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PART I

*Civil war – mobilizing across  
borders*

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# 1 *Transnational dynamics of civil war\**

JEFFREY T. CHECKEL

Civil war has become the dominant mode of organized violence in the post-Cold War international system. Depending upon the counting rule employed, such wars have afflicted from a third to a half of all nations. This internal warfare is not just extremely common, it is persistent, with 20 percent of nations experiencing at least ten years of civil war since 1960. During the mid 1990s – to take just one example – nearly a third of the countries in sub-Saharan Africa had active civil wars or conflicts (Blattman and Miguel 2010, 3–4).

Equally important, this form of ‘internal warfare’ is rarely internal, with 55 percent of all rebel groups active since 1945 having transnational linkages (Salehyan 2009, 5). Indeed, civil wars nearly always create opportunities and incentives for outside actors to intervene; these actors may be other states, rebel groups, transnational civil society, or the international community, and this intervention may be malign (fanning the war) or benign (transnational NGOs targeting the use of child soldiers). Moreover, such wars are often fueled by cross-border flows of goods, including material (weapons), money (diaspora financing) and human (new recruits for rebel groups). Finally, civil wars can spur social mobilization across borders – by strengthening senses of community among ethnic co-brethren, say.

So, the transnational clearly matters, with scholars documenting a strong correlation between various transnational factors and actors and changes in civil war dynamics. In this important sense, such wars are no different. Across a variety of subfields and research programs in comparative politics and international relations (IR), it has become a

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truism to argue that the external and the internal, the global and the local, the state and non-state actors are inextricably linked. The theoretical challenge – for scholars in general and students of civil war in particular – is to explain the interactions across these various levels.

This introduction and the essays that follow take up this challenge, exploring the relation of the transnational to the local in the context of civil war. How do we conceptualize this transnational dimension? In material or social terms? How does it affect civil war dynamics? By bringing new material resources into play? By affecting cost/benefit calculations? By promoting learning among actors? Under what conditions do transnational factors increase or decrease levels of civil violence? What is the nature of the causal connection between the transnational and the local? Put differently, what is the causal mechanism at work?

We argue that to address these issues requires three moves. Theoretically, the finding of transnationalism's importance in civil war needs to be linked to existing literatures in other subfields that have extensively conceptualized and empirically documented such non-state dynamics; key here is work on transnational politics in IR theory and sociology. Analytically, one needs a more robust understanding of causality, where the goal is the measurement of causal mechanisms and not simply establishing causal effects. Methodologically, the central challenge is practical – to measure mechanisms in action.<sup>1</sup>

The volume thus addresses gaps and promotes learning across three literatures. For students of civil war, we supplement political economy models and correlational analysis with process-based evidence on its social and transnational dimensions. We thus provide new insights to enduring questions related to civil conflict – agency and motives, group mobilization, and international intervention, to name just a few. For those studying transnationalism, we build upon but go beyond a focus on the benevolent side of world politics by exploring and theorizing transnational violence – that is, cross-border activities with malevolent intent and consequences. For scholars interested in process, we provide detailed evidence for the advantages – and disadvantages – of a move to mechanism-based theorizing.

The remainder of this introductory essay is organized as follows. I begin with a brief review of work on transnationalized civil war, arguing that a diffusion metaphor is often invoked to link the external

<sup>1</sup> More formally, we measure their observable implications; see below.

and internal. To operationalize it, I draw upon – in the second section – theories of transnational politics. Work by international relations specialists and sociologists offers a rich menu of mechanisms – framing, learning, brokerage, persuasion – to explain *how* transnationalism matters in civil war. The third section connects the theory to data by focusing on method; special attention is paid to process tracing, as this is particularly well suited to measuring causal mechanisms. In the final section, I conclude and preview the volume's structure.

### Civil war and the transnational

Over the past decade, new research on civil war has put its study squarely in the academic mainstream. At first quantitative in nature, it has been complemented in recent years by a growing qualitative literature on civil conflict. My purpose here is not a wide-ranging review of this rich literature – for this, see Tarrow 2007, and Blattman and Miguel 2010; rather, the concern is how this work conceptualizes and measures transnationalism (see also Wood, this volume).

Early efforts emphasized aggregate measures (Fearon and Laitin 2003), thus overlooking the sub-national, international, or transnational dimensions of civil war. There was an inclination “to treat civil wars as purely domestic phenomena” and a consequent neglect of “transborder linkages and processes” (Cederman, Girardin, and Gleditsch 2009, 404). More generally, the analytic starting point was individual states treated as independent entities – a so-called closed polity approach (Gleditsch 2007). Cognizant of this limitation, several scholars spearheaded a two-pronged move to develop more disaggregated databases. Some have disaggregated geographically and spatially, using so-called geo-referenced conflict data (Buhaug and Gates 2002; Buhaug and Rød 2006).

More important for my purposes, others have disaggregated by moving away from state-level, aggregate proxies – for example, by coding the attributes of non-state conflict actors (Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2006). This has allowed researchers to document the impact of new actors and interactions across state boundaries in a wide array of cases. Work of this sort is important, not only advancing the civil-war research program, but also – by adopting an open polity perspective – aligning itself with the bulk of

IR scholarship. It has allowed scholars to offer a more nuanced picture of civil conflict, including its transnational dimensions.

As one important example, consider Salehyan's book-length study on what he calls transnational insurgencies (Salehyan 2009). In it, he utilizes rich and disaggregated data embedded in a rigorous research design to document that external sanctuaries have played a central role in more than half of armed insurgencies since 1945 (see also Malet 2010). Salehyan also explains exactly how international borders shape the behavior of rebel groups involved in such conflicts. Simply put, insurgencies seeking to challenge a state often have the option of mobilizing abroad – and especially in neighboring states – where they are safely out of reach of domestic foes. The book is anything but a closed polity approach; rather, it demonstrates the analytic power to be gained when civil wars are viewed in their broader international and transnational contexts (see also Kalyvas and Balcells 2010).

### *Theory and analytics*

Scholarship on the transnational dimensions of civil conflict has illuminated the broad trends at work, and has done so in a methodologically self-conscious way that enhances the reliability of the findings. This is no small feat, especially when one remembers that the data come from violent and inaccessible parts of the world, from failed or failing states. Moreover, there has been a concern to integrate the data with theoretical arguments of increasing sophistication – for example, Salehyan's theory of transnational rebellion that draws upon work on political opportunity structures and conflict bargaining (Salehyan 2009, ch. 1). This is a welcome and progressive move (Checkel 2010).

At the same time, such theorizing is typically not linked to the now voluminous literature on transnationalism in world politics (Risse 2002). This seems odd – for a more systematic connection to this research would alert scholars to alternative theoretical starting points for understanding the cross-border dynamics of civil conflict (see also Tarrow 2007, 588–590).

The work of Kristian Gleditsch and his collaborators is typical in this regard. More than any others, they have documented the role of various transnational factors in civil war (Gleditsch and Salehyan 2006; Gleditsch 2007). It is somewhat puzzling, however, that these effects are interpreted primarily through the lens of rational choice,

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where transnationalism influences the dynamics of civil war by altering material incentives and shifting cost/benefit calculations (Gleditsch and Salehyan 2006, 341; Gleditsch 2007, 294–299; see also Gates 2002; Fortna 2004, 487–490; Kalyvas 2006, 2008; Humphreys and Weinstein 2007; Blattman 2007, 7–13; Toft 2007, 102–107). Part of the justification for this focus is that non-material factors such as norms, ideas, and learning are difficult to measure (Salehyan 2009, 39)<sup>2</sup> – an assertion that is hard to understand in light of advances in empirical constructivist research over the past 15 years (Adler 2002).

The literature on transnational politics is much more agnostic on social theory, with some preferring rational choice (Cooley and Ron 2002), some social constructivism (Price 1998), while still others combine the two (Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999a). If the goal is to understand the full range of dynamics affecting civil war, then we can only gain by adopting a broadened social-theoretic starting point. As Cederman, et al., argue “additional research is needed on the details of the border-transgressing bond, especially as regards the nature of the actor-specific mechanism” (Cederman, Girardin, and Gleditsch 2009, 433). And from a problem-driven perspective, this ‘bond’ may equally well be captured by rationalist or constructivist perspectives.

### *Methodological issues*

Students of civil war have shown a growing interest in process (Tarrow 2007) – for example, in exploring the linkages from the transnational to a particular civil conflict. Given this shift, it is not surprising that the language of causal mechanisms is now often invoked (Fortna 2004; Gleditsch and Salehyan 2006, 335–336, 360; Salehyan 2008). Yet, it is unclear what is meant by such language. In one recent study where the transnational to civil war nexus is explored, causal mechanisms seem central to the analysis, but are never defined. Instead, it is left to the reader to infer that a mechanism equals a hypothesis, diffusion, spillover effects, or ethnicity (Cederman, Girardin, Gleditsch 2009, 408, 412, 433; see also Gleditsch 2007, 297; and the discussion in Fjelde “Transnational Dimensions,” 5). Causal mechanisms can be

<sup>2</sup> See also Hanne Fjelde. (undated) “Transnational Dimensions of African Civil Wars and the Triple-R Framework.” In Thomas Ohlson (ed.), *From Intra-State War to Durable Peace: Conflict and its Resolution in Africa after the Cold War*. Unpublished Manuscript, Uppsala University, 14–15.

defined as the process by which an effect is produced or a purpose is accomplished (see next section). However, it is not clear this is what the civil war scholars are measuring empirically. Moreover, even in those cases where more effort is devoted to theorizing transnational mechanisms, these then vanish in the empirical testing (Gleditsch and Salehyan 2006, 342, 347–350). There would appear to be a mismatch between the language of causal mechanisms and methodological choice, between conceptualizing cause as a process ( $\rightarrow$  mechanisms) and measuring it via quantitative techniques ( $\rightarrow$  covariation).

Even the most sophisticated, mixed method research on transnationalized civil war has problems at this level. Consider again Salehyan's *Rebels without Borders* (2009). Methodologically, the rigor of the book's quantitative first half is not carried over to its case studies, which is unfortunate given the availability of an increasingly sophisticated case-methods literature (Bennett and George 2005; Gerring 2007a, for example). As a result, the case studies – despite the author's claims (Salehyan 2009, 108, 110, 122–123, 164) – fail to provide evidence for the causal mechanisms he posits to explain the correlational findings. For example, bargaining dynamics based on cost/benefit calculations figure prominently in Salehyan's theory; yet, the case study chapters provide no process-level evidence that such dynamics were at work.

Here again, the transnational politics literature offers both conceptual discussions and empirical applications relevant to students of civil war. Conceptually, it has taken seriously the logical implications of open polity models, developing cross-level theoretical frameworks. These move well beyond level-of-analysis approaches (Singer 1961) or arguments about residual variance (Moravcsik 1993), to emphasize cross-level interactions that put the spotlight on process (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999a). Such a conceptual move is necessary if one is to explore the role of transnational causal mechanisms.

Empirically, scholars of transnationalism have put a good bit of thought into the methods one needs to measure such dynamics. Moving beyond the measurement of causal effects, they have demonstrated that techniques are available for capturing mechanisms. In particular, they have convincingly shown the utility of a method known as process tracing (Risse-Kappen 1995a; Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999a), which is seen as key for measuring mechanisms (Bennett and George 2005, ch. 10). These empirical, operational applications of the technique



should be of great help to students of civil war, who increasingly invoke it while failing to demonstrate how it works in practice (Weinstein 2007, 53–59; see also Kalyvas 2007).

### *Summary*

Scholarly research has documented that transnationalism plays an important role in civil conflict, but the specific causal mechanisms remain poorly understood, for both theoretical and methodological reasons. From a broader perspective, these limitations are understandable and no surprise. The success to date of the civil war research program (Blattman and Miguel 2010) means these studies have reached a new level of sophistication, where open-polity models and transnational dynamics are stressed, and causal mechanisms are invoked. However, it is one thing to speculate about transnational mechanisms; it is quite another properly to theorize and measure them.

### **Transnational mechanisms of civil war**

Progress in addressing these gaps requires a two-fold analytic-theoretical move – to the language and practice of causal mechanisms and to theories of transnationalism. I begin by situating this volume's understanding of causal mechanisms in the (vast) literature on them. Next, I turn to transnationalist scholarship in international relations and sociology. This work suggests specific ways to make operational the diffusion mechanism invoked in much of the civil war literature, a point I demonstrate with examples from the volume's empirical contributions. A third section then turns the tables, suggesting that transnationalists have something to learn as well, in particular, how to theorize transnational violence.

### *Causal mechanisms – from confusion to emergent consensus*

Thinking about mechanisms has a long history in the philosophy of science and in the social sciences. Philosophers – for several hundred years – and social scientists – more recently – have debated the nature and meaning of cause (Kurki 2008 for a state-of-the-art review). Is it best captured by a Humean understanding of constant conjunction and covariation or a realist account of cause as process? Among sociologists and inspired by the work of Robert Merton and his

colleagues at Columbia University, mechanisms were the subject of intensive inquiry in the early years after World War II (Hedström and Swedberg 1998, 1–2). Thus, in the distant and not-so-distant past, the interest in mechanisms was there.

Such interest has blossomed among political scientists over the past decade, due both to a growing dissatisfaction with structural theories (Hall 2003, 375–388) and the rise of a new generation of scholars (see also Bennett, this volume). Rationalists now do mechanisms (Elster 1998), constructivists see them as a core component of their social theory (Wendt 1999), quantitative researchers increasingly invoke them (Gleditsch and Salehyan 2006, 341–344), and – among qualitative methodologists – new research on case studies gives mechanisms a pride of place (Bennett and George 2005; Gerring 2007a).

One not surprising result of all this attention is that different authors define a causal mechanism in different ways, a fact now widely noted and bemoaned (Mahoney 2001; Gerring 2007b; Falleti and Lynch 2009). At an intuitive level, it is easy to define a mechanism – it connects things and captures process. However, the devil, as always, is in the detail. Are mechanisms easy or hard (i.e., unobservable) to see? Must the use of mechanisms be premised on an ontological stance of methodological individualism?

Building upon recent discussions in the literature, I define a causal mechanism as “the pathway or process by which an effect is produced or a purpose is accomplished” (Gerring 2007b, 178; see also Caporaso 2009). Mechanisms are thus “relational and processual concepts ... not reducible to an intervening variable” (Falleti and Lynch 2009, 1149); they are “the operative or motive part, process or factor in a concrete system that produces a result” (Wight 2006, 34). These minimalist definitions capture other extant usages of the term (Gerring 2007b; see also Gerring and Barresi 2003).

Moving from conceptualization to a more operational level, there is also a growing consensus on measurement. Philosophers of social science – and especially scientific realists – view causal mechanisms as ultimately unobservable ontological entities that exist in the world, not in our heads; they are thus more than mere “analytical constructs that facilitate prediction” (Wight 2006, 31–32, quote at 31). If mechanisms are real but unobservable entities, the implications for measurement are clear: we measure not hypothesized mechanisms, but their observable implications.