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# Introduction to Special Issue on “Disaggregating Civil War”

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We introduce the contributions to this special issue on “Disaggregating Civil War.” We review the problems arising from excessive aggregation in studies of civil war, and outline how disaggregation promises to provide better insights into the causes and dynamics of civil wars, using the articles in this special issue as examples. We comment on the issue of the appropriate level of disaggregation, lessons learned from these articles, and issues for further research.

**Keywords:** *civil war; disaggregation; geography; actors; research design*

Civil war and related concepts such as state failure have traditionally been studied at the level of the nation state, where states at large are either “at war” or not (e.g., Sambanis 2002). Merely a cursory glance at actual civil wars, however, reveals that violence rarely engulfs entire states, but typically occurs in confined areas (e.g., Kashmir in India and Chechnya in Russia), and with other areas within a state, such as capital cities, often at relative peace. Likewise, “failing” states do not go from being fully effective over their entire territory to completely ineffective. The case of the Northwestern Provinces in Pakistan demonstrates how state capacity can be a matter of degree where states may be more or less effective in certain areas or domains of their territory. In spite of this, most existing studies treat civil war as an aggregate outcome at the level of the state and ignore all variation within states, actors, and regions experiencing conflict.

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Many of the nonfindings and conundrums in the existing cross-national research on civil war—often in stark contrast to case studies or narratives of individual conflicts—appear to follow at least partly from the near exclusive reliance on country-level attributes. For example, cross-national studies have generally found little evidence that ethnic fragmentation at the state level is strongly related to civil war onset (e.g., Fearon and Laitin 2003). But if civil wars are local phenomena, specific to particular areas and actors or groups, then there is no reason why the relevant local characteristics should be captured in national-level measures. It is straightforward to show empirically that the locations where conflicts occur rarely are “typical” or similar to national averages or country-level characteristics (Buhaug and Rød 2006; Buhaug and Lujala 2005). The indigenous population of the Aceh province in Indonesia, for example, is a small share of the total population of the state (only 3 million out of approximately 210 million), but forms a majority in the part of Sumatra where the armed rebellion has been active. Likewise, studies on deprivation and conflict that look at inequality between groups tend to find stronger evidence than studies using measures of aggregate social inequality (e.g., Østby 2008). Theory relating conflict to social or group polarization typically translates to local or group specific conditions, yet most existing conflict research has looked at national aggregates and averages that are only loosely linked to the rationale for conflict and the postulated micro-level mechanisms (Cederman and Girardin 2007; Kalyvas 2007, 2008; Sambanis 2004).

### **Disaggregation in Previous Research on Civil War**

Abstract theories of conflict generally emphasize agency and conflict in an interactive process between at least two actors and can in this sense be considered disaggregated (see, e.g., the review of conceptualizations of conflict in Most and Starr [1989]). Despite this clear actor-centric focus at the theoretical level, however, most efforts to empirically evaluate propositions on civil conflict revert to examining variation in conflict and peace at the state level. Going beyond the state as the unit of analysis in empirical research on civil war is complicated by a number of problems and challenges, in particular the scarcity of actor-specific or disaggregated data, as well as the problem of assessing “potential” non-state actors in civil war prior to the onset of violence. However, numerous examples of disaggregated analysis have emerged in part as a response to the problem of comparative country-level studies of civil war.

For a long time, the Minorities at Risk (MAR) dataset was the dominant source of disaggregated information on ethnic civil wars and conflict (Gurr 1993, 2000). This massive data-collection effort spawned a series of quantitative studies on mobilization and conflict behavior of ethnic minorities around the world. Important results have been generated pertaining to, for instance, the conflict-inducing effects of groups’ settlement patterns (Toft 2003), transborder ethnic kin (Saideman 2001), or autonomy rights (Brancati 2009). However, because of data limitations relating to the nonspatial

nature of the MAR dataset and its primary focus on minorities rather than dominant groups, there is a need for new data collection projects that complement the vast, qualitative literature on subnational mechanisms driving ethnic conflict (for reviews, see Brubaker and Laitin [1998] and Cederman [2002]).

A more recent stream of research on the micro-dynamics of individual civil wars has also abandoned the country-level measurements in favor of disaggregated analysis and data collection that traces the behavior and interactions of subnational actors in individual conflicts (Tarrow 2007; Kalyvas 2008). Rather than relying exclusively on comparative statistics of national data, the micro-theoretic turn features a broader variety of within-country sources of information. This literature has also seen considerable use of innovative methods and analyses, including experiments to evaluate more directly how individuals respond to varying treatments (Habyarimana et al. 2007), surveys of former participants in violent acts (Weinstein 2006), ethnographic data from fieldwork in conflict zones (Wood 2003), as well as mixes of various methods to analyze variation within individual conflicts that might help us understand resort to violence (Kalyvas 2006). In addition, prominent exponents of the country-level approach have complemented their approach with more context-sensitive investigations to check if their postulated causal mechanisms are indeed operating as expected in particular cases. In an edited two-volume study, Collier and Sambanis (2005a, 2005b) present a series of case studies that probe the validity of Collier and Hoeffler's (2004) well known model of civil war onset. Likewise, Fearon and Laitin (n.d.) conduct a series of "random narratives" to ascertain whether the causal mechanisms suggested by their own model (developed in Fearon and Laitin [2003]) apply to these selected conflict cases.

The intensive analysis of individual conflicts and efforts to compare conflicts more systematically have certainly overcome some of the limitations in previous unsystematic case studies of individual conflicts and helped to narrow considerably the gap between ideographic and systematic approaches to the study of civil war. All the same, these micro-theoretic contributions suffer from certain structural weaknesses resulting from their limitation to a small number of cases and exclusive focus on cases where we see conflict. Without a larger set of conflicts and comparison cases where conflict could occur it is difficult to distinguish between idiosyncrasies of individual conflicts and to evaluate whether we see modal patterns in civil conflicts. Looking only at conflicts can help understand variation within in a conflict over time, but leaves us unable to assess whether the features highlighted as important for conflict onset may not also be common in other situations where we do not see resort to violence. In a recent survey of the literature on micro-level dynamics of civil war, Kalyvas (2008, 398) argues that these studies have to sacrifice

... a measure of external validity to gain more internal validity and the exclusion of those macro processes that cannot be analyzed at the micro level. These compromises are often accompanied by a pronounced lack of clarity on scope conditions, and a tendency, sometimes, toward reckless extrapolation from the micro to the macro level.

## Toward a Broader Range of Disaggregation

Understanding why individuals and states resort to violence will require a theoretical focus on actors and specific mechanisms that may give rise to conflict. Since civil wars are usually defined as “armed combat taking place within the boundaries of a recognized sovereign entity between parties subject to a common authority at the outset of the hostilities” (Kalyvas 2006, 17), it is natural to highlight dyadic configurations that pit a peripheral challenger against an incumbent government. It is thus no coincidence that several articles in this special issue rely on an explicitly relational perspective based on center-periphery dyads, not unlike dyadic studies in interstate conflict research. These contributions advance our understanding of how specific causal mechanisms, such as exclusion, may trigger violence within particular constellations of governments and ethnic groups (Cederman, Buhaug, & Rød 2009), how geographical characteristics of groups influence the prospects for conflict and peace (Weidmann 2009), and how specific group relations and dyadic characteristics can give rise to very different forms of conflict (Buhaug, Gates, and Lujala 2009). Other contributions to this issue elaborate how characteristics of conflict actors in terms of their resources and strategic environment influence the prospects for settlement, the risk of protracted conflicts, and the likely outcomes of conflict (Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2009; Beardsley and McQuinn 2009). Another set of studies develops propositions on how variation in geographic characteristics and the social environment within states influence the prospects for settlements and likely location of battles within conflicts (Buhaug, Gates, and Lujala 2009; Hegre, Østby, and Raleigh 2009). These distinctions and variations are disregarded in studies that lump together all forms of civil war and focus on country-level characteristics.

If our theories are disaggregated, then our empirical analyses and research designs should reflect this. This special issue attempts to overcome some of the limitations in efforts to empirically assess propositions on civil war either exclusively through national-level characteristics or individual case studies by presenting a series of studies at different levels of aggregation. We argue that, depending on the particular research question, scholars often have a broad choice that includes an intermediate range of aggregation between cross-national comparisons at the macro level and intensive case studies at the micro level. In fact, all empirical research is subject to a fundamental “budget constraint” that limits its intensity and the scope that can be supported by a project. The more intense the scrutiny of causal mechanisms and empirical details, the more resources have to be invested. Other things being equal, this “intensive/extensive tradeoff” (Gerring 2004) limits the number of cases that can be studied with a given amount of resources.

In this special issue, we show how advances in data collection and analytical methods can shift the conflict researchers’ budget constraint outward, thus making it possible to partly transcend the resource dilemma. In particular, the use of geographic information systems (GIS) allows researchers to transform geographical information into formats amenable for statistical analysis. For example, many

researchers have relied on the information on the size of ethnic groups in the Soviet ethnographic *Atlas Narodov Mira* compiled by Bruk and Apenchenko (1964) and later reported in the *World Handbook of Political and Social Indicators* (Taylor and Jodice 1983), but few have to date taken advantage of the information in the actual maps in the original source to assess the configuration of ethnic groups. Of course, disaggregation at the intermediate range cannot compete with the full detail of micro-level studies, but it is indeed feasible to lower the level of aggregation below the national level without reducing the sample to a small number of conflicts or countries. The possibilities exemplified include the following units of analysis:

*Ethnic groups.* By focusing on subnational groups within a large number of countries it is possible to identify the specific actor constellations that may lead to conflict onset as well as instances where relations are less likely to become violent (see Cederman, Buhaug, and Rød 2009 and Weidmann 2009).

*Conflict cases.* Disaggregation at the level of conflicts allows for more detailed analyses of actor constellations and conflict characteristics and to evaluate how these influence prospects for settlements, the duration of violence, as well as the likelihood of specific outcomes (see Buhaug, Gates, and Lujala 2009; Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2009).

*Spatial units within country cases.* Countries are rarely homogenous or uniform, and typically display large variation within their territory. Looking at spatial variation within individual states enables detailed comparisons between conflict and nonconflict sites with attention paid to detailed subnational processes (see Hegre, Østby, and Raleigh [2009] as well as Beardsley and McQuinn [2009]).

It is clear that these levels of aggregation lend themselves to different research questions and have different pros and cons. While methodological advances and data-collection efforts can open up new possibilities below the level of nation-states, it is not possible to entirely escape the aforementioned intensive/extensive trade-off. For example, studies based on a global sample will typically find it convenient to treat subnational groups as unitary actors to ensure tractability. Although this represents an improvement over reification of entire country cases, it forces the analyst to make methodological compromises that ignore important processes, such as the possible splintering of groups and intragroup variations in terms of preferences and behavior. In the case of ethnic groups, it can be questioned whether such units act as homogenous actors or whether one should treat them as categorical resources that can be used to mobilize individuals (e.g., Brubaker [2004] and Kalyvas [2006]). Many ethnic groups give rise to multiple, and often rival organizations, while others may fail to achieve effective collective action. Furthermore, ties other than ethnicity may be important in mobilizing insurgencies, and can conceivably split ethnic groups. States may seek accommodation with some factions to undermine others. Russia, for example, after the second Chechen war in 2000, chose to transfer direct control over Chechnya out to the security forces of a local strongman and a political coalition including former insurgents. This exchange allowed Russian forces to withdraw from

active fighting in Chechnya as well as securing the compliance of local elites in suppressing resistance (Zürcher 2007, 97).

Looking at the actual set of rebel organizations and their characteristics can help us take into account such variation and its effects on conflict dynamics, but makes it much more difficult to consider onset among “potential” actors that may take up arms. Systematic data collection at the level of political organizations, or even individuals, represents such a challenge that the goal of creating a global sample cannot be realized at this point. It may therefore often make sense to restrict the selection of cases to existing instances of civil wars, which represents a small share of the very large universe of potential cases, if these actually could be enumerated. All the same, it should be recalled that such a restriction to conflict cases also limits the research questions that can be addressed with the research design.

Ultimately, these considerations beg the question of how far to disaggregate, and at the same time, how wide the empirical scope should be. This is ultimately a theoretical issue, which will depend to a large extent on the specific research question and mechanisms of interest. Just as there is a danger of losing the relevant details in aggregates and committing ecological fallacies when not disaggregating (Robinson 1950), research may also run a risk of disaggregating too much. It is difficult to reconstruct the plot of a novel from the individual sentences, and excessive disaggregation can lead to a proliferation of observations without clear behavioral referents and questionable additional information. While attention to empirical details may improve the quality of causal inferences, excessive lowering of the aggregation level may obscure the operation of key processes at the macro level. For example, nationalism and state formation are processes with a global reach that have diffused throughout the last few centuries, and their influence on political violence have recently been analyzed systematically (Wimmer and Min 2006). Moreover, events in conflict processes in different countries may not be independent of one another, which in turn implies that individual states in many cases may be “too small” for understanding conflicts (Gleditsch 2007). Clearly, disaggregation is no end in itself, and more disaggregation is not necessarily better.

Ultimately, the research question should determine the appropriate level of aggregation. As a rule, the best way of establishing the appropriate unit of analysis derives directly from the main causal hypotheses. Our recommendation is that the key political actors be identified as well as their motivations and resources within a given interaction constellation. The contributions to this special issue demonstrate how different research questions can be examined across a wide spectrum of possible research designs, ranging from global coverage of subnational processes in all countries to those that cover a single country or conflict.

## **Substantive Findings and Possible Extensions**

What substantive lessons can be learned from this special issue? First, the most important theme relates to the importance of geography. Without assuming a

deterministic impact, the contributions document different ways that actors' location matters for patterns of political violence, especially by influencing the fighting capacity of both governmental and nonstate organizations. Despite the sweeping claims about the decreasing relevance of space in the globalization literature, combat far away from an organization's headquarters in inhospitable terrain causes serious difficulties even to modern military organizations. Not only do challenges to governmental incumbents become more likely; if initiated, fighting likewise has a tendency to last longer. As we will see, the ability of nonstate actors to mobilize effectively may also derive from the concentration of settlement patterns.

Second, our findings indicate that claims about the alleged irrelevance of ethnic configurations for the outbreak of civil war are mistaken and that many empirical findings held to establish its irrelevance can be attributed to overaggregation. When geographically disaggregated down to the level of ethnic groups, empirical analyses show strong effects of exclusion and mobilization on conflict behavior. Rather than being a matter of grievances only, such mechanisms interact with the aforementioned geographic factors as described in several contributions.

Third, the specific organizational form and characteristics of rebel groups matter. Larger excluded groups tend to have more resources to extract concessions from governments and may thus resort to violence if not given acceptable offers. But large demographic size does not always translate into effective power if several competing organizations claim to represent a constituency and groups are undermined by factional infighting. Small, but cohesive, organizations may be disproportionately likely to fight, although they tend to fight shorter conflicts and are more likely to be offered some concessions relatively quickly. In contrast, groups that mount tenacious resistance in the periphery, but have only limited ability to inflict damage to a central government, tend to get involved in long, intractable conflicts. Furthermore, violent conflicts are more likely to end when rebel organizations have a legally accepted political wing, indicating better prospects for nonviolent avenues and negotiations.

While suggestive, these findings leave plenty of room for future research. To a large extent, the information about ethnic groups in this special issue derives from the dated *Atlas Narodov Mira*. Cederman, Buhaug, and Rød (2009) draw on a new data set on *Ethnic Groups in Power* (EPR), but this source of information is currently being geocoded. Further efforts are also needed to make the EPR data set compatible with the data set on Nonstate Actors, presented in Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan (2009). Even though that study provides powerful evidence that the presence of peaceful institutional options tends to shorten civil wars, existing geographic data sets also require increased institutional detail as regards states' regime types and degree of centralization. Given the territorial relevance of autonomy arrangements, such as ethnic federalism, studies of their impact on conflict stands to gain from the application of GIS-based methods. The same can be said about transborder effects operating through rebel sanctuaries and ethnic kin. It should be obvious that new data collection projects are not only highly desirable, but also methodologically very much within reach and that the research presented here provides useful starting points for such efforts.

We hope that the current selection of articles convinces the interested reader that disaggregation of civil war studies to a full range of geographical and actor-specific detail promises to yield new and worthwhile insights that complement existing country-level studies and the popular wave of micro-level studies.

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