

Conflict research: lacunas, mantras and pitfalls

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The invitation to give a presentation at the Young Pugwash (ISYP) workshop on New Challenges to Human Security in Wageningen, the Netherlands and contribute this comment came at the right time. With the academic year drawing to a close, and the number of MA theses of a new generation of conflict researchers piling up on my desk, the ISYP request allowed me to pause for a moment and look critically at my field of study. 'What are the lacunas in conflict research?' the ISYP organisation wanted to know. 'Where do our analyses or approaches fail? And: do we ask the right questions?' The art of formulating questions lies at the heart of academic thinking and, interestingly, prompting and important questions such as these are often asked by people outside of ones own area of expertise. In this brief article I will focus on the first two questions and discuss a number of lacunas, mantras and pitfalls in the new field of study that Conflict Studies is by means of six brief statements and recommendations (see the headers of the following sections). Hopefully, this will inspire people to 'ask the right questions' when it comes to understanding how and why people resort to collective violence.

The interpretation of violence is political

Over the past decades, mainstream views on violent conflict in the media and countless UN and World Bank reports, consultancy documents, and NGO briefings have shifted substantially. During the Cold War, local conflicts were mostly seen as 'proxy wars' and explained in terms of ideological divides (communism/capitalism) and super power strategy, at times combined with political turmoil connected to processes of post-independence state-building. After the Cold War, the violent conflicts in the Balkans, Indonesia, and Africa were coded as 'ethnic' or 'ethnonationalist': ancient hatreds and primordialist identities were seen as root causes. Since the late 1990s, increasingly conflicts are framed as driven by greed, 'terror', criminality and warlordism.

Not surprisingly, this shift in mainstream conflict analysis coincided with a paradigm shift in the international arena. The 'ancient hatred' view matched the principle of non-interference, which prevailed during the early 1990s: exemplified by the reluctance of the international community to intervene in wars in, for instance, the former-Yugoslavia and Rwanda.

Particularly after 9/11, criminality became the dominant policy framework through which local wars were understood and dealt with. Increasingly, organised violence in Congo, Angola, Liberia, Somalia, Sierra Leone, Colombia, Chechnya and Afghanistan was depicted as illegitimate, abusive, reigned by terror and potentially threatening regional and global security. This new understanding of local war established both a justification and legitimation for intervention, in line with the Bush doctrine and the War on Terror.

The interpretation of violence is political. The selection of a form and level of explanation for contemporary violent conflict is a serious political act in the sense that representations have political implications. The way in which violent incidents and conflicts are coded and categorised will play – intentionally, or not – a role in casting blame and responsibility [1]. Since the interpretation and representation of conflict and violence can have enormous consequences (from ‘letting them fight it out amongst themselves’ attitudes of the early 1990s to the ‘military humanism’ or ‘will to govern’ of today) there is a great need to critically examine the social phenomena of contemporary violent conflict, its interpretations and their consequences.

Identity is crucial, but should be handled with caution

Despite the great variety of views on contemporary conflict most authors acknowledge the key role of the identity group (however problematic). Azar [2] was one of the first in the field who argued for a radical revision of Clausewitzian ideas by claiming that it was the identity group – ethnic, religious, cultural and other – and not the nation-state that was at the core of most contemporary conflicts. Although today the ‘extra-state’ wars conducted by the US in Afghanistan and Iraq attract the lion’s share of media attention, Azar’s claim is still supported by evidence: in the 1989-2004 period 94 per cent of worldwide violent conflicts were intra-state wars [3,4]. This is *not* to say that ‘identity’ or ‘identity differences’ are causing violent conflict. Although this idea is frequently unknowingly used in the media, among academics the ‘ancient hatred’ view is generally rejected, and primordialism is mentioned only when scholars want to point out what they are not. Instead, *identity boundary drawing* is seen as a central aspect of the mobilisation of support for armed conflict in the world today. Still, identity labels should be handled with caution: actors in civil war cannot be treated as if they were unitary. The problem with ‘identity’ is that although semantically ‘identity’ implies *sameness across time or persons*, most (constructivist) analysts continue to speak of ‘identity’ while at the same time repudiating this implication of ‘sameness’ [5]. This problem also arises in the study of intra-state war: the concept of ‘identity group conflict’ or group violence entails the total interchangeability of individuals, both as participants and perpetrators and as targets. However, as Kalyvas [6] points out, civil wars are not binary conflicts, but complex and ambiguous processes that foster interaction among actors with distinct identities and interests. ‘It is the convergence of local motives and supralocal imperatives that endow civil war with its particular character and leads to joint violence that straddles the divide between the political and the private, the collective and the individual’ [7]. The study of contemporary conflict should therefore consist of a systematic analysis of group dynamics, interests and alliances at various levels: including local and national actors, insiders and outsiders, individuals and organisations, civilians and armies.

The field of Conflict Studies is inventing the wheel

Parallel to the increase in civil wars (since the 1950s) the desire to understand, prevent and contain these conflicts resulted in a boom in research and training institutes on Conflict Studies, Conflict Resolution, Peace and Conflict, and Human Security, often closely tied to policy debates. However, this new field – understandably – has its weaknesses. Much older academic traditions often accuse the field (and in particular studies of ethnic conflict) of ‘inventing the wheel’: e.g. Ignatieff [8] turning to Freud to explain why ‘neighbors kill’, overlooking the work of Social Identity theorists who study the process of identity group competition; and the intellectual wall between the study of ethnic conflict and long traditions of scholarly theorising about group mobilisation and collective violence. Clearly, Conflict research can greatly benefit from drawing on these established scholarly traditions.

Multidisciplinarity is not obvious

‘Young’ as it may be, Conflict Studies has its own set of mantras. The two most prominent mantras in the field are the repeated stress on ‘conflict is complex’, and the ‘need to be multidisciplinary’. A combination of these two mantras (‘multidisciplinarity is complex’) may do the field some good, since multidisciplinarity is too often taken for granted. The various approaches to conflict and violence that the field of Conflict Studies seeks to combine under the heading of ‘multidisciplinarity’ are not simply heterogeneous, but in fact often point in (sharply) differing directions. To be sure, there are affinities between certain of them, but there are strong tensions as well. The study of conflict bears a multivalent, and at times even contradictory theoretical burden.

As conflict researchers we need not only to be aware of the different theoretical approaches to conflict, but also pay (more) attention to their underlying assumptions, their affinities and contradictions. I argue that there is no such thing as a ‘grand theory of violent conflict’, and see no use in seeking to come to a coherent integrated synthesis of the approaches available. Rather, we need to be more explicit in the way we position the various relevant theoretical views vis-à-vis each other and within a broader frame. This will allow students of conflict to do their bricolage, but in a well-informed, and knowledgeable way.

Conflict = clustered violent episodes

Too often conflict and violence are lumped together as one and the same thing. We need to take a closer look. Under the heading of ‘the Sri Lanka conflict’, ‘the Colombia conflict’, ‘the war in Bosnia’, ‘Rwanda’, or basically any other ‘intrastate war’, many different forms of violent incidents take place. If, for instance, the media talk about the Sri Lanka conflict flaring up again, what we see on the ground are various, at times unrelated violent incidents: in-fighting between competing factions within the Tamil Tigers in the East, villagers killed by land-mines in the North, violent incidents in the South between Muslims and Tamils militias, and yes, ‘conventional warfare’ between the Government of Sri Lanka’s (GOSL) army and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) cadres.

What in fact often happens is that violent episodes are clustered, are lumped together and called a conflict. Consequently, all violence that occurs is placed under the heading of the master narrative, the master cleavage. Often the great variety of violent incidents and episodes

are perceived as mere (and rather irrelevant) local manifestations of the central conflict cleavage (GOSL versus LTTE, Hutu vs. Tutsi, Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia, FARC, vs. Colombian army or paramilitaries, etc.). They are seen as automatic and unproblematic after effects of actions and decisions located at the centre. However, ethnographies of collective violence during civil wars show a much more complex picture. Violence in an ethnic or class war may not be ethnic or class violence. Very often under the heading of the master narrative many different forms of violent acts occur: private, criminal, sexual violence, the settling of old scores, land conflicts, family feuds etc. Most macro studies of conflict disregard the private content of political violence and miscode individual cases. This calls for fine-grained analysis that takes into account the different forms of violence. It is the interaction between local and central, private and political spheres that counts, and helps us to understand the dynamics of intra-state war.

Analysis matters

Our 'readings' of a conflict will for a large extent determine what sorts of intervention we design. Too often lack of analytical tools and lack of grounded critical analysis of collective violence and conflict results in ad hoc policy making, and misreading. As researchers we have to be highly aware of the political landscape in which we operate and of the political implications of our representations. The task of conflict analysis is to unravel the complex dynamics of interactive processes in order to understand how and why people resort to violence. Conflict policy should be based on solid, critical, and grounded analysis. This is an important field of study. There is a lot to be learned. Analysis matters, for there is a lot at stake.

Notes

1. Paul R. Brass, Introduction: Discourses of ethnicity, communalism, and violence, in Paul R. Brass (ed.), *Riots and Pogroms*, New York, 1996, pp. 1-55
 2. Edward Azar, *The Management of Protracted Social Conflict: Theory and Cases*, Dartmouth, 1990.
 3. Lotta Harbom and Peter Wallensteen, Armed conflict and its international dimensions 1946-2004, *Journal of Peace Research* 42 (2005) 623-635.
 4. Of the 118 armed conflicts counted by [3] in the period 1989-2004 only 7 were categorised as interstate. The other 111 were categorised as intra-state (90) or internationalised intra-state (21).
 5. Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, Beyond identity, *Theory and Society* 29 (2000) 1-47.
 6. Stathis N. Kalyvas, The ontology of 'political violence': Action and identity in civil wars, *Perspectives on Politics* 1 (2003) 475-494.
 7. See [6, p. 487].
 8. Michael Ignatieff, *The Narcissism of Minor Difference*, London, 1999, pp. 34-71.
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