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Local Orders in Warring Times: Armed Groups' and Civilians' Strategies in Civil War

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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

the ways in which civilians react to the presence of combatants in their territories.

This view of war zones as ordered pieces of territory may be counterintuitive at first. War is supposed to entail anarchy and chaos, not order. Yet, if we think about armed groups' ability to survive and grow in the context of an irregular war, it becomes evident that anarchy is seldom a good option. Violence alone cannot bring about all the types of collaboration that the group needs, and in some cases it can trigger resistance. An armed group that aims to amass territory is better off setting up a regulatory system in controlled areas; this allows it to monitor more easily the local inhabitants as well as outsiders. In addition, setting up a system of norms that regulates civilian behavior provides the opportunity to shape local dynamics—from the economy to the structure of social organizations—in ways that benefit the group. It also allows for putting into practice some of the group's ideological goals. Finally, by influencing different aspects of local life, the group is able to attain civilian collaboration through a variety of means.

Even though armed groups benefit from establishing order in the territories where they are present, they cannot always do so in the same way. The communities that inhabit those territories vary along several dimensions, which explains why some may readily welcome an armed group that aims to change the current state of affairs, but others may fiercely resist it. While for the group the best scenario is to achieve full endorsement and create a type of local order that allows for maximum control over the territory and the population, sometimes it prefers to limit its aspirations and adopt a strategy that allows it to earn a moderate level of collaboration. Put differently, the group is better off by gaining *some* collaboration than fueling a resistance movement. Hence, it chooses its behavior towards civilians based on its expectations of how they would react to alternative strategies.

What explains the different reactions that local communities display? I argue that civilian behavior in the midst of war cannot be understood in isolation from this process of creating local order. Because such a process involves disrupting a pre-existing state of affairs, it not only makes some individual behaviors more or less costly, but also involves a comprehensive transformation of different aspects of local life. Unless we take into account how this process evolves, we can hardly identify the context in which civilians may or may not decide to provide support to the warring sides. I argue that the strategy the armed group adopts in any given territory has a different effect depending on the structure of the community that inhabits it. The causal mechanism entails not only the transformation of the alternatives available to locals, but also of the payoffs that they associate with them. Some of the processes whereby local order is created also involve the transformation of preferences and beliefs.

I model the interaction between armed groups and local communities as a game with multiple sub-game equilibria: for each type of community, there is an equilibrium strategy of the armed group and an equilibrium type of civilian collaboration. Assuming that the armed group accurately predicts civilian behavior makes sense because institutional learning often takes

place in these organizations—that is, through time, they learn what works best with different communities. Under certain circumstances, however, they may choose a strategy that does not lead to the maximum possible level of collaboration. They may even choose one that triggers credible resistance and results in a huge loss of life, as well as of territorial control. I argue that these off-equilibrium strategies are the outcome of a set of factors related to the competition with other warring sides; the strategic value of the local territory; and the military and political capacity of the group.

Research Design

I test my hypotheses using quantitative and qualitative evidence on the Colombian conflict. My research design allows me to test my theory at three levels of analysis: the armed group, the locality, and the individual. I combine statistical analysis of both original survey data and existing quantitative data; a controlled-comparison of six cases; and in-depth analysis of interviews.

The Colombian conflict is particularly well suited to my research topic for several reasons. First, in addition to the state, various armed groups compete for local control: several right-wing paramilitary groups and two leftist guerrilla organizations. This allows for comparisons across armed groups while controlling for national-level conditions. Second, there is great variation across Colombian localities in their geography, income, race, traditional political affiliations, history of pre-war violence, social capital, state presence, and type of economy. This variation allows for testing alternative hypotheses about the role that local characteristics play in armed groups' strategies and civilian collaboration, while controlling for national and regional factors. Third, the Colombian government's recent demobilization program offers a unique opportunity to conduct extensive research with ex-combatants of both guerrilla and paramilitary groups. This allows for gathering micro-level data on a variety of aspects of armed groups and their behavior towards civilians—a possibility seldom available to researchers of civil wars.

I rely on a four-step procedure to test my general argument about the strategies that armed groups adopt and the type of collaboration that they are able to elicit. I begin (step 1) by conducting a quantitative analysis of a database of localities that I am compiling, with information on the pre-war characteristics of the community, the type of behaviors that armed groups and civilians exhibited through time, and the characteristics of the local order that was established. I also include existing data that allows me to control for a variety of factors such as violence, settlement patterns, wealth, education, population diversity, and state presence. Statistical analysis then allows me to see whether armed groups choose the strategies that I hypothesize for each type of community, and whether locals respond to those strategies as the theory predicts. In addition, the data also allow for testing the effect of the factors that I expect to explain off-equilibrium strategies.

Even though this exercise is very useful as it allows me to test the argument on a large number of cases, it can only poorly illustrate the causal mechanisms that I claim to be at work in

the interactions between armed groups and civilians. Given that my argument stresses the importance of the dynamics that characterize each path to local order—and how they affect civilian behavior through time—I make claims about a set of causal links. Hence, a method that allows me to trace causal chains is essential. To do this, I rely (step 2) on a controlled comparison of two sets of cases. Each set consists of three local communities in the same region, which share the same history in terms of settlement patterns and violence, and display a similar local economy and level of state presence. There is variation, however, in the structure of the community.

By comparing the process of creating local order in each locality, and the type of civilian collaboration that emerged, I will be able to test my argument on both outcomes as well as on the mechanisms that I claim to underlie them. For example, fine-grained evidence from the cases allows me to show how commanders anticipated the reaction of different communities when planning their strategies, and the strategies they used at different stages in their attempt at creating local order. At the same time, the cases offer empirical evidence of the ways in which locals of different communities perceived the arrival of the armed groups, and why they reacted in the ways they did. The evidence also shows how different local orders function, and how their characteristics shape the choices of civilians through different causal mechanisms. In other words, this detailed information on individuals' experience of different local orders illustrates the micro-foundations of my theory.

While this controlled comparison of cases allows me to document causal mechanisms, it does not allow me to generalize. However, there are observable implications of those mechanisms at the level of the individual that can be tested on a larger number of cases. To do this, I derive implications from my theory to a particular type of collaboration: recruitment (step 3). I formulate several hypotheses on the conditions under which voluntary recruitment is more likely as well as on the motivations that underlie it. I argue that different processes of creating local order not only lead to different levels of recruitment, but also make some motivations for it more likely. I test these hypotheses by relying on a survey with ex-combatants from both guerrilla and paramilitary groups and a control group of civilians (Arjona and Kalyvas 2008); it gathers evidence on the local order in which both civilians and combatants lived, as well as on the process that led the latter to enlist.

Finally (step 4) I rely on qualitative evidence to validate my assumptions about how the logic of irregular warfare imposes a set of challenges and local goals on armed groups. I conducted several in-depth interviews with former medium-level commanders and rank fighters of different armed groups who operated outside of my case-areas. The interviews provided detailed evidence on the ways in which these organizations plan their arrival to new territories, as well as their strategies to control populations. While these interviews cannot serve as a general test, they provide additional empirical validation for my theory.

Conclusion

Research on civil war dynamics requires that we take seriously the differing contexts in which individuals make choices be they combatants, civilians, or public officials. If we are to understand these contexts, we need to pay more attention to the ways in which the war transforms local dynamics, and how it does so differently across war zones. Both the process through which these changes take place and their outcomes entail different and complex reconfigurations of social, political, and economic states of affairs. Exploring the different form that war takes across a national territory will illuminate our understanding of wartime phenomena like recruitment, civilian support to the warring sides, armed groups' ruling strategies, and violence.

While quantitative data and analysis can allow us to identify patterns and test correlations at the sub-national level of analysis, they cannot allow us to assess the causal mechanisms at work. Theorizing the micro-foundations of general causal links, and searching for evidence to explore their validity, is inherent to good explanations. The correct use of qualitative methods—both for gathering new data and analyzing them—offers the possibility of describing and making sense of these processes. It also makes the findings of the quantitative analysis more intelligible, as it moves us from the realm of correlations to that of theoretically specified and empirically validated causal claims.

Notes

¹ There are excellent accounts of the variation that armed groups display in their willingness to govern populations (Weinstein 2007; Mampilly 2007). However, the literature has so far assumed that there is no within-group variation in this respect. This fact leads to overlooking the immense variation that exists within civil wars in the ways in which armed groups and civilians interact. In addition, it leads to underestimating the role that civilians' agency plays.

² This idea of mechanisms as a key component of more complete explanations in the social sciences has been presented in a detailed and illuminating way by Elster in several works. Most recently, for example, he has argued that “[m]any social scientists try to model this relation [between explanans and explanandum] using statistical methods. Statistical explanations are incomplete by themselves, however, since they ultimately have to rely on intuitions about plausible causal mechanisms” (Elster 2007: 8). Several authors stress in a similar way the importance of causal mechanisms as defined by Elster (Achen 2002, for example).

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Getting the Balance Right: A Mixed Methods Approach to the Study of Post-Civil War Democratization

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Bridging the quantitative-qualitative divide in civil war studies is imperative if we are to improve our understanding of the dynamics of intrastate violence leading up to all-out civil wars. Nicholas Sambanis (2004) pinpointed a list of shortcomings in the quantitative literature on civil wars—measurement error, unit heterogeneity, model misspecification, and unclear specification of causal mechanisms—and called for combining statistical and case study work to address these limitations. Sambanis and Paul Collier (2005) then edited two volumes that identified the causal logic and limitations of the Collier-Hoeffler model of civil war onset and the quantitative methods on which it is based, and expanded it through 16 case studies. In a similar vein, Fearon and Laitin (2005) are conducting a "random narrative" project that essentially combines their statistical model on civil war onset with 25 randomly selected country studies.

This work indicates that multi-method approaches are being taken seriously in civil war research. Yet one commonality of their use of mixed methods is that the in-depth case studies or narratives are typically employed to detect limitations in the statistical models or to improve the original models with new insights. This is certainly one way of triangulating multiple methods to understand better the complicated process of conflict escalation across space and time—but not the only one possible. In this essay, I thus advocate another way of using mixed methods for a different research purpose—identifying and measuring a proposed mechanism.¹ Describing why and how I have combined a large-N analysis with paired case com-

parison in my ongoing research on post-civil war democratization, I call for getting the balance right between quantitative and qualitative techniques—so as to maximize the analytic advantages of each.

Post-Conflict Democratization

My interest in democracy building in post-civil war countries began with the realization that there was a striking imbalance between substantial international efforts at democracy promotion in such settings and the paucity of systematic comparative research on the issue. The quantitative literature in civil war studies has paid little attention to asking under what conditions post-civil war democracy is more likely to emerge and survive. Even in the democratization literature, the question of how democratic governance can be established in war-torn societies is "either wholly neglected or seriously under-theorized" (Bermeo 2003: 159).

Intrigued by these analytic gaps, I started my research by asking what caused the success or failure of democracy building in countries emerging from deadly internal conflicts since the end of World War II. Moreover, I was puzzled that power-sharing arrangements are widely considered the most effective institutional tool for establishing peace and democracy in post-civil war countries, even though they often work against that prospect—the case of post-2003 Iraq comes immediately to mind.

To answer these questions, I began with a theoretical insight drawn from the work of Doyle and Sambanis (2000) and Wantchekon (2004): Peaceful resolution of violent conflicts (or negotiated settlement of civil wars) and a high degree of international commitment to peacekeeping operations should be essential conditions for building a sustainable peace and democracy in post-civil war societies. However, I quickly learned—through a careful examination of the case study work—that negotiated settlement has not necessarily led to durable peace and stable democratic regimes in post-civil war countries. Moreover, strong international involvement in conflict resolution and peace building processes has often produced adverse outcomes, such as repeated peace failure in Lebanon and an extremely delayed process of establishing a functioning central government in Bosnia-Herzegovina. My research question thus became more specific and nuanced: Why does peaceful resolution of civil wars sometimes lead to establishing a stable democratic government, while at other times it does not, despite similar degrees of international commitment?

Differing Time Horizons

I argue there is a trade-off between the short-term interest in ending violence as quickly as possible and the long-term goal of post-civil war democratization, and that this trade-off revolves around the issue of power sharing. The short-term interest in making a peace by signing a peace agreement and the long-term goal of democracy promotion do not always coincide in civil war situations, but in fact often conflict, depending upon the time horizons held by key political actors involved in the transition from war to peace. My proposed mechanism in post-conflict political processes is as follows.