



'Greed' versus 'Grievance': A Useful Conceptual Distinction in the Study of Civil War?

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I. Introduction

Since the end of World War II, civil war has been the most common form of large-scale violent conflict; in total, this type of armed confrontation has killed about sixteen million people (Regan 2009). Over the past decade, there has been a pronounced increase in the civil war literature. Economists, among other social scientists, have tried to investigate the causes of large-scale violent conflict by using economic theory, as well as empirical tests, which had hitherto been impossible due to lack of data. These analytical searches are driven by the hope that if we can gain a better understanding of the causes of civil war, we may be able to prevent future violent conflict and help to resolve ongoing wars. In this article I discuss whether 'greed' versus 'grievance' is a useful conceptual distinction to help us understand and prevent civil wars. I argue that the theory of collective action provides some useful insights into the organisation of rebellion. Group interests (e.g., common grievances) can only be addressed by collective action. One way of understanding how this collective action can be achieved is to frame rebellion as the production of a public good. Collective action theory suggests that in order to overcome the problem of 'free riding', participants have to receive private rewards. Thus, 'greed' may be an important factor in the organisation of rebellion. Since rebellion necessitates private gains even if it is based on common grievances, theories of civil war should consider both factors. In principle, empirical tests can be used to evaluate the relative importance of 'greed' versus 'grievance'. A number of studies suggest that private incentives are more important determinants for individuals to join rebellions than the belief in the cause of the rebel movement.¹ However, in many cases the empirical tests are not rooted in theory, making it difficult to distinguish conclusively between rival theoretical explanations.

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The paper is structured as follows. Section II presents a synopsis of how collective action theory can frame our understanding of civil war. In section III, I present an overview of the empirical evidence, followed by a conclusion.

II. Theory

The key feature of civil war is the formation and persistence of a rebel army. Theories of rebellion should therefore focus on the explanation of this phenomenon. In a civil war, rebels challenge the government and rebellion can be thought of as the production of a public good. In economic theory a public good is defined as a non-rivalrous and non-excludable good (Samuelson 1954). Non-rivalry means that consumption of the good by one individual does not reduce availability of the good for consumption by others. Non-excludability means that no one can be effectively excluded from using the good. Rebellions can be understood as the production of a public good, because if the rebellion succeeds, the entire population will be living under the new regime, irrespective of individual support for the rebellion.

According to the theory of collective action (Olson 1965), common interests within a group are insufficient to produce a public good. Individuals in any group have incentives to 'free ride' on the efforts of others since they cannot be excluded from the consumption of the public good. The incentive to 'free ride' is reduced if only active participants receive private benefits. Thus, without these so-called selective incentives to motivate participation, collective action is unlikely to occur even when groups have common interests. Based on these assumptions, Tullock (2005) models the individual's decision whether or not to participate in a rebellion. Individuals will participate if their benefits outweigh their costs. They know that their individual decision will have very little impact on the outcome of the rebellion. Thus, Tullock argues that the public good aspect of rebellion has little relevance in the individual's decision whether or not to participate; instead, individuals base their decision to join on the private good aspect of rebellion. Tullock recognises that much of the literature focuses on the public good aspect of rebellion, i.e. groups rebel because they are aggrieved and promise a new political regime addressing the underlying causes of economic and social inequalities. Tullock terms this 'the paradox of revolution', as the public good aspect dominates the discussion while the private rewards for rebels receive little attention, although they are key in the participation decision (Tullock 2005:174–85).

The 'greed' versus 'grievance' debate is very much shaped by the understanding of rebellion as producing a public good. 'Greed' can be interpreted as concentrating on the importance of the private gains aspect, while 'grievance' focuses on the public good aspect of rebellion. A well-defined theory of rebellion has to consider both aspects because they are interrelated.

Private gains and costs of participating in a rebellion are dependent on the likelihood of the rebellion succeeding, but the success of a rebellion in turn depends on how many individuals decide to participate. Typically, one would expect rebellions to start with a small group of rebels and then to swell to large, self-sustaining organisations. Olson (1965) argues that group size is critical in

achieving collective action: Smaller groups face lower costs of organisation and it is more lucrative for individuals to join because the private rewards are being shared among fewer participants. This suggests that the incentive for group action diminishes as group size increases; as a consequence, large groups are less able to act in their common interest than small ones. Thus, according to the theory of collective action, smaller groups are more likely to rebel, and in order to recruit followers, they will have to provide selective incentives. To mobilise a small rebel group may only require the promise of private returns rather than appealing to a public good aspect of rebellion. However, in order to motivate individuals to join a small group of rebels, the leader may want to appeal to the public good characteristic of rebellion. The more individuals join the higher the chance of success and the opportunity to gain private rewards. Therefore, theories of rebellion should consider common interests as well as private gains as possible decisive determinants.

In sum, this discussion of the theory of rebellion centres on the key assumptions that 1) rebellion produces a public good; and 2) individuals make a rational choice regarding whether to join the rebellion.

Public Good

Since public goods are by definition non-rivalrous and non-excludable, it is debatable whether any such good really exists or whether it is just a useful concept in economic theory. This analysis focuses on rebellions, which aim to put a new political regime into power. While it can be argued that political regimes are non-rivalrous, they can certainly exclude individuals. Purges, expulsions, and the denial of a number of human/citizens' rights are ways of punishing members and supporters of the previous regime. In this sense one might argue that rebellion produces a club good, rather than a public good. If individuals can be excluded, there is less of a free rider problem, and hence private incentives are less important to organise a rebellion. Appealing to a common interest may be sufficient.

Likewise, other models of rebellion do not rely on the provision of selective incentives because the free rider problem will not arise due to varying preferences for the public good within the group. Kuran (1989) assumes that strongly motivated individuals start the rebellion and others with a less strong motivation join once the chances of success are higher. This 'bandwagon' effect is most likely to result in strong rebel support if preferences are uniformly distributed. Clustered preferences make rebellion less likely.

Rebellions may start off as addressing grievances, but justice-seeking can turn into loot-seeking during the course of the war. Where there are opportunities for large profits, the composition of the rebel group will gradually shift towards those with a motivation for private gain rather than an interest in the public good: the rebellion experiences adverse selection in motivation (Weinstein 2005).

Esteban and Ray (2008) suggest that the preference distribution within groups matters for the organisation of rebellions. In general, within-group heterogeneity makes it more difficult to achieve collective action, but the heterogeneity may enable a useful division of labour. The richer members of the group provide the finances for conflict while the poorer members provide conflict labour. They

hypothesise that groups defined by ethnicity have larger within-group heterogeneities than class-based groups. Ethnic groups can therefore use these differences within the group to finance and organise rebellions.

Rational Choice

Rational choice theory frames much of economists' understanding of economic behaviour. It is the central paradigm of modern micro-economic theory, which has been more widely applied to explain a number of social behaviours such as those discussed in Becker (1976). The assumption of rational choice frames a number of formal models of rebel participation and recruitment. Grossman (1991; 1999) presents a model in which peasant households decide how to allocate their labour time to production, soldiering, or participation in an insurrection. The interaction between the ruler and the peasant households results in an equilibrium allocation of labour time and a probabilistic distribution of income from the three activities. One possible equilibrium outcome is a higher expected income if time is allocated to rebellion despite its opportunity cost. Gates (2002) argues that the leader faces a principal-agent problem, and he tries to overcome this by the offer of selective incentives. The greater the geographic or social distance between leader and recruits, the greater the supervision problem and thus the need for private gain. Potential recruits join the rebellion if these private gains are sufficiently rewarding.

Analogous to the cost-benefit analysis in economic models, in social behaviour models individuals act as if balancing costs against benefits to maximise personal advantage. The models outlined above assume that potential recruits make a rational decision to join a rebellion, based on a cost-benefit analysis. However, many rebel armies use coercion in their recruitment process. Beber and Blattman (2008) argue that threats and punishments can be used as selective incentives. They provide a framework in which it is rational for the rebel leader to use force rather than rewards to solve the collective action problem. Like the other rational choice models, this attempt by Beber and Blattman focuses on explanations that tend to emphasise economic motivations for conflict. Psychological or sociological factors are less well integrated into formal approaches. For example, charismatic leadership may be crucial to the formation of a rebel army. There is some empirical evidence that leadership matters for economic outcomes (Jones and Olken 2005), but the importance of leadership has so far not received any formal treatment in the study of civil war. 'Irrational' behaviour may drive (some) rebellions. Based on the examples of Bosnia and Rwanda, Mueller suggests that leaders whip up hatred and recruit 'fanatics, criminals and hooligans' (Mueller 2004:88) to commit most of the violence. Another likely example of irrationality is the Ugandan Lord's Resistance Army, whose leader claims to fight for the rights of the Acholi ethnic group in Northern Uganda. This rebel organisation has killed and kidnapped many members of its own ethnic group. With its only stated goal being the establishment of rule by the Ten Commandments, it is more akin to fanatical religious groups than to organisations of political opposition. 'Irrational' behaviour by leaders (Gartzke 2003) and followers (Mueller 2004) may be more difficult to integrate into formal modelling.

III. Evidence

I now turn to the empirical evidence to evaluate the role of private incentives ('greed') and group interests ('grievances') as suggested by the theoretical framework outlined above. Over the past decade a large number of applied studies have tried to assess the causes of civil war.² The empirical analysis can be grouped into the examination of: 1) the participation decisions of individuals; 2) what makes groups more likely to rebel; and 3) what makes countries more prone to conflict.

Why Do Individuals Join Rebellions?

Individuals' attitudes to rebellion are analysed by MacCulloch (2004) and MacCulloch and Pezzini (2007). These studies tell us something about the *taste* for revolution, but there is currently no research linking these attitudes to actions. There may be a considerable gap between having a taste for revolution and joining one.

A small number of surveys are used to analyse participation in an armed organisation (e.g., Arjona and Kalyvas 2006; Verwimp 2005). Since it is dangerous to conduct these surveys, they are either based on recall questions (Humphreys and Weinstein 2008) or they take place in situations that have not fully escalated (Oyefusi 2008). In their seminal study Humphreys and Weinstein (2008) examine participation in the rebel and regular forces based on survey data in Sierra Leone. A large proportion of the rebel recruits (88%) claim to have been abducted and forced to join, raising the question whether their participation can be modelled as a choice. Interestingly, their survey data suggest that abductees and volunteers do not seem to be systematically different from each other. Humphreys and Weinstein attempt to distinguish the various explanations of why individuals joined the rebellion by grouping the explanatory variables into explanations of grievance, selective incentives, and social sanctions. Men were more likely to participate if they were poor and/or had low levels of education. Poverty could be interpreted either as a grievance factor or as evidence that these individuals are facing low opportunity costs. However, Humphreys and Weinstein carefully try to disentangle grievance factors from selective incentives. They provide additional evidence by estimating the likelihood of joining the regular armed forces. Like joining the rebel forces, poverty seems an important driver in joining the government army. This evidence makes it hard to reconcile joining the rebellion as a result of grievances. Thus, in this context poverty is less likely to be a proxy for grievances than for the likelihood to be receptive to selective incentives due to low opportunity costs.

Monetary incentives made participation more likely, as did social sanctions. Thus, there is evidence that positive and negative incentives were used to address the free rider problem.³ Volunteer participants were more likely to join because they felt safer inside the group. Abductees and volunteers only differed in respect to this last variable; unsurprisingly, abductees did not feel safer inside the group.

Survey evidence from seven countries/territories⁴ conducted by the World Bank also suggests that the lack of economic opportunities is more important than addressing group grievances. Forty per cent of all respondents said that they joined

a rebel group because they were unemployed, while only 13% claimed they did so because they believed in the group's causes (The World Bank 2011:80).

Why Do Groups Rebel?

Civil war requires an organised group that challenges the government. What makes groups decide to pursue their aims in a violent way while others stay peaceful? Dube and Vargas (2006) use event data for Colombia and find that when coffee prices are low, violence in coffee areas is significantly higher. This supports the hypothesis that individuals and groups are more likely to rebel when opportunity costs are low. Private incentives are more valuable in times of economic hardship and thus increase participation in violence. Jenne, Saideman, and Lowe (2007) and Toft (2003) use the Minorities at Risk (MAR) data set to examine the behaviour of ethnopolitical groups worldwide.⁵ Their findings with respect to geography are very similar: groups which are concentrated in rural areas are more likely to turn violent than groups that are concentrated in urban areas or that are dispersed across the country. Toft (2003) interprets these results as support for the hypothesis that these concentrated groups have a higher capability and greater legitimacy. Jenne, Saideman, and Lowe (2007) also find that external military support and low average national income make a violent campaign against the government more likely. They do not find any evidence that either political discrimination or economic differences make it more likely for organisations to turn to violence.

Although this gives some interesting insights into which groups may be more likely to turn to violence to pursue their demands, this work suffers from the impossibility to define the universe of groups that are likely to rebel. As Fearon (2003:195) points out, “‘ethnic group’ . . . is a slippery concept’, and it is impossible to draw up a complete list of ethnic groups (ibid.). The MAR data set tracks minorities ‘at risk’, defined as groups that have collectively experienced systematic discriminatory treatment *vis-à-vis* other groups in a society. Thus, this definition is likely to introduce a selection bias. Ideally, comprehensive surveys would identify all sizeable groups in the population, irrespective of whether they have suffered or benefitted from discrimination.”⁶

What Makes Countries Conflict Prone?

The studies of individual and group behaviour are instructive as to why people join rebel organisations and what characterises the organisations that turn to violence in pursuit of their aims. However, the majority of empirical studies examine the causes of civil war at the country level, with a large body of case studies examining the causes of civil war for individual countries. An excellent compilation of case study evidence is presented in Collier and Sambanis (2005). A different literature draws on cross-country data to examine what makes countries more prone to civil war. Core articles of this literature on civil war onset include Hegre et al. (2001), Collier and Hoeffler (2004), and Fearon and Laitin (2003). While most of this literature does not provide a careful link between theory and empirical tests, Besley and Persson (2008; 2010) are notable exceptions.

Although this literature uses different data sets, methods, and models, some common results have emerged. Countries with higher per capita income, larger populations, and primary commodity exporters⁷ are more likely to experience civil war. There is also strong evidence that countries that had a civil war in the past are much more likely to experience another one. In a large proportion of countries the civil war recurs within a decade; Collier, Hoeffler, and Söderbom (2008) find that this is the case for about 40% of the post-conflict societies that they study. However, despite the high likelihood of spiralling into a conflict trap, there is hope for post-conflict societies. The longer the peace lasts, the less likely it is for countries to experience a further civil war (Hegre and Sambanis 2006). Income growth is another variable that is robustly correlated with civil war onset. However, there are concerns that growth may be endogenous to civil war risk; growth rates may be low because economic agents perceive the risk of war as high. Miguel, Satyanath, and Sergenti (2004) use an instrumental variables approach to tackle this issue and confirm that lower growth rates are associated with higher conflict risk.

One of the most commonly cited causes of war is inequality. Examples include the hypothesis that aggression is caused by frustration, which in turn is rooted in 'relative deprivation' (Gurr 1970). Another one is the assertion that 'the relation between inequality and rebellion is indeed a close one' (Sen 1973:1). However, there is little evidence that commonly used measures of inequality are significant in any of the civil war onset regressions (Collier and Hoeffler 2004). Thus, the assumption that inequality matters to people sufficiently to start rebellions may simply be wrong. Stevenson and Wolfers (2008) suggest that individuals place much more importance on their absolute rather than relative income. However, there may be a number of other reasons why there is no statistical evidence for a link between inequality and the risk of civil war onset. First, the availability of cross-country data is poor, possibly preventing us from picking up any effects from inequality to civil war. Second, as the work by MacCulloch and Pezzini (2007) indicates, the poorest in society are more likely to be frustrated, angry, and have a taste for rebellion, but they may lack the means to mount a large-scale rebellion. Thus, although there is no lack of motivation for a rebellion, it is simply not feasible. Third, it has been argued that the commonly used measures of inequality (e.g., the Gini coefficient) only capture 'vertical' inequality (i.e., equality between individuals). What might matter more is the inequality between groups, termed 'horizontal' inequality (Stewart 2005). This inequality is the result of discrimination against groups in an inequitable society. Regan's concept of 'structural' poverty seems to be based on the same idea (Regan 2009). Stewart (2005) presents nine case studies in which 'horizontal' inequality leads to serious political instability.

For Nepal, Murshed and Gates (2005) and Macours (2009) show that the increase in inequality fuelled the Maoist rebellion. Østby (2008) provides a cross-country study on the subject. She finds evidence that 'horizontal' inequality does increase the risk of war. To summarise, there is no evidence that vertical inequality causes conflict, while there is some limited evidence that horizontal inequality may contribute (in some cases) to the risk of civil war.

Other possible causes of large-scale violent conflict are differences due to ethnicity, religion, and class. Most of the empirical research has been conducted

on the impact of ethnicity on the risk of civil war. Fearon and Laitin (2011) classify civil wars since World War II and code 57% of these as ethnic civil wars. There is strong evidence that ethnically diverse societies tend to grow more slowly (Easterly and Levine 1997; Mauro 1995) and have a low level of public goods provision (Alesina, Baqir, and Easterly 1999; Habyarimana et al. 2005; Miguel and Gugerty 2005). The cross-country growth literature uses a measure of ethno-linguistic fractionalisation; it measures the probability that two randomly drawn individuals from a given country do not speak the same language. Using this measure or one of ethno-political exclusion (Wimmer, Cederman, and Min 2009) provides mixed evidence of a link between ethnicity and conflict. Hegre and Sambanis (2006) conclude that the relationship between ethnic diversity and civil war onset is not robust.

Why are we not able to find a robust link between ethnic diversity and civil war onset? If a society is very diverse (i.e., the various groups are very small), ethnic grievances may motivate a group to take up arms, but they are too small to mount a sizable rebellion. Cooperation across different groups is difficult to achieve due to differences in group preferences, and any resulting coalition is fragile. More fundamentally, it may be that the case that civil wars are not 'ethnic wars' in the sense that people fight because of their ethnicity (Regan 2009). Rebel leaders may be motivated by grievance or greed, but they do not recruit randomly from the entire population. Ethnic groups provide an ideal recruitment pool. Their shared experiences (of real or perceived discrimination) make it easier to motivate their group members. Their shared language and preferences make it easier to achieve coordination and collective action. The threat and use of social sanctions curb free riding. The circumstances that lead to a civil war outbreak are often complex, and ethnicity is a tool for mobilisation⁸ but not the 'cause' of conflict.

IV. Conclusion

This article provides a discussion of the conceptual distinction of 'greed' and 'grievance' in the civil war literature. I base my arguments on the premise that collective action theory presents a useful framework for the analysis of civil war. 'Greed' is interpreted as responding to private incentives when individuals make the choice of whether or not to join a rebel movement. The overview of the empirical evidence suggests that private incentives are a key determinant in the participation decision. However, defining and measuring various theoretical concepts, such as for example 'greed' and 'grievance', is problematic, resulting in difficulties in interpreting the empirical results. Even though there is a disconnect between theory and evidence, a consensus begins to emerge on which factors are more likely to be associated with the onset of civil war. Inequality and ethnicity receive a lot of attention as drivers of violent conflict, but there is so far little evidence that these measures of 'grievances' are robustly correlated with civil war onset. Other explanatory variables are highly correlated with each other; for example, there is a close relationship between income, democracy, and natural resources. This makes it difficult to disentangle their contribution to civil war onset. There is firmer evidence that poor economic opportunities, low incomes,

and a past history of violent conflict make civil war more likely. If we can improve economic opportunities, we do not only improve individual wellbeing but also tackle one of the important drivers of violent conflicts. 'Greed' is therefore a useful concept in addressing the twin challenge of security and development.

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Notes

¹ As indicated, for example, in the surveys presented in the World Development Report 2011 (The World Bank 2011).

² Hoeffler (2011) provides an overview on the causes of civil war.

³ For a different perspective on free riding in civil wars, see Kalyvas and Kocher (2007).

⁴ Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Sierra Leone, Democratic Republic of the Congo, West Bank, Gaza, and Colombia.

⁵ Minorities at Risk, <http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/mar/> (accessed 3 December 2010).

⁶ The MAR codebook claims that more recent updates have addressed this selection issue (Minorities at Risk 2009).

⁷ A detailed discussion of the relationship between natural resources and development can be found in Auty (2001). The special issue of the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (2005, vol. 49, no. 4) examines the relationship between natural resources and conflict.

⁸ A detailed account of mobilisation in Rwanda can be found in Yanagizawa (2009).

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