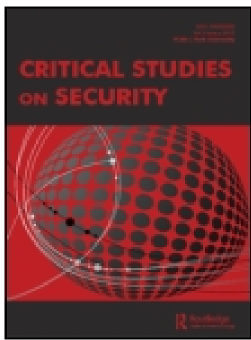

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Making sense of violence in civil war: challenging academic narratives through political ethnography

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This article seeks to assess the role of political ethnography in the study of civil war, and more particularly research which focuses on the micro-dynamics of violence. By focusing on the representations put forward by econometric and structural research about civil war, this article underlines the importance of fieldwork research and political ethnography in deepening and broadening our understanding of violence in civil war. By using the author's personal immersion experience in the conflict zone of the North Caucasus, this article highlights how structural variables, such as political grievances and marginalization, depict an incomplete image of participation in rebellion by focusing on the onset of violence and not on its sustaining factors. This article argues that in order to complete a micro-dynamic turn in the study of violence, one has to theorize the commonalities of life trajectories amongst individuals who decide to rebel against their marginalization by focusing on the role of nonphysical violence in civil wars.

Keywords: civil war; political ethnography; micro-dynamics of violence; radicalization; North Caucasus

Introduction

This article reflects on the scholarship of civil wars and the social construction of this object. How should we understand and represent the concept of late warfare and violence in civil war? By looking at the role of political ethnography in the study of civil war, this article challenges the major academic narratives about late warfare in order to rethink our epistemological understanding of this phenomenon. Political ethnography, in the case of this article, is understood in its minimalist definition; research involving immersion in a community, or at the local level, and engages in its daily life and routines long enough (usually for several months) to be able to grasp and take seriously local actors' self-understanding of a political phenomenon. By focusing on the representation put forward by econometric and structural research about civil war, this article underlines the importance of fieldwork research in deepening and broadening our understanding of violence in civil war, as was done with the concept of security in the critical turn of the 1990s.

First, it will be argued that although scholars have now engaged in a new research program that considers the micro-dynamics of violence in civil war in order to deepen our understanding of this phenomenon, a profound epistemological debate remains between positivists and interpretivists. According to the current literature, this deepening of violence in civil war is mainly focused on a will to disaggregate it into a series of acts

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of violence analyzed independently or to rationalize violence essentially. This article argues that in order to deepen our understanding of violence and its dynamics, political ethnography and anthropology permits us to uncover the eclectic nature of violence during civil war and to reintegrate the individual into our analysis. By focusing on local narratives, fieldwork vignettes, and personal experiences, the locus of explanation should be moved from causes of violence toward pathways into violence. In other words, it postulates the need to study how individuals evolve throughout a civil war in order to challenge the static depiction offered by top-down analysis focusing on the onset of violence. The approach put forward in this article follows Kalyvas' distinction between the causes of civil war and its dynamics (2006). It insists on the importance of the sequences of events, experiences, and decisions made by individuals in relation to violence, and not only how the conflict erupted.

By using the author's personal immersion experience in the conflict zone of the North Caucasus, this article will seek to underline how structural variables, such as economic inequalities, political grievances, and marginalization, depict an incomplete image of participation in rebellion. By sharing the daily life of 'potential' insurgents and their constant marginalization, my understanding of rebellion moves from structural causes to socio-psychological involvement toward violence. This article will demonstrate that in order to complete a micro-dynamic turn in the study of violence, one has to theorize the commonalities of life trajectories amongst individuals who decide to rebel against their marginalization.

Greed and grievance: marginalized and poor, but not yet rebels

Scholars have insisted for a long time on the recurrence and growing number of civil wars compared to international conflicts since the end of the Cold War. Although this conclusion has now been challenged, the emphasize put on this type of conflict has pushed scholars to identify the variables, mechanisms, and causes that make countries more vulnerable to civil war. This theoretical discussion leads to several debates in the field of conflict studies, the greed and grievance debate being one of the most important. According to the tenant of the 'grievance' side of the debate, economic and social inequalities between groups (ethnic, linguistic, or religious) and the sudden change in the social system produce political tensions that lead to rebellion (Gurr 1971; Scott 1976). Group identification, and by the same token group grievances, would drive people toward violence. In this case, inequalities and deprivation between groups would be the key factors pushing individuals to join a rebellion and challenge the government.

In the case of the economic side of the debate, militias and insurgent groups are seen as greedy political actors that challenge the state monopoly in order to capture rents and resources. Collier and Hoeffler (2004) have demonstrated that economic incentives, such as the capacity to organize and finance rebellion, are a more robust predictor of civil war than grievances (see also Collier, Hoeffler, and Söderbom 2004). Fearon and Laitin (2003), using similar data and econometric techniques, also reject the importance of grievances and argue that institutional capacities are robust predictors of rebellion. The debate between the two groups of authors is mainly the product of a different interpretation about the role of income level and material motivation in the outbreak of civil war (Blattman and Miguel 2010, 23).

Following these two seminal articles, an important amount of literature has focused on the economic aspects of civil wars (Berdal and Malone 2000) and presented violence as simply the continuation of economics by other means (Keen 1998, 11). Some scholars

have suggested that a new type of war is emerging (Kaldor 1999) where there is an increasing role played by criminal networks and private actors targeting civilians to extract resources from them. An important part of the conflict literature, mainly driven by economists, has engaged in studying rebellion through the lens of economic individual preferences.

If one looks more closely, both sides of the debate share several similarities. First, both approaches construct their model along the critical role played by economic inequalities as either an opportunity or as the cement for ideology. Both sides agree that rationality behind violence in civil war is defined loosely as individuals act on behalf of a subjective (identity) or an objective (economic) trigger in order to propose an ahistorical and universal model explaining choices and decisions made by fighters. Finally both approaches have depicted civil war, a rather complex phenomenon, as a static image where groups and individuals are presented as following a linear and rational trajectory toward their engagement into violence. Individual preferences are understood through material incentives and leave aside central sociological and psychological elements. The relationship between the latter elements and economic incentives is often brushed aside by the conflict literature mainly the tenants of the greed and grievance (see Cramer 2002). The problem is not in understanding the causes of violence in civil war but to understand how individuals sharing similar economic and social problems follow different trajectories leading to rebellion or not. ‘Civil wars are not binary conflicts but complex and ambiguous processes that foster an apparently massive, though variable, mix of identities and actions’ (Kalyvas 2003, 475). Violence could be seen as a process involving ‘temporal and spatial unfolding of ambiguous actions, shifting contexts, and actors with multiple and contradictory motives’ (Fujii 2009, 11). In other words, identities, motivations, and narratives can vary from village to village and should be analyzed independently in order to grasp a better picture of a civil war. Local issues of violence could be driven by banal and daily problems rather than a central narrative such as ethnic identity or religion. The overarching cleavage might not be the triggering cause of violence; however, it can become an opportunity to commit violence and to justify it even if it does not have a direct link with the causes of the onset of violence at the national or at the regional level.

Cross-national and econometric approaches reach the limit of their explanatory capacity as they are not able to provide concrete depictions of these heterogeneous pathways and mechanisms toward and outside of violence. Formal models offer insight about tendencies and regularities of violent actors; however, they often obliterate the complex dynamic of engagement into violence. This type of research is a derivative from the need to propose predictive and explanatory models that capture certain aspects of the process leading to engagement toward violence, and leaves aside the ones that are not crucial for policy-makers. One can paraphrase Robert Cox (1983) about the problem-solving nature of the greed and grievance debate, as it became a way to objectivize and to rationalize violence and rebellion. Policy-makers could thus address the issues as a way to control the outbreak of rebellion in order to favor economic development.

The flip side of this kind of aggregate rationalization of violence is the lack of empirical and theoretical knowledge of the micro-dynamics of conflict. What do these aggregate causal factors really mean for local actors and how do they matter throughout a conflict? Blattman and Miguel (2010, 8) argue that given the state of the literature in civil war studies, ‘the most promising avenue for new empirical research is on the subnational scale, analyzing conflict causes, conduct, and consequences at the level of armed groups, communities, and individuals.’ Although cross-national research underlines the difference in nature between the causes of the onset and duration of civil wars (Fearon and Laitin

2003; Collier and Hoeffler 2004), it rarely addresses the changing nature of the motivations at the individual level and how rebels evolve through their participation in an armed group. In a more recent piece, Collier, Hoeffler, and Rohner (2009) acknowledge the multi-nature aspect of the process toward violent participation into a civil war. Their analysis, however, remains focused on a restrained definition of the concept of violence and the level of analysis involved in this process.

Despite the enormous progress made in the study of conflict and civil war in the last decade, the discipline remains mainly unable to theorize the individual trajectories and the pathways leading ordinary individuals into violence. The top-down approaches focusing on the onset of civil wars have identified several background features that are shared by individuals that join rebellion; however, these conditions are necessary but not sufficient to create a rebellion. Furthermore, Petersen (2001) has demonstrated in his work about Eastern Europe how the triggering factors explaining why somebody joins a rebellion are generally completely different compared to the sustaining factors that explain why the same individuals choose to carry on into rebellion. The idiosyncratic nature of socio-psychological pathways toward rebellion remains understudied and needs a broadening and deepening of their analysis. By using my personal experience in civil war, I try to underline how I came to challenge the reified depiction of the greed and grievance debate about rebellion.

Introduction to fieldwork: inconsistencies between academia and experience

Throughout six months of fieldwork in the North Caucasus, trying to make sense of a latent but nevertheless brutal civil war in the making, I was struck by the daily tensions I encountered between my understanding of violence as an academic and as participant observer into the process of violence.[1] Before accessing the region and engaging in ethnographic research, I understood the conflict as a classic case of a civil war where weak state capacities and high levels of poverty fostered the development of radical Islam in order to fight socio-political marginalization.

I had the opportunity to be immersed amongst young radical Islamists trying to understand the puzzle of collective action in civil war. The local government identifies these young religious individuals as potential insurgents as they share similar problematic structural conditions such as extreme poverty, marginalization, and high levels of religiosity. The central narrative put forward by the Russian government followed the large conclusions of the macro-level scholarship on civil war. The region shared several structural problems that made it a perfect candidate for the development of civil wars.

The problem in rationalizing violence and collective action through structural variables is that we lose sight of violence as a long and difficult process. As Randall Collins (2008) underlines, violence is a rather uncommon and difficult phenomenon even for people engaging in a rebellion. One does not evolve into an insurgent overnight; engaging in violence is hard and costly even if predispositions are present. From victim to terrorist, from student to perpetrator, or from policeman to refugee, identity changes through nonlinear cycles where the frontiers between categories are blurry and academically challenging.

By spending several months immersed amongst radical Islamists, my understanding of these structural problems and their effect as causes of violence changed. Background conditions to violence (marginalization and inequalities) are necessary and crucial for the development of a civil war; however, they teach us very little about how an ordinary villager moves from marginalization and exclusion to supporting the rebels to engaging in

violence and atrocities. These young radical Islamists with whom I shared my daily life were marginalized financially, religiously, and their social mobility was blocked by the extreme level of corruption and nepotism amongst political elites; however, they reject violence as a solution to their problem. They described insurgents' actions as objectionable and unacceptable even if committed in the name of religion or marginalization. On the other hand, I conducted interviews with 'former' insurgents who described their own participation in violence as a long series of missed opportunities and fortuities. Their narratives were rarely linked to political or economic marginalization; this easy way out in explaining their violent behaviors was avoided. My empirical data obtained through participant observation and interviews with local people depicted a conflicting image of violence in civil war. The next section will engage with the tensions existing between quantitative literature and interpretive literature regarding the way we study violence at the micro-level. In addition to this, I will go into further explanation of my fieldwork experience and provide important vignettes to highlight the different forms of violence in a civil war setting.

The research program into the micro-dynamics of violence in civil wars: epistemological and methodological tensions

Violence during civil war is a particularly complex phenomenon where its timing and spacing varies according to contexts and situations. It was underlined earlier that in the debate about greed and grievance, the analytical object remains the entire rebel group or movement. It is postulated that all individuals part of movement, often thousands, share some common interests and goals in order to rebel against the state. In order to challenge the structural and limited approach to violence in civil war, scholars have underlined the need to look at 'discrete episodes of violence [...]; a scepticism about the utility of labels applied to conflicts from the outside; and a commitment to finding ways of incorporating the voices of participants into the analysis' (King 2004, 447). Kalyvas (2008) has coined the term micro-dynamics of violence in civil war in order to describe this new research program.

This research program has been mainly driven by mainstream political scientists seeking to explain civilian victimization in civil war. The main objectives put forward by this new trend are, however, shared by anthropologists, economists, and political scientists. They agree that the disaggregation of the concept of violence offers valuable advantages as it provides a more nuanced and detailed description of civil wars, as well as a larger sample of events to draw on empirical-based conclusions and challenge reified labels, social categories, and narratives. Although they agree on the common objectives of this research program, interpretative fieldworkers, such as ethnographers and anthropologists, and mainstream scholars, such as economists, disagree on the way to approach their object of study. An ontological and epistemological debate has developed between the tenants of an ethnographic and inductive approach in opposition to a deductive approach based on formal models in the study of violence at the micro-level.

For economists and mainstream political scientists, this aggregation problem is easily tackled by engaging in microeconomic statistical studies in order to check the robustness and the validity of structural hypotheses at the micro-level. Instead of taking civil war as a whole as the object of study, they look directly at local acts of violence, individual perpetrators and their motivations, recruitment, internal insurgent organization, or counter-insurgency strategies in order to build comparative data sets and an objective study of violence (Blattman and Miguel 2010, 8). Civil war could thus be seen as an amalgamation

of acts of violence that happens under a common master narrative. The problem with structural econometric research on civil war is not the way we study this object (epistemology) or its nature (ontology); it is a methodological problem of data aggregation and the proxies chosen to measure the role of grievances, poverty, and ethnicity (Blattman and Miguel 2010, 24–29).

To the contrary, ethnographers and anthropologists have engaged in the task of analyzing violence as a diffuse and eclectic factor during civil war. Several years before this micro-dynamic turn in the study of violence in civil war, anthropologists and ethnographers have insisted on the need to challenge violence as a concept (Robben and Nordstrom 1995; Nordstrom 1997). Nordstrom (1997) explains that the concept of violence is often mistakenly taken for granted and reified in (civil) war. We regularly talk about different wars, but we rarely talk about different *violences* in a conflict (Nordstrom 2004, 57). We talk about different strategies or different patterns of violence but rarely do researchers insist on the difficulty in finding what is precisely understood as violence in a conflict zone.

In order to do so, anthropologists have put their analytical focus on personal war stories, practices, and narratives as research data. Nordstrom (2004, 3) explains that 'the sum total of stories [of individual survival] tells us the nature of war.' In other words, violence should be studied as it is performed on a daily basis. For these scholars, the 'experience' of violence remains the only way to construct faithful and committed depictions of a violent phenomenon.

This kind of data is often dismissed by mainstream scholars of econometric approaches as life stories do not fulfill the role in explaining violence and insurgent behaviors in civil war (Strand 2011). In other words, ethnography and anthropology are seen as subordinate to more 'rigorous' quantitative methods or be seen as a 'summer intern' in comparison to 'senior partners' (Hopf 2006, 18). In order to be considered as 'scientifically' valid by mainstream scholars, ethnographic and anthropological material needs to be presented as life stories that corroborate formal models. A general example of this phenomenon could be found in Blattman and Miguel's (2010) seminal literature review on civil war. Although the two authors put forward a thorough and exhaustive review of the literature, including several qualitative and case study researches, they leave aside an entire part of the literature on ethnography and anthropology of civil war. Their focus remains on qualitative studies that meet their scientific standards, put forward robust results at the micro-level, or provide formal models and generalization (for examples, see Scott 1976; Wood 2003). Crucial ethnographic studies of civil wars (e.g. Nordstrom 1997) are not even considered in their literature review, most likely due to the fact that they seek to depict the eclectic nature of civil war stories and not its regularities.

According to Ed Schatz (2007, 12), in this situation 'ethnography is subsumed by his larger epistemological-ontological commitments. [...] Ethnography is reduced from being both an end-goal (production of insider meanings) *and* a process (person-to-person contact) to simply the latter.' One can observe this tendency in the field of civil war studies as many positivist approaches have used field research including ethnography in order to contextualize quantitative analysis and formal modeling (Humphreys and Weinstein 2007, 2008; Weinstein 2007; Lyall 2009, 2010). In this type of multi-method approach, the core ontological assumptions associated with ethnographic research are often lost in the larger epistemological objectives associated with quantitative and formal model approaches.

This brings us back to our earlier interrogations about violence in civil war as an object of study. How should we study violence in civil war and how could we evaluate

conflicting research results between field research and econometric approaches? Paraphrasing Campbell (1998, 43), are we witnessing incommensurability between the 'micronarratives' of the participant interpreters and the macronarratives of the outside observer? In other words, should violence, as a research concept, be understood through the ontology of the ordinary people living through it, or according to the homogenized categories established by scholars and policy-makers?

By using my personal experience in conducting research in conflict zones, the next section will demonstrate how political ethnography offers methodological and epistemological advantages that allow us to rethink our understanding of violence and the causes of civil wars. At the same time, theoretical and empirical generalizations, and the need to provide an 'authentic' depiction of the idiosyncratic aspect of violence, should not be mutually exclusive from the 'experience' and 'interpretation' of violence.

Where is the violence in civil wars?

Violence is an evasive concept that is not easy to define, especially in the context of a civil war. Too often the concept is taken for granted and reified as something that does not need to be defined or challenged ontologically. Experiences from many field researchers in conflict zones have demonstrated the relative absence of physical violence where we expect it the most, such as battlefield fronts (Nordstrom 2004). While I was conducting field research in the North Caucasus, I was puzzled by – what I perceived at the time as a research failure – the total absence of violence in a civil war setting. As I was traveling throughout the most unstable part of the region, I was witnessing the extreme securitization of every aspects of life, such as checkpoints, military control in public spaces, and police forces controlling access to every governmental building. The summer was reportedly the insurgent season but I was unable to observe 'political violence,' such as shootouts, terrorist attacks, or mop-up operations, though I had accessed hubs of insurgents in Chechnya and in Dagestan.

The restrained understanding of violence I expected to encounter in a war zone shaped my own expectations and subjectivity. My expectations were the product of my personal experience with the study of violence in civil war. By studying conflicts from the outside and without the experience of being immersed in its daily activities, I pictured violence through its academic definition. Checkpoints and military controls in public space were not violence; I was looking for 'real' violence. One can observe how theoretical concepts dictate what researchers observe and identify as evidence in a civil war. In fact, the objectives and the scope of our research often create a limited and narrow view of the conflict. Several authors have underlined the ontological problem produced by scientific categories imposed from outside of the conflicts with the purpose of making sense of violence (Brass 1997; Mundy 2011).

Studying violence in civil war is thus making arbitrary choices based on our own subjectivity to the question what is violence? The answer to this question is often dictated by the interests of the researcher and the audience he is aiming for. In the study of the micro-dynamics of violence in civil wars, most authors provide a caveat about the elusiveness of the concept of violence, yet choose to focus only on its physical aspect and place it in precise empirical categories. Although this conceptual choice is legitimate in order to reduce the scope of the inquiry, it nonetheless obliterates a whole side of civil wars.

The main problem in the case of my fieldwork was that these categories and discrete acts of violence were completely absent. How could we study violence in civil war if

violence is hidden and in the interstices of power? In the case of my own experience, the problem was not only the absence of perpetrators or visible victims but of the entire concept of violence. How could I reconcile, on the one hand, the academic narrative that depicts the North Caucasus as unstable and about to fall into a religious sectarian war with, on the other hand, the absence of physical violence in my participant observation?

Anthropologists have explained that our

> understandings of violence *should* undergo a process of change and reassessment in the course of fieldwork and writing because it is not only unrealistic but dangerous as well as to go to the field with ready-made explanations of violence so as to 'find truths' to support our theories. (Robben and Nordstrom 1995, 4)

Although challenging the concept of violence ontologically helps to challenge reified academic narratives and social constructs, it does not contribute to the academic literature on rebellion. In my case, I chose to use my immersion and ethnographic research in order to challenge the concept of violence. The challenge was to deconstruct this concept in order to foster a better understanding of physical violence.

After several weeks of 'chasing' physical violence across the region, I decided to reverse the research problem. If physical violence was absent from my observations, why not focus on its causes theorized in top-down macro-level analysis of civil wars in order to understand its micro-level mechanisms. . Without reliable statistics, surveys, and with an incomplete sample of interviews with insurgents, my research started to focus on the daily life of ordinary people in conflict zones. My fieldwork sought to understand what the literature labels as 'non-violent' practices, such as checkpoints and ethno-religious profiling; in other words, engaging in daily activities associated with political and social marginalization. I sought to explain how structural elements analyzed in cross-national econometric researches unfold to become causes of violence in the daily life of conflict zones.

In that context, political ethnography opens a more interpretive way to grasp violence as an open concept. Through its bottom-up approach, focusing on the voices of ordinary people, on the interstices of violence and participant observation in conflict zones, political ethnography is particularly useful in helping the researcher adopt a completely different perspective of violence in civil wars. As anthropologists underline,

> the lived experience of violence – and the epistemology of violence – the ways of knowing and reflecting about violence – are not separate. Experience and interpretation are inseparable for perpetrators, victims, and for ethnographers. (Robben and Nordstrom 1995, 4)

My immersion into the life of ordinary people aimed at understanding violence in a different way, and by living through the marginalization and the repression ordinary Muslims undergo on a daily basis. As I shared physical appearances associated with insurgent features (olive skin, dark hair, 'Salafi' beard), I started to be perceived as a security threat by military forces. I moved from an outside observer to a participant observer into the counterinsurgency. I was submitted to rather brutal corporal searches, I was denied basic rights and was denied access to public spaces, governmental buildings, and local celebrations (for vignettes and additional details, see Ratelle 2013). I was still not involved in what traditional scholars of civil war would describe as violence; however, I became immersed in the lived 'experience' of marginalization and 'soft' violence.

This profiling, or should I say discrimination, became an extreme burden to support as an ordinary citizen and a researcher. Contrary to what is often depicted in the study of civil wars, physical violence is not always more damaging to individuals and thus more

worthy of being studied. 'Soft' forms of violence might be just as durable and damaging to individuals and more violent in terms of a human's ability to cope with. These pervasive forms of violence play a central role into the socio-psychological process leading to rebellion. The stress and the anxiety produced by this discrimination might often weigh more than the risk of being exposed to suicide attacks and daily shootouts in the region. What scholars in the study of civil wars usually label as nonviolent practices, war narratives, or eventually noises are in fact central aspects in the processes toward physical violence. Why should we exclude these kinds of practices from our study of violence?

Collins (2008) and Tilly (2003), two of the main authors in the field of violence, warn us about the danger in broadening the concept of violence as it risks diluting and undermining our understanding of an already complex phenomenon. In the case of research on violence in civil war, broadening the concept offers a better glimpse in the life of ordinary people and mostly on the pathways of becoming an insurgent. In my personal case, being profiled as an Islamic terrorist on daily basis transformed my understanding of the conflict. As Collins (2008) and Gilligan (1999) have theoretically demonstrated, violence is mainly the product of extreme emotions such as fear and shame. Sociological and psychological approaches to violence support the importance to seek to understand how nonphysical aspects play a role in the process of rebellion.

Broadening violence: understanding how marginalization leads to rebellion

Anthropological researchers have coined the term 'everydayness of violence' (Das et al. 2000), and in the case of this article, the 'everyday of war' (Nordstrom 2004, 33), with the purpose of explaining how violence has an impact on social life and shapes subjectivity and emotions. Journalists or human rights workers often describe this pervasive form of violence in conflicts as rooted in social discrimination, profiling, and marginalization. Robben and Nordstrom (1995, 2) explain that 'violence is a dimension of people's existence, not something external to society and culture that "happens" to people.' Considering the latter, checkpoints and military controls in public spaces are dynamics of violence through their discriminatory action, and through their capacity of producing physical violence. Individuals react differently to extreme physical marginalization, such as ethno-religious profiling. What role does repetitive humiliation at checkpoints and in daily life play in the process of joining an insurgent movement?

In my case, the stress and anxiety associated with discriminatory practices and 'nonviolence' led me to develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). For people living in a war zone, this nonphysical violence can culminate in becoming the triggering factor pushing them toward violence. This process is habitually long and unequal, and ordinary people start to cope with this degrading experience as they can. In the case of the people I encountered, there was a turn to religion in order to find answers and solutions to these forms of violence. Danger and fear is slowly subdued by a feeling of necessity or resignation, violence is interiorized as normal, and people adapt to it in order to survive. Nonphysical or *soft* violence is deeply internalized in socio-political structures and finally spills over in all spheres of social life. 'Violence reconfigures its victims and the social milieu that hosts them' (Nordstrom 2004, 59). Violence does not disappear; it always circulates and reconfigures itself in different forms from its nonphysicality to rebellion.

Our knowledge of the processes leading ordinary people to join a rebellion is rather limited, as the literature takes for granted that exclusion and humiliation are factors that produce a cognitive effect strong enough to transform ordinary individuals into insurgents.

Studying nonphysical forms of violence permits us to challenge these axioms, or at least allows us to precisely explain how repetitive events can lead to the will to challenge the control of the state through physical violence. The focus of research is thus moved from causes to pathways toward additionally opening a whole new range of possibilities.

Scheper-Hughes and Bourgeois (2004, 1) explain that

> violence can never be understood solely in terms of its physicality – force, assault, or the infliction of pain – alone. [...] The social and cultural dimensions of violence are what give violence its power and meaning. Focusing exclusively on the physical aspect of torture/terror/ violence misses the point.

Several authors have sought to capture this nonphysicality of violence, although research and mainly its theorization in link to civil war studies remain underdeveloped. Two concepts, which are linked to the greed and grievance debate, can help us broaden our understanding of violence in civil wars.

Bourdieu (2001) has insisted on how violence is imbedded in social and material structures and interiorized as normal and acceptable. People come to accept and reinforce their own marginalization and subordination by legitimizing political and social institutions. They become the indirect source of their own repetitive humiliation. Through a series of social practices and mundane activities, a pervasive nonphysical form of violence replaces the need for physical violence. In my previous example, marginalization and discrimination against Muslims at North Caucasian checkpoints have been accepted as normal in the name of fighting terrorism. If one looks through the prism of the greed and grievance debate, symbolic violence represents what pushes individuals to engage in violence. After contributing to their own marginalization, people rebel in the name of these same inequalities.

The concept of structural violence, coined by Galtung (1969), also touches upon the nonphysicality of violence and the greed and grievance debate. It describes how economic inequalities and exclusion resulting from structural conditions operate as violence against individuals. More recently, Farmer has further pushed this definition by linking economic inequalities and social suffering and disease (1999). Structural aspects put emphasis on the exploitation of the individuals leading to their marginalization. Contrary to symbolic violence, structural violence does not always act on an unrecognized basis and mainly works through the mechanism of economic marginalization. Its victims could know its pervasive effects, although they rarely rebel against them.

In both cases, whether consciously or not, nonphysical violence becomes the cement for rebellion when humiliation, inequalities, and marginalization become unbearable or acceptable. Although top-down macro-level analyses of civil wars have integrated the spirit and the importance of nonphysical violence, they did not succeed at explaining in what contexts and settings these factors become unbearable for future rebels. As demonstrated by sociological and criminology literature, these factors are necessary but are not sufficient criteria to transform ordinary people into insurgents and are part of larger socio-psychological processes (Collins 2008). This article suggests that civil war literature should engage in the study of the mechanisms by which humiliation, marginalization, and poverty slowly reinforce the process of radicalization and foster pathways into rebellion.

Political ethnography is well-equipped to study the presence and the impact of daily routines and practices of soft violence on ordinary people. The researchers should seek to study various forms of violence at work in a civil war in order to provide a better

understanding of the mechanisms at work. In order to do so, one also has to deepen his/her understanding of violence in civil war by going further than to simply move the focus from the civil war in general to villages and acts of violence. By broadening the concept of violence, it opens the door to interrogate the individual pathways and processes of radicalization. This kind of study has been gaining a certain momentum in terrorist studies (Taylor and Horgan 2006) and in the study of violence in general (Collins 2008); however, it remains relatively new in civil war studies (Petersen 2001; Wood 2003). However, the process of joining an insurgent group is not linear or simply the result of the grievance produced by exclusion or discrimination. Theoretical reflection about violence in civil war should be able to analyze how major structural factors impact the local context and how these two elements affect individual choices to rebel.

Deepening the study of violence: radicalization pathways to rebellion?

Although the literature about civil wars has put much emphasis on the causes of rebellion and civil war following the end of the Cold War, the patterns and pathways of violent engagement remain under-theorized. This article suggests that the concept of radicalization could help the literature on civil war move from focusing on background explanations toward violence as a process.

Terrorism studies have engaged in the concept of radicalization in order to explain how ordinary individuals evolve toward terrorist groups. Radicalization is understood here as 'a process of ideological socialisation of (usually) young people toward effectuating fundamental political changes, usually through the use of violent tactics of conflict waging against the political enemies and their followers' (McAllister and Schmid 2011, 217). Without going into the details of the research about radicalization in terrorism studies, it is crucial to underline how this discipline was able to move away from overgeneralization about terrorist characteristics and backgrounds, such as the role played by psychopathology and brainwashing as causal factors. In other words, deepening our level of analysis about violence means to interrogate single individuals' life pathways toward insurgent groups instead of focusing on structural variables such as inequalities and marginalization.

Many factors can explain the reluctance in tackling this crucial issue in the study of violence in civil wars. A possible explanation might lie in the fact that contrary to terrorism and participation in mass violence, rebellion was never depicted by policy-makers and scholars as an irrational behavior. In the case of civil war, the rationality of insurgents was taken for granted and the hypothesis of greed was put forward as an axiomatic paradigm. Researchers were thus funded around other factors such as greediness and the criminal profile of insurgents, and not the socio-psychological development of insurgents. To the contrary, terrorist and massacre studies have had to debunk the myth surrounding the irrationality of actors and their tendency to suffer from psychological pathologies. Individual pathways and life stories were one of the best methodological approaches to debunk this myth. The literature about civil war can thus build on the extensive socio-psychological research developed in the field of terrorism studies and criminology (Taylor and Horgan 2006).

In order to produce this kind of research in the context of civil war, ethnographic research remains one of the best ways to achieve results. Firsthand interviews with ordinary insurgents during civil wars remain a scarcity in the discipline and are treated as anecdotal or journalistic evidence by mainstream researchers. One cannot dispute the fact that interviews with ordinary insurgents are difficult to conduct; sampling is most of

the time impossible and thus are causal claims and external validity based on the time of fieldwork. At the same time, contrary to the widespread belief in academia, access to people willing to share their stories and narratives concerning civil wars is relatively easy and researchers often encounter a 'need to talk and talk' (Nordstrom 1997, 3–4). These interviews and life stories represent a formidable window to test and challenge assumptions rooted in macro-level theorizations of civil wars. If methodological and theoretical value of these narratives is debatable, political ethnographers usually agree that ethnography is the methodology best suited to judge the validity of truth claims made by actors. Ethnographic methods in the context of civil war represent a better alternative to surveys, which are often well-equipped to highlight the perception of ordinary individuals with regard to discrimination, repression, and arbitrary state behaviors. It also gives the analytical tool to engage in other aspects, such as silences, daily practices or emotions, which are difficult to assess with formal methods and surveys. Political ethnography opens a whole new range of object of studies in order to deepen our understanding of violence in civil wars.

Academics often believe that the only way to study the socio-psychological pathways of participation into civil war is to interview a representative sample of insurgents. Throughout my fieldwork, I had the occasion to conduct semi-structured interviews with 'formal' and active rebels in the North Caucasus. In general, rebels would offer pre-constructed and general narratives about religion or oppression in order to explain their actual participation. As I was conducting interviews, what was most striking was not the material I was collecting in order to prove or disprove econometric research about the causes of violence in civil war; how each rebel was using similar words and expressions to describe his or her life trajectory into violence was more striking. These testimonies are usually social narratives that are circulating in the region and are shared amongst local inhabitants. Interviews need to be contextualized in order to understand why rebels and ordinary people use these narratives.

If my fieldwork had focused on these interviews as research data, it would have been impossible to draw any robust conclusions about violence into the insurgency. In my case, participant observation into the daily life of marginalization and profiling in the North Caucasus opened other avenues of research. The most fruitful interviews were not obtained with insurgents but with ordinary citizens with whom I shared life moments at checkpoints and other military controls. These ordinary people described to me how this marginalization based on their ethnicity or their religious faith affected their life and their view about the government. Their life stories and experiences combined with my own experimentation of checkpoints as moments of extreme marginalization or 'soft' violence helped to contextualize my interviews with insurgents.

Just like the concept of physical violence, perpetrators or rebels are not the only actors who can be studied in order to understand radicalization and pathways toward violence. By immersing ourselves into the life of ordinary people in civil war, our personal experience permits us to understand what roles background predispositions, such as inequalities and marginalization, play. It forces us to live the experience of nonphysical violence and to understand that the process of engaging in violence is much more complex than depicted by academic narratives.

Concluding remarks

This article has sought to introduce new ways to study the phenomenon of violence in civil war. It has made the argument that idiosyncratic life stories, personal experiences,

and fieldwork vignettes should be seen as valuable material in the scholarship about civil wars. By focusing on fieldwork, the goals are not to abandon the quest for theorizing the concept of violence and reaching robust conclusions, but to explore other research alternatives. Scholars, in their will to give a sense or an explanation to violence, create generic categories such as rebels, civilians, combatants, or noncombatants. For anyone who has spent time in a war zone, these categories are often inaccurate and draw a static picture of civil war. Research about violence should seek to challenge these categories and approach our research problems differently.

In order to conclude this article, it seems central to address the notion of safety associated with ethnographic research in civil war. The topic remains underdeveloped even if certain authors have published on the topic (Wood 2006). Often the ethical responsibility to protect is well developed for human subjects; however, left aside for the researcher. If self-reflexivity and participant observation help in theorizing violence as an experience, one has to establish precise limits in order to protect his or her physical and mental integrity. Contrary to what is depicted in the academic world, access to the field does not represent the biggest challenge of ethnographic research. The real challenge remains to be able to impose personal self-limitations in the study of violence. Indeed, in order to fulfill the academic criteria for representative samples and causal claims, one can openly jeopardize his/her security.

In several cases during my fieldwork in the North Caucasus, I openly put myself in danger in order to obtain research material by accepting to meet with insurgents or immersing myself in dangerous positions. This decision was often not intentional but was the result of what I would label as academic peer pressure. In order to fulfill impossible scientific standards of research associated with field research, I put my own security at risk. Fieldwork and ethnography in conflict zones often follow an extreme pace where the researcher is not able to fully assess the risk he/she is taking. It is only when the researcher is back from the field that he or she fully realizes the extent to which his or her life was in danger.

Unfortunately, there is not a single solution to reduce the dangers and the emotional load associated with studying violence and civil war as a direct participant. However, as a community of scholars, we can try to mitigate the negative effect by creating academic networks sharing strategies and methods linked to security on the field. As an epistemic community, it is also central to establish new standards in order to evaluate the robustness of theoretical conclusions linked to fieldwork. First, in the name of security, scholars can develop standards that put emphasis on the fact that material could be gathered in safe settings and in which danger and risk-taking are not reinforced. Second, it is important to promote field research and the sacrifices it implies, and avoid transforming ethnography as a sub-method. In fact, this article has demonstrated that anthropology and ethnography can contribute in strengthening our understanding of violence in civil war.

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Note

1. In the case of my research, I use the concept of participant observation into violence as I immersed myself into the practices of ethno-religious profiling – a form of nonphysical violence. My participation, or maybe I should say my firsthand experience, into nonphysical

violence offered me a way to understand the impact of nonphysical forms of violence into the process of radicalization in civil war. Although I was not directly involved with the physical form of violence such as insurgent activities or torture, except from minor physical abuse committed by police forces, I was still immersed and participating in the process of violence in itself.

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