



Greed and Grievance: Methodological and Epistemological Underpinnings of the Debate*

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The great contribution of the ‘Greed and Grievance’ debate has been to get economists to recognise political causes of conflict by calling them economic.¹ After all, all conflicts are about resources, just as all conflicts are about identity and all conflicts are about power. To deny any of these is simply blind and hence uninteresting, and to claim an exclusive causal element in these overlapping Weberian categories is to confuse contribution with exclusivity. It is also to waste great time and useful intellect in proprietary claims on the causal field, where useful effort could be put into addressing the multicausal effect with social

* Portions of this article were previously published in Arnsion, Cynthia J., and I. William Zartman, eds. *Rethinking the Economics of War: The Intersection of Need, Creed, and Greed*. pp. 256–284. © 2005 by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. Reprinted with permission of The Johns Hopkins University Press.

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science's most important question: *Which, when, why?* The interesting questions are how and when, not whether, these factors relate to each other in causing and sustaining conflict. Are they always concomitant, or reinforcing, sequential, or phasal, and under what conditions? But another interesting question is why erroneous counter-claims evolve and achieve standing?

Part of the answer comes from the fact that social science inquiry hangs on a pendulum. New explanations emerge and attract the momentum of scholarship, lining up true believers and drawing the fire of true doubters, until a counterproposition appears and the pendulum swings in a new direction. In the dialectic of scholarship, by the time a synthesis is made out of the thesis and its antithesis, a new thesis arises based on some other parameter and the pendulum swings in a new direction. The movement encourages exclusivist and exaggerated claims in order to draw attention to the new explanatory angle. Since the new paradigm faces entrenched resistance, neither human nature nor contesting claims allow for modesty about the new turn of inquiry, and the pendulum only comes to rest on one side or in the middle much later, often unnoticed as the debate moves elsewhere (Kuhn 1970).² Each explanation enriches understanding, yet each tends to claim that it has *the* key, to the exclusion of the others. As the debate evolves, claims to exclusive explanations are tempered and inserted into a bundle of causes, but the new wave of economic claims is still fresh.

Of course, the movement is not as sharply defined as the pendulum image may suggest, as the study of internal conflict shows. The new thrust of explanation that grew out of World War II was that wars begin in people's minds, with less attention to the material conditions that made their minds turn to war (Bernard et al. 1957; Cantril 1966; Klineberg 1950). As the Cold War took over the postwar peace, people's minds viewed internal as international conflict to be the work of international forces, notably communist interference in internal affairs, providing a reverse mirror for Marxist materialist explanations of conflict. Why external interference was able to take hold was dealt with only by a minority of scholars (see Rosenau 1964, a rare book ahead of its time). With the rise of anticolonial nationalism, the focus turned to the denial of nationalist rights as the cause of conflict (Emerson 1960; Snyder 1968; Wallerstein 1966). Thereafter, internal conflict was seen to be the consequence of poverty, a putative direct link that is hard to kill. Of course, economic explanations – and indeed, exclusively economic explanations – of conflict were not new. In Marxist scholarship, conditions of economic exploitation produced class conflict, both in and between nations. Poverty *per se* was not the direct cause of conflict but rather part of a more sophisticated relationship mediated by sociopolitical structures.

However, little of this analysis proved to be relevant for current intrastate conflicts, if indeed it was relevant for any conflicts. Later research has tried to identify the conditions and the mediating effects through which poverty or structural causes do indeed lead to conflict, producing the more focused work on relative deprivation (Davies 1962; Davies 1969; Gurr 1970). With the waning of the Cold War, the replacement of ideology by identity as a driving force for conflict, and the rise in seemingly purposeless rampages animated by personal gain, such new events introduced new conditions to be explained, leading to debates about the role

of identity – primordial or contextual (Anderson 1991; Francis Deng et al. 1996, especially ch. 3, ‘Identity’). Yet the pendulum had swung too far, leaving a large unoccupied area for material explanations, and the latest wave of scholarship has churned up economic explanations of conflict (Brito and Intriligator 1990; Collier and Hoeffler 1998; Garfinkel and Skaperdas 1996; Hirshleifer 1988; Intriligator and Brito 1988; Jean and Rufin 1996; Keen 1996; Keen 1998; Lichbach 1989).³ New phenomena have attracted a new body of scholarship, as is appropriate, including attention from the World Bank, which, in the absence of an ability to recognise political causes, has sought an economic explanation for the debilitating conflicts that hamper its reconstruction and development efforts.

In this situation, it is not yet clear exactly what the economic claim to causality is. If the argument is that resources sustain rebellions, or that rebellions need resources, or that political entrepreneurs use resources to pursue conflicts, it is unexceptionable and perhaps unexceptional. But if it is that the maldistribution of resources has no relation to conflict, or that the drive for personal (as distinguished from group) gain in resources is the cause of conflict, or that ideology or identity or power or status grievances are a hoax without operative effect on the course of conflict, it is empirically wrong and ideologically perverse. Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, for example, ‘find little evidence for grievances as a determinant of conflict. Neither inequality nor political oppression increase the risk of conflict’ (Collier and Hoeffler 2002:1). But economists, as well as other social scientists, are far from united behind the Collier–Hoeffler thesis on the causes of conflict; Ola Olsson and Heather Congdon Fors use a game theoretical approach to find that the Congolese wars against both Mobutu and Laurent Kabila were ‘triggered by institutional grievance’ (Olsson and Congdon Fors 2004).⁴ Karen Ballentine identifies ‘effective governance’ as ‘the critical variable mediating the relationship that Collier has posited between natural resource dependence and the opportunity for rebellion’ (Ballentine 2003:265). In analysing recurrent civil wars, Barbara Walter argues,

Civil wars will have little chance to get off the ground unless individual farmers, shopkeepers, and potential workers choose to enlist in the rebel armies that are necessary to pursue a war, and enlistment is only likely to be attractive when two conditions hold. The first is a situation of individual hardship or severe dissatisfaction with one’s current situation. The second is the absence of any nonviolent means for change. . . . [A] higher quality of life and greater access to political participation have a significant *negative* effect on the likelihood of renewed war.

(Walter 2004:371)

‘We have already argued against a greed-based interpretation of rebellion. Most entrepreneurs of violence have essentially political objectives’, Collier et al. (2003:79) write.

But there is a deeper dimension to the current debate, which is related not just to a new twist in events but also to new epistemologies (Gates 2002; Ragin 1997; Sambanis 2004). It stems from the use of different research methods using different types of data. Most postwar research on internal conflict has focused on

in-depth case studies used to test explanatory propositions, with increasing formality (Ballentine and Sherman 2003; George 1982; George and McKeown 1985; Zartman 1995). The data tend to be longitudinal or sequential, because this approach grew out of historical studies and so is generally process oriented. Propositions may be inductively or deductively derived, but they are used to guide the evaluation of individual cases analyzed in some detail, with causal relationships explicitly posited. This characterisation is obviously an ideal type, more or less rigorously followed in individual scholarship. Such studies work to identify the courses and causes of selected cases of conflict rather than to seek correlations among characteristics in large populations of events and look for; hence they tend not to deal in control cases or random selections.

It is doubtless the loose formalisation of this approach, its small numbers of cases, and its deference to case idiosyncrasy that has provoked the search for a newer methodology now in vogue (see Levy 2009; Zartman 2005a). This newer research uses aggregate data on the largest number of cases possible either to test or generate deductive propositions through correlation or factoring. It needs careful coding and large numbers of diverse cases gathered together into types, and is more interested in showing statistically significant correlations than in explaining them. Indeed it is interested in 'proneness' rather than in causality, focusing on the opportunity for conflict posed by certain conditions rather than the motivation of those who seize that opportunity (yet using seized opportunity as the proxy variable for opportunity *per se*). But opportunities are only half the explanation (and arguably the smaller half) if no one is motivated to seize them. The statistical methodology aims to show whether resources, identity, or penury correlate with conflict rather than to explain and test why or how, and it spends little time on apparently deviant instances. It therefore often ignores some basic research questions: What is it in the correlation that provides causality? And, given several effects of the same cause, which, when, and why?

Perhaps more important that what questions are being asked is how they are being answered. Statistical methodology can handle only data that are quantitatively, objectively measurable and can explain only that for which it has data. In the interest of precision it must make inflexibly quantifiable definitions, and so, because it has no 'feel' for its subject, has to rely on indicators or 'proxies'; subjective elements must be objectified to become data.⁵ So, such studies do not explain civil conflict; they only explain conflict with more than 1,000 deaths, which is a bit like explaining human growth by starting at the age of twelve. Its indicators, such as per capita income or economic growth, are often far away from the effect they are proxying, such as proneness. Thus, the resource school of analysis shows that poverty 'increases the likelihood of conflict' (Collier et al. 2003:53), which is an important restatement, but deduces from that fact that grievances have no role in causing conflict, using poverty as a proxy for grievances, as if all poor people should be equally rebellious about their condition. Unexplored is the question why poverty leads to (correlates with) conflict in some instances and not others, and which instances those may be – the which–when–why question.

This research – at least in its early reports – showed the search for personal economic benefits ('greed') to be the cause of conflict, and dissatisfaction over

economic but also other types of conditions ('grievance') to be irrelevant, as if the two were not related. But both greed and grievance as motivators are beyond this methodology and so must be measured by indicators rather than by direct evidence. Thus 'greedable' (lootable) conditions become the evidence of greed. In the words of Willie Sutton, banks are robbed because that's where the money is (or, in the words of the new methodologists, bank robbery correlates with money). The traditional methodology would be more interested in what steps Sutton took to get to the money or what led him to become a robber in the first place. It's a bit like judging the number of peanuts in a dish by the number of peanut shells lying around and, finding none, declaring that there are no peanuts there. Or, perhaps in a closer analogy, when looking for the role of love in marriage, deciding that a proxy for love must be the sending of flowers, and when then not finding much flower sending these days, declaring that love has little role in marriage. These analogies may be declared inaccurate, but so are proxies in too many crucial cases. The core of the problem is that many crucial elements in the causation of social events are perception, only available in the words of the actors themselves, and there is no way, other than expressed evidence, to find proxies for sentiments and perceptions. Yet in explaining behavior in the behavioral sciences, objective conditions are always mediated by subjective perceptions for which quantitative data are inadequate, and we are all thrown back on Weber's *Verstehen*.

For example, Collier and Hoeffler (2002) found no correlation between either income or land ownership inequality and the risk of conflict and therefore concluded that poverty-based grievances are irrelevant to the outbreak of conflict. But using inequality as a proxy for grievance is spurious; the relevant question is mediatory: under what conditions are inequalities accepted (people who 'know their place') and under what conditions are they resented to the point of rebellion? It is hard to find measurable data to answer that question. Proxies cannot do it; feelings are beyond their grasp. Later research along these lines has corrected its earlier exuberance to recognise the existence of grievance and to place economic opportunity among the indicators of a situation prone to conflict and an element in the sustainability of conflict. It still does not indicate at what moment greed enters into the course of conflict and what its role is in motivation and in continuation. The more unfortunate effect of the greed fad is that it turns researchers' attention from a more important question: What is the role of attention to causative grievances in the crafting of a lasting resolution to the conflict? We know that additional grievances are added onto the original grievances as the conflict continues. We also know that going back to the beginning of the conflict and correcting the original grievance is not enough to resolve the conflict. But we have no thorough answer to the role of grievances in the construction of a durable outcome, because that is not the focus of current research and because that question has not been asked. It should be.

At this point it is worth looking at the record. It is impossible to report on a full census of conflicts, but a good selection will do. The LTTE conflict in Sri Lanka (1983–2009) arose because of discrimination against the previously favoured Tamils (grievance) and government greed (de Silva 2005; Wriggins 1995). The rebellion in Ivory Coast began in 1999 as an army pay mutiny (grievance) and then

in 2002 became a northern (Muslim) revolt against discrimination (grievance) and southern greed. The conflict in the Philippines was a reaction to discrimination against the Muslim population of Mindanao (grievance) by a corrupt government (greed) (Penetrante 2011). The conflict in Liberia in 1989–2007 arose because of ethnic resentment (grievance) of government discrimination (greed) (Adebajo 2002; Zartman 2005b). The rebellion in Sierra Leone in 1991 grew out of youth alienation from the lack of any future (grievance) because of government greed (Abdullah 1998; Kandeh 2005). The rebellion in Casamance began in 1983 in protest against dishonoured promises and exploitative discrimination (grievance) by the Senegalese government (greed) (Thomas-Lake 2010). The current conflict in Colombia arose from the neglect of new social groups after the pact ending *La Violencia* in 1964 (grievance) by the ruling parties (greed) (Chernick 2005; Eisenstadt and Garcia 1995). The conflict in Peru began in the 1960s as a protest against the poor and neglected conditions of the uplands Ayacucho (grievance) at the hands of a fat and inattentive government (greed) (McClintock 2005). The rebellion in Aceh began with a historic desire for self-government but really took off when local grievances against government repression intensified (Collier et al. 2003:73). If, in effect ‘[h]ighly repressive societies often fail to trigger civil war’ (ibid.:89), that does not negate repression as a frequent grievance but rather leads to the next question: Which, when, and why?

Greed does come in, but at a particular ‘end’, not the beginning of the conflict. Greed appears when the conflict gets bogged-down and stuck in an S⁵ (soft, stable, self-serving stalemate) situation. The shift to greed is a sign of the evolution of a conflict beyond its ‘normal’ course toward either victory or stalemate and settlement. The length of that ‘normal’ course is impossible to calculate and probably to conceptualise, but it is clear from the historical record that when victory and mutually hurting stalemate become unlikely in the parties’ perception and when they find themselves in charge of a territory of their own, with no hope of defeating the opponent or of being defeated, that their search for resources to fund the conflict becomes an end in itself, and greed sets in. Greed is the mother of great inventiveness, building roadblocks, billing bribes, requisitions, protection schemes, mining privatisable resources, and other ways of turning a good cause into a money-making scheme.

Yet, ironically to the debate, greed is indeed present at the beginning, *before* the conflict, as the cause of the grievances. Greed in the state rulers gives rise to rebellion, prolonged failure in the rebellion’s struggle for rights and grievances turns the rebellion’s leaders to greed, and greed within the rebellion encourages greed within the state. States on the road to failure – the initial precondition of the conflict – fall into the clutches of a ruling elite increasingly devoted to making money out of their position, at the expense of state functions. The state treasury is the primary lootable resource, and greed and grievance are two sides of the same coin, the one practiced by privatising rulers and the other felt by the alienated population. If the weakened state retains enough responsive capability to push the rebellion into a prolonged, intractable conflict, the rebel leaders face the temptation to turn to private gain because the social cause of the conflict is blocked. Locked in a conflict that it is not winning, state leaders might be expected to launch

a major reform programme and overtake the original causes of the conflict; unfortunately, such examples are practically nonexistent: The state leaders no longer have the capacity to do so, and so they sink deeper into repression and kleptocracy. Mobutu's Zaire, Aristide's Haiti, Siad Barre's Somalia, Doe's and then Taylor's Liberia, and many others, are examples. Thus, greed occurs initially within the state, later (after a soft stalemate) within the rebellion, and then again within the state. Or, in other words, state collapse or failure gives rise to rebellion, but prolonged rebellion leads to state collapse, not so much at the hands of the rebellion as by self-destruction on the part of the state itself. It is this vicious cycle that brings about prolonged and intractable conflict in the poorer areas of the world (Arnson and Zartman 2005; Collier et al. 2003).

Finally, in another vicious circle, entrance into the greed phase weakens the ability to come to a resolving settlement of the conflict, just as it has arisen because of that same inability. The lesson of both ends of the problem is clear: It is important to reach an outcome – victorious or negotiated – early because the later evolution of the conflict makes it extremely difficult to resolve. Thus the largest lessons fit together well: It is important to strengthen the state and its ability to perform its supply and control functions, so that debilitating conflicts of need and the greed do not arise and further weaken the state and sap its functions. But if violent conflict arises, it is important to assure either one side's victory or a stalemate leading to settlement, lest the unresolved conflict become intractable and unresolvable. And victory or settlement is possible only by recognising and tending the need and greed bases of the conflict.

Notes

¹ This argument was earlier developed in part in Zartman (2005c).

² This effect is the subject of many presentations in *Science* magazine. See, e.g., Balter (2004), which ends: ‘“There is no need to set up the Kurgan and farming hypotheses at variance with one another,” says April McMahon, a linguist at the University of Sheffield, U.K. “But sadly, this is something that [people] have a tendency to do” ’ (ibid.:1326).

³ Note that this strain of scholarship is quite different (even if not entirely unrelated) from the longer-standing work on the economic consequences of conflict, for which economics is the dependent – not independent – variable (see Collier 1999; Murdoch and Sandler 2002; Stewart and FitzGerald 2001).

⁴ The ‘institutional grievance’ variable used in this article is modeled as deliberate institutional differences between formal- and informal-sector production. This is intended to reflect factors including the strength of property rights and the rule of law that the ruler can control directly.

⁵ According to Collier and Hoeffler (2000:26), ‘although objective grievance is not a powerful primary cause of conflict, conflict may generate [objective? subjective?] grievances which become powerful additional risk factors’, where ‘objective grievance[s]’ were indicated by ethnic polarisation, political rights, political openness, and ethnic group size, but not how people felt about these situations, with the apparent assumption that all people feel the same about the same situations.

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