

Civil Wars and Ethnicity

After discussing the research that stresses the role of economic factors in predicting civil war outbreaks, we now move on to studies which bring grievance back to the academic discussion on the onset of ethnic conflict. After first briefly addressing the progression of research on the onset of civil war, this paper focuses on two papers that illustrate the extent to which ethnicity can be associated with civil war onset.

In the 1960s, social psychology research on intergroup relations led to the realistic conflict theory (Sherif, 1961), which holds that conflict and competition between groups over valued resources can create intergroup hostility and prejudice. This theory showed that when groups are in conflict or competition for the same valued resources, material factors are important in explaining intergroup conflicts. Further research showed that threats of losing valued resources do not necessarily have to be realistic for discrimination to occur, and threats are not always objective. Runciman applied these findings to his relative deprivation theory (1966), based on the idea that what a group or an individual has depends not just on objective circumstances, but on how the group or individual feels about what they have as compared to others. If a group or individual thinks others are doing better, the group or individual is likely to feel relatively deprived. Gurr (1970), inspired by these psychological theories, connected the idea of relative deprivation to violence, assuming a frustration-aggression mechanism. In 'Why Men Rebel' he states: "The potential for collective violence varies strongly with the intensity and scope of relative deprivation among members of a collectivity" (pp. 24).

However, as we saw in last week's readings (e.g. Collier and Hoeffler, 2004), contemporary researchers have distanced themselves from relative deprivation theory and thus have dismissed the role of inequality and the grievance literature. In large-N studies they found that inequality could not explain the outbreak of violent conflict. Considering their economic backgrounds, it is apparent why they have focused only on opportunities and the greed of individuals. Stewart (2009), however, attributes these non-findings to conceptualization and measurement problems. She points out that these studies emphasized "*the pursuit of individual economic advantages as the prime force-driving conflicts. But the majority of internal conflicts are organized group conflicts - they are neither exclusively nor primarily a matter of individuals committing acts of violence against others*" (pp. 11).

Stewart (2009) introduces the concept of horizontal inequalities (HI) as a cause of civil war. HI's are defined as "inequalities in economic, social, or political dimensions or cultural status between culturally defined groups" (pp. 3). She does not deny that personal motivation contributes to causing people to fight, but she strongly emphasizes the vital force of group identity and group motives in contrast to previous research that focused on inequalities among individuals. Moreover, she states that where there is limited freedom to switch group, as in the case of culturally defined groups, boundaries are important in creating group grievances and

thus are important in terms of political mobilization.

Stewart was able to bring grievances back to the academic discussion. She does not provide new insights, but must be credited for considering grievances as a group rather than as an individual phenomenon and for contributing towards proving the empirical significance of grievance.

The empirical analysis of Cederman et al. (2011) relies on Stewart's (2009) conceptualization of horizontal inequalities, but presents a more extensive causal mechanism by explaining how horizontal inequalities lead to grievances and how such grievances lead to collective violent action. In short, they claim that HI's are the underlying cause of violence insofar as they transform into grievances through the process of social comparison. These grievances (perceptions of injustice) further transform into violent collective action through the process of group mobilization. These assumptions are based on social psychology concepts like the process of social comparison, the realistic conflict theory, and the free-rider problem. Furthermore, Cederman et al. (2011) also find that ethnic groups above as well as below their country's average per capita income are more likely to engage in collective violence.

What is truly innovative is their new global dataset on economic HI's. They combine self-coded data on ethnic groups' settlement areas with the G-Econ dataset on local economic activity. In some countries, the data is poor quality, which might suppress variables and produce questionable survey reports. Cederman et al. (2011) point out this potential problem themselves (pp. 483-484).

There is one area that I believe could be a shortcoming. As I mentioned at the beginning, according to social psychology theories, threats of losing valued resources do not necessarily have to be realistic for discrimination to occur, and threats are not always objective. Relying heavily on concepts from social psychology, Cederman et al. (2011) address this issue of perceptions in their theoretical assumptions: "As we have seen, the perception of injustice generates grievances that serve as a formidable tool of recruitment" (pp 482). However, they do not integrate perception into empirical analysis. Including perception might provide interesting insights for future research.

References:

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