastly dissimilar conditions apply: the state is highly fragmented and far from unitary; threats to national security originate primarily from within the internal sphere rather than from external sources; the state lacks even the most minimal test of sovereignty (a monopoly on the instruments of legitimate coercion); military–civilian distinctions lose their relevance in a plethora of armed groups; national and elite interests are often indistinguishable; and the boundary between the external and internal spheres ceases to exist as people, money, guns and goods move freely and unregulated across porous national boundaries. In effect, there is little in the conceptual toolbox of orthodox international relations and security studies that has any real analytical value for understanding contemporary intrastate war. It is obvious that fresh perspectives are urgently required.

Rethinking the Economics of War is an unusually coherent and stimulating collection of case studies on contemporary intrastate war that goes beyond the narrow categories of orthodox security studies and makes a genuine contribution to this most important subject. The book grew out of a conference jointly hosted by the Woodrow Wilson Center and the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies as a follow-up to the International Peace Academy's 'Economic Agendas in Civil Wars' research programme, which itself has produced three highly-regarded volumes⁶ on the same theme. The extremely well-researched and perceptive case studies examined in the volume include: Lebanon, Peru, Sierra Leone, Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo, Colombia and Afghanistan. In addition, excellent introductory and concluding chapters provide genuine theoretical insights into the causes and aetiology of war and lend an authentic intellectual integrity to the overall project.

The primary aim of the study is to interrogate one of the most influential approaches to the causes of intrastate war of recent years. In the late 1990s, Paul Collier, an economist of the World Bank's Development Research Group, began to argue that intrastate war was caused by 'opportunities for primary commodity predation', and in direct contradiction of political science-based understandings, he asserted that 'objective grievance is not a powerful primary cause of conflict'.⁷ He argued that the key to understanding contemporary intrastate war lay in 'greed' and the desire for loot by rebel actors, rather than in any objective grievances ('need') or ideologies of difference ('creed'). Employing the methods of econometric analysis, Collier suggested that the probability of greed-based war breaking out in a given country was greatest under the following conditions: high primary commodity dependence, a surfeit of young, unemployed, and poorly educated men, and rapid economic decline.⁸

Collier's approach has since gained real political and academic currency, despite the fact that he has recently moderated his position to emphasize the interaction of greed *and* grievance in war initiation.⁹ The notion that the exploitation of natural resources for purposes of self-enrichment is the principal driver of war has become a central element of United Nations and World Bank policies towards intrastate wars, notably through efforts to reduce trades in 'conflict goods'. The greed hypothesis has also generated a vast body of scholarship, and is a central component of the 'new wars' argument. Mary Kaldor's influential thesis suggests that contemporary warfare is 'new', in part because its aims are greed-based, it exploits the global networks engendered by neo-liberal globalization and it

blurs the distinctions between war and organized crime.¹⁰ Although Collier's greed hypothesis is a partial corrective to the view that intrastate war can be explained by reference to its irrational and inexplicable primordial qualities, it remains a powerful expression of the 'new barbarism' approach, not least because it reduces the actors in intrastate war to little more than thieves and bandits. As such, the greed hypothesis functions to de-politicize and de-legitimize violent forms of subaltern counter-hegemonic resistance, securitize aid and development activities and legitimize the global liberal project.¹¹

Like the earlier IPA research project volumes, *Rethinking the Economics of War* finds no case study evidence that greed can be considered the sole motivation or cause of intrastate war, or even a significant initiating factor. As the study's editors put it: 'It is notable that none of the conflicts explored in this book started as a greed-based rebellion. Contrary to Collier's earlier predictions, neither greed nor the existence of lootable, resource-based wealth was an important cause or trigger of the conflict' (p. 11). Further, the evidence from actual cases suggests that even though war always requires a resource base for its continuation, greed is rarely an important variable in the persistence of war; the pursuit of wealth is virtually always a means to a political end rather than an end in itself. Instead, the editors conclude that 'grievances and identities – political factors – are still central to understanding the roots and objectives of war' (p. 12), and that wars result from a complex interplay of failing state structures, a set of material grievances, hostile social identities, and political entrepreneurs who are willing and able to mobilize groups (pp. 262–70).

This summation, as well as the detailed evidence gathered in the book's case studies, confirms the cumulative findings of a great deal of existing research on intrastate war. For example, an important section of the literature locates the causes of contemporary war in the structures and processes of the so-called 'weak state.'¹² Noting that virtually all contemporary war takes place in postcolonial, developing countries where the state is ineffectual, corrupt, externally vulnerable, lacking autonomy and facing a profound crisis of legitimacy, it is frequently argued that contemporary intrastate wars are the result of either the long-term state-building project that has always been bloody,¹³ or the terminal decay and collapse of the postcolonial state under powerful internal and external pressures.¹⁴ More specifically, war occurs in such contexts because the debilitating conditions of statehood transform weak state politics into a recurring process of crisis management, what Joel Migdal has called 'the politics of survival',¹⁵ where the pursuit of ruling class hegemony through strategies of identity politics, clientelism, or repression runs the constant risk of provoking a violent backlash from powerful social forces. Alternatively, war can occur when severe interruptions to resource flows – brought on by the end of superpower patronage, imposed structural adjustment programmes, or the collapse of commodity prices, for example – disrupt the networks of elite accommodation at the heart of the stabilizing 'redistributive state'.¹⁶ In effect, war erupts in weak states when elites engage in increasingly violent competition over decreasing resource flows and access to power, or come to rely on risky strategies like coercion (which invariably provokes violent resistance) as a substitute for patronage.

An example of the weak state pathway to war is provided in an intelligent and insightful chapter by Jimmy Kandeh. He demonstrates how the Sierra Leone war was 'rooted in mass deprivation, declining living standards, shrinking mobility opportunities, and state repression' (p. 93), which was the governance strategy of choice for a rapacious and dictatorial ruling elite mired in the debilitating context of 'a weakening state' (p. 87).

Addressing the greed hypothesis directly, Kandeh argues that it was government greed (rather than rebel greed) in the midst of chronic poverty that set the initial conditions for war: 'Predatory accumulation by public officials impoverished society, lumpenized the country's youth, devalued education, incapacitated the state, and made Sierra Leone susceptible to armed rebellion' (pp. 85–6). The RUF insurgency, initiated by idealistic students and aimed first and foremost at resisting official malfeasance and political repression, was only later 'hijacked by criminal and opportunistic elements (domestic and external, elite and lumpen) united by a common pillage agenda' (p. 85). The Sierra Leone conflict therefore, viewed by many as the quintessential 'greed' war, was in fact rooted in the conditions of weak statehood, the crisis politics of ruling elites, and the reaction it provoked from civil society. Such a reading contradicts Collier's formulation in that it identifies economic predation as a structural feature of weak statehood rather than as a consequence of rebel criminality; moreover, it implies that subaltern rebellion occurs for reasons of grievance (due to impoverishment and exclusion, for example) rather than individual greed.

A similar picture emerges from Erik Kennes's incisive dissection of the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Kennes's main conclusion is that 'the war in the DRC has been fuelled by an accumulation of grievances' (p. 143); this discontent was then organized and mobilized into the promulgation of civil war by political/military entrepreneurs (p. 144). More specifically, Kennes demonstrates how the Mobutu regime operated for decades as a classic redistributive state in which various 'big men' were given control over large sectors of the economy or allowed to loot public institutions, in a form of elite accommodation aimed at stabilization. However, the gradual hollowing out of state structures, as well as growing disruptions to the distributive state, led eventually to its collapse and the condition of war ongoing today (p. 155). He concludes that the 'war economy' that has since developed in the DRC is simply a continuation of the peace economy (also based on plunder) that had existed prior to the war (p. 158). Once again, the historical processes of postcolonial state-construction (or deconstruction, as it was in this case) are shown to be directly implicated in the pathways that lead to war.

Another important section of the wider literature focuses on the role of political identities in intrastate war initiation, and in particular, the instrumental roles played by elites and so-called 'ethnic entrepreneurs'— local and national, political, military and religious — in manipulating social identities. These studies draw attention to several key identity-related factors: the historical construction and maintenance of exclusive (and often antagonistic) identities by colonial and postcolonial ruling elites for the purposes of political and social control; the perceptions of insecurity between identity groups in situations of emergent anarchy or state failure; and the role of language, history, symbols and culture in fomenting inter-group rivalry.¹⁷ Specifically, it is suggested that the causes of intrastate war are rooted in the deliberate creation of society-wide 'conflict discourse' by political, military and ethnic entrepreneurs that structures political and social knowledge and action.¹⁸ These elites monopolize politics, media, academia, religion and popular culture, using them to reconstruct political and social discourses towards hatred, inter-group conflict (ethnic, religious, or class-based), and ultimately civil violence. The primary characteristics of these discourses include: identity construction and the creation of an 'other'; creating or drawing upon a discourse of victimhood and grievance; constructing a discourse of imminent threat and danger to the political community; and overcoming social and cultural inhibitions and norms that prohibit political and personal violence. In the context of weak and dysfunctional states, moreover, elite-led projects of conflict discourse creation are relatively

easy; there are a whole range of pre-existing grievances that elites can draw upon to ensure that their message resonates with sections of the community.

The case studies drawn together in this volume provide numerous examples of exactly these discursive processes. Elizabeth Picard's penetrating analysis of the Lebanese civil war, for example, reveals an extraordinary level of 'antagonistic martial propaganda', in which 'the leaders of the warring parties described their enemy in essentialist terms (it was a war between Islam and the West) and interpreted the war using cultural concepts'. She goes on to argue that these public discourses 'received a large popular echo because the shared culture of Lebanese society in the mid-twentieth century was permeated by the memory of past intercommunal hostility, making groups vulnerable to ideological provocation and strategic mobilisation' (p. 24). Although not the sole reason for war – there were other political, economic and social structural factors, as well as external variables – Picard suggests that the 'hegemonic discourses' of certain factional elites were a key explanatory variable in the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war.

In a similarly convincing analysis, Cynthia McClintock reveals how Peru's Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) targeted teachers and students in a sustained programme of discourse creation, based on local grievances and class-based ideology, but not ethnic difference (p. 58). McClintock shows how Sendero's efforts to influence the younger generation resonated strongly among certain sectors of Peruvian society, leading to a movement that at its height numbered 25,000 militants. She concludes that greed had nothing to do with the outbreak of conflict, even though Sendero later moved into the coca trade in order to finance its military operations. More importantly, the evidence shows that 'at no time did the control of resources become an objective in itself' (p. 83); rather, the purpose of the insurgency was always to create a revolutionary society. Once again, a detailed case study reveals how elite-led discourses, economic, political and social grievances, and weak state structures combine in historically unique circumstances to create the conditions necessary for sustaining organized civil violence.

In the end, *Rethinking the Economics of War* confirms that intrastate war is a highly contingent and complex form of social activity. Its origins are always rooted in a unique historical confluence of social, economic, and political *structures*– in particular, the debilitating structures of weak statehood – and a set of willing and capable *agents*– political and military elites who promote violent discourses and organize the material and human resources necessary for sustained civil violence. In this sense, structures and agents are inter-dependent and co-constitutive; intrastate war is unlikely to erupt unless both are present. Given the centrality of human agents and the role of discursive processes in war initiation, it can be argued that more than anything else, war is a social and political construction. Such a formulation has profound implications, not least because if war is constructed by human beings, it can also be deconstructed by human beings.

Footnotes

¹ See K. Holsti, *The State, War, and the State of War*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 22; J. Fearon and D. Laitin, 'Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War,' *American Political Science Review*, **97**: 1 (2003), pp. 75–8.

² D. Byman and S. Van Evera, 'Why They Fight: Hypotheses on the Causes of Contemporary Deadly Conflict,' *Security Studies*, 7: 3 (1998), p. 24.

³ H. Miall, O. Ramsbotham and T. Woodhouse, *Contemporary Conflict Resolution: The Prevention, Management and Transformation of Deadly Conflict*, Cambridge, Polity, 1999, p. 32.

⁴ Holsti, *The State, War*, p. 40.

⁵ It is estimated that in the former Yugoslavia alone, there may have been as many as 75,000 victims of war crimes by 1994, including 25,000 rapes, many in special rape detention camps. See F. Wilmer, *The Social Construction of Man, the State, and War: Identity, Conflict, and Violence in the Former Yugoslavia*, London, Routledge, 2002, p. 60.

⁶ M. Berdal and D. Malone (eds), *Greed and Grievance. Economic Agendas in Civil Wars*, Boulder, CO, Lynne Rienner, 2000; K. Ballentine and J. Sherman (eds), *The Political Economy of Armed Conflict. Beyond Greed and Grievance*, Boulder, CO, Lynne Rienner, 2003; M. Pugh and N. Cooper (eds), *War Economies in a Regional Context: Challenges of Transformation*, Boulder, CO, Lynne Rienner, 2004.

⁷ P. Collier and A. Hoeffler, *Greed and Grievance in Civil War*, Policy Research Working Paper 2355, Washington, World Bank, 2000, pp. 26–7.

⁸ P. Collier, 'Doing Well Out of War', in Berdal and Malone, *Greed and Grievance*, p. 110.

⁹ Collier has suggested more recently that in terms of direct causality, greed 'does not appear to be the powerful force behind rebellion that economic theorists have assumed', *Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil War and Development Policy*, World Bank Report, Washington, World Bank, 2003, p. 64.

¹⁰ M. Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*, Cambridge, Polity, 1999.

¹¹ See M. Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security*, London, Zed Books, 2001.

¹² See R. Jackson, 'Violent Internal Conflict and the African State,' *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 20: 1 (2002), pp. 29–52.

¹³ M. Ayoob, 'State Making, State Breaking, and State Failure', in C. Crocker, F. Hampson and P. Aall, (eds), *Managing Global Chaos: Sources of and Responses to International Conflict*, Washington, DC, United States Institute of Peace Press, 1996.

¹⁴ I. W. Zartman, 'Introduction: Posing the Problem of State Collapse', in I. W. Zartman (ed.), *Collapsed States: The Disintegration and Restoration of Legitimate Authority*, Boulder, CO, Lynne Rienner, 1995.

¹⁵ J. Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State–Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1988, pp. 227–9.

¹⁶ J. Azam, 'The Redistributive State and Conflicts in Africa,' *Journal of Peace Research*, **38**: 4 (2001, pp. 429–44.

¹⁷ See S. Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War*, London, Cornell University Press, 2001; R. Lemarchand, *Burundi: Ethnocide as Discourse and Practice*, Washington, DC, Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1994; F. Wilmer, *The Social Construction of Man, the State, and War: Identity, Conflict, and Violence in the Former Yugoslavia*, New York, Routledge, 2002.

¹⁸ R. Jackson, 'The Social Construction of Internal War' in R. Jackson (ed.), *(Re)Constructing Cultures of Violence and Peace*, New York, Rodopi, 2004. See also V. Jabri, *Discourses on Violence: Conflict Analysis Reconsidered*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1996.