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# Introduction

Do grievances cause civil war? The desperate struggles of discriminated and stateless peoples around the world suggest that the answer to this question must be affirmative, as illustrated by such cases as the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, the Fur in the Sudan, the Tamils in Sri Lanka, the Karen in Myanmar, and the Kurds in Turkey and elsewhere. Indeed, the upheavals in North Africa and the Middle East in 2011 demonstrate that it is difficult to sustain regimes that exclude large parts of the population from political power along ethnic or nonethnic lines.

In stark contrast to these observations, however, much of the contemporary literature on civil war takes a very different view. Regarding explanations rooted in political and economic grievances with suspicion, leading scholars of civil war typically give short shrift to grievance-based accounts on the basis of results indicating that ethnic diversity and unequal individual wealth distributions have no statistically distinguishable relationship to internal conflict. In particular, ethnic grievances as triggers of civil wars receive little support in this literature, despite their having attracted substantial attention in qualitative studies. Arguing that grievances are the product, rather than a cause, of violence, or otherwise so omnipresent that they cannot account for civil conflict, these authors question the sincerity of political entrepreneurs' appeals to ethnic nationalism, dismissing them as the opportunistic and self-serving arguments of warlords, thugs, and criminals.

In his best-selling book *The Bottom Billion*, Collier (2007, p. 18) expresses these doubts explicitly:

> So what causes civil war? Rebel movements themselves justify their actions in terms of a catalogue of grievances: repression, exploitation, exclusion. Politically motivated academics have piled in with their own hobbyhorses, which usually cast rebels as heroes. I have come to distrust this discourse of grievances as self-serving.

Along similar lines, Mueller (2000, p. 92) interprets grievances as an opportunistic cover for greedy and even criminal activities:

> What passed for "ethnic warfare" in Bosnia and Croatia seems then to have been something far more banal: the creation of communities of criminal violence and predation. In the end, the wars resembled the movie images of the American Wild West or of gangland Chicago, and they often had less to do with nationalism than with criminal opportunism and sadistic cruelty, very commonly enhanced with liquor.

If ethnic conflict is fundamentally banal then it could potentially take place in any society, as illustrated by British soccer hooligans and motorcycle gangs in Denmark: "Under the right conditions, thugs can rise to a dominant role, others can lend a hand or withdraw into terrified isolation or studied indifference, and any place can degenerate into a Bosnia or a Rwanda" (Mueller 2000, p. 68).

From a less radical vantage point, most scholars who rely on quantitative evidence insist that ethnic frustrations fail to explain internal conflict. In a review of political-economy approaches to "ethnic mobilization and ethnic violence," Fearon (2006, pp. 857–8) comes to precisely this conclusion:

> Cross-national statistical studies find surprisingly few differences between the determinants of civil war onset in general, versus "ethnic" civil wars in particular. Once one controls for per capita income, neither civil wars nor ethnic civil wars are significantly more frequent in more ethnically diverse countries; nor are they more likely when there is an ethnic majority and a large ethnic minority.

In fact, this skeptical attitude as regards grievances as causes of civil war and ethnic conflict is so pronounced among rationalist scholars that Horowitz (2002, p. 547) characterizes it as "antipathy to antipathy."

Challenging these nonfindings, we argue that they, to a large extent, result from inappropriate theoretical assumptions and problematic empirical operationalizations. To be sure, measuring grievances is more easily said than done. As mental states that can easily be misinterpreted, such phenomena are notoriously difficult to pin down objectively. We wholeheartedly agree with Blattman and Miguel's (2010, p. 18) diagnosis:

> At present, the economic motivations for conflict are better theorized than psychological or sociological factors. Individual preferences in existing models typically include only material rewards and punishments. One key implication is that we have not derived the falsifiable predictions that distinguish between material and non-material theoretical accounts. Yet, the greater degree of existing theory on economic factors does not imply that researchers should discard non-economic explanations of conflict.

Much of the contemporary research on civil war aggregates the analysis to the country level. While expressing similar doubts about the relevance of grievances as explanations, a new wave of scholarship has shifted the attention away from entire countries to micro-level studies of specific processes of civil violence. In seminal contributions to the civil war literature, Kalyvas (2003; 2006) casts doubt on the validity of "master cleavages" as the key to such conflicts. Instead,

he argues in favor of a much more disaggregated perspective that highlights mundane micro-level motivations, such as local feuds and the settling of petty grudges that have little to do with the warring parties' broader ideological justifications. Although Kalyvas remains open to the possibility of ideological preferences influencing the outbreak of conflict, and some micro-level studies leave room for the role of political grievances (e.g., Gates 2002; Wood 2003; Weinstein 2007), most authors contributing to this literature deviate from such explanations (e.g., Fearon 2006; Blattman and Miguel 2010).

Our empirical strategy differs from both the country-level and micro-level literatures by focusing on interactions between the state and actors at intermediate levels of aggregation, such as ethnic groups and rebel organizations (Cederman and Gleditsch 2009). This approach allows us to go well beyond conventional country-level studies in terms of empirical detail, while at the same time allowing us to maintain the broad horizons of a truly *global* comparison. Following in the footsteps of Gurr's (1993a; 2000b) and Horowitz's (1985) classical contributions to the literature on ethnic conflict, this is a book about the impact of political grievances on civil war in general and the conflict-fueling role of ethnic nationalism in particular. As illustrated by the revolts in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya erupting in the spring of 2011, anger with political exclusion without reference to ethnic cleavages may lead to violence, but ethnonationalist civil wars remain arguably the most important, and also most misunderstood, class of grievance-related violence.

As a way to overcome the formidable obstacles associated with the operationalization and measurement of grievances, our strategy is to take one step back in order to detect structural situations that can be safely assumed to cause frustrations in the first place. In particular, we postulate that political and economic inequalities afflicting entire ethnic groups, rather than merely individuals, are especially likely to fuel resentment and justify attempts to fight perceived injustice. According to the terminology introduced by Stewart (2008b), such asymmetries can be labeled "horizontal inequalities" since they concern established groups, as opposed to "vertical inequalities" among isolated individuals and households. Part of the reason why grievance-based arguments have found little support in the quantitative literature is that such studies have typically measured vertical inequality, while ignoring its horizontal counterpart.

Since the most powerful counterarguments to grievance-based explanations have been backed up by quantitative indicators, this book centers on the development of better measures of inequalities that are directly linked to group-level theories of civil war. Furthermore, the problems of measuring political and economic inequalities call for new data. There is an important research tradition that relies on well-established data sources, such as the Minorities at Risk (MAR) data set. Nevertheless, these and similar data impose restrictions that make them less suitable to study the types of processes that we focus on in this book. Therefore, we build on a new version of the Ethnic Power

Relations data set that we refer to as EPR-ETH, which traces ethnic groups' access to state power (see Chapter 4). Our analysis also makes frequent use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS), which facilitate measurement of subnational properties and configurations. In particular, we rely on a geo-coded extension to EPR-ETH (GeoEPR), which provides detailed information about the EPR groups' settlement areas (see Chapter 5). Furthermore, the EPR-ETH data include a new extension that covers transnational ethnic kin (see Chapter 6). Finally, the book also employs a mapping that codes links between the EPR-ETH groups and conflict data coded for rebel organizations. All these data resources can be accessed through our data portal GROW$^{up}$ (Geographic Research On War: unified platform).[1]

If properly reconceptualized as group-level claims resulting from macro-level processes, such as nationalism and state formation, rather than as fixed ethno-demographic configurations or apolitical collections of individual characteristics, grievances can be systematically linked to political violence through actor-specific mechanisms. Taking this step from "factors to actors" enables us to postulate and evaluate a number of specific hypotheses concerning conflict parties' behavior under varying ethno-political configurations. Our argument does not, in any way, exclude possible effects of alternative causal mechanisms that are not related to inequalities or grievances. Rather than setting up false dichotomies that pit "greed" or "opportunities" against "grievances," our aim is to show that the latter category strongly influences the probability of civil conflict even while controlling for the former. Thus, the goal is to resurrect and refine a specific class of grievance-based explanations rather than debunking the alternatives.

The second part of our book analyzes the causes of civil war outbreak. In Chapter 4, we find that ethnic groups that are excluded from governmental influence are more likely to experience conflict than those that enjoy secure access to executive power. Recent loss of power or outright discrimination, rather than mere exclusion, tends to increase the risk of conflict even further. Our results indicate that political horizontal inequality often triggers civil violence.

Moreover, the findings of Chapter 5 demonstrate that group-level economic inequality can also lead to violent conflict, especially for groups with wealth levels below the national average, as exemplified by the Chechens in Russia and the Albanians in Yugoslavia. However, the evidence is much more mixed for groups that are wealthier than the average group. Furthermore, our analysis shows that the conflict propensity of disadvantaged and to some extent advantaged groups appears to hinge on political exclusion in the sense that economic horizontal inequality only matters where there is also political horizontal inequality.

In Chapter 6, we show that this group-level perspective also allows us to capture transborder processes involving ethnonationalist kin. Despite recent advances in this area, a central puzzle remains unresolved: namely that ethnic

[1] The system is available at http://growup.ethz.ch.

groups that at least in theory could count on support from large transborder ethnic kin (TEK) groups have often remained surprisingly peaceful, such as the stranded Russian populations in the "near abroad." Postulating a curvilinear, conflict-inducing effect of the TEK group's relative size compared to the incumbent, state-controlling group, we find that the risk of conflict increases within the middle range of the size spectrum. Moreover, our results suggest that the net effect, compared with situations without transnational links, is conflict-dampening for large TEK groups that enjoy access to executive power in their countries, as illustrated by the lack of conflict in many post-Soviet states. In contrast, our model shows that excluded TEK groups, such as the Kurdish minorities in Turkey, Iran, and Iraq before 2003, tend to increase the risk of civil war.

The group-level analyses are complemented by findings aggregated up to the country level in Chapter 7, including different measures of inequality and conflict. The aggregated analysis makes it possible to compare ethnic to nonethnic conflicts and the risk of conflict with excluded groups to the risk of civil war in countries without ethnic cleavages. Moreover, we contrast explanations based on horizontal inequalities to those that feature vertical inequalities. The results suggest that our group-level findings can be readily generalized from group relations to the country level, while also demonstrating the advantages of replacing conventional ethno-demographic indicators with measures that are more sensitive to the underlying political logic of ethnonationalist conflict and within-country variation.

Part III goes beyond the traditional focus on conflict onset. In Chapter 8, we examine the duration and outcome of conflicts, which allows us to consider the actual characteristics of organizations involved in conflicts and their relationship to ethnic groups, and to take seriously the possibility that ethnic groups may not be unitary actors and that rebel organizations can have a complex relationship to ethnic constituencies. We demonstrate that ethnonationalist exclusion influences not only the initial emergence of conflict but also its duration. Again, the argument is that decisions by states to exclude groups from power, rather than the mere existence of ethnic cleavages, are what make a difference for explaining patterns of violence.

Finally, Chapter 9 concludes the book. There we summarize our findings and explore trends affecting entire world regions. This analysis allows us to draw general conclusions for theory and policy, especially with respect to inclusion of ethnic groups through power sharing.

Having summarized our findings, it may be useful to anticipate the reasons why we come to such different conclusions compared with the dominant view. In fact, there are several reasons why both grievances and inequalities have been downplayed in contemporary scholarship on civil wars. To address these shortcomings, this book offers the following improvements:

- *Intermediate disaggregation rather than just individual or country-level analysis*. Most systematic studies of civil wars tend to be general but heavily

aggregated, and thus lacking in empirical precision, or disaggregated but focused on single countries, and thus lacking in generality. Focusing on conflict processes either at the country level or at the level of individuals or villages, much of the contemporary literature overlooks intermediate levels of aggregation where collective grievances are directly relevant, and where inequalities are most easily detected. To fill this gap, we explore explicit relational configurations at the mesolevel of aggregation, namely the group and organization levels, before aggregating our findings back to the country level.

- *Motivational rather than merely cognitive mechanisms*. Because of the strong influence of narrowly construed rationalistic and cognitive theorizing, many popular explanations tend to overlook the role of grievances. Rather than privileging cognitive processes at the expense of emotions, our book postulates explicit causal mechanisms that show how collectively felt grievances result from structural inequalities and may produce violent conflict under specific conditions.
- *Ethnonationalism rather than merely ethnicity as a conflict cause*. The conventional literature on "ethnic conflict" tends to debate the role of ethnicity in itself, as a demographic or individualist property that can be extricated from its political context. Such reasoning loses sight of the state, which plays a central role as a prize and an autonomous actor in nationalist conflicts. Our theoretical framework centers on the *political* function of ethnicity, especially where inequality creates tensions between ethnic groups that can be exploited for ethnonationalist mobilization.
- *Theoretically relevant data and measures, rather than the standard toolbox*. Scarcity and fragmentation of appropriate data on the relevant actors have also made it difficult to measure grievances, even indirectly. Indices such as the ethnic fractionalization index and the Gini coefficient of inequality are inherently individualist and therefore offer a poor operationalization of horizontal inequalities. Based on new data and new methods, we develop alternatives to these conventional measures by analyzing group-level mechanisms explicitly.

The issue of grievances and violence may seem merely academic. Yet, very much as successful medical treatments hinge on proper diagnosis, conventional methods of conflict resolution depend critically on how the causes of conflict are analyzed. Indeed, it comes as no surprise that those who dismiss ethnonationalist claims as being both ubiquitous and irrelevant for conflict tend to be skeptical about power sharing as a method for settling conflicts and prevent renewed violence. Instead, these scholars focus on ways to prop up weak governments and to help them improve their counter-insurgency campaigns. Referring to Fearon and Laitin's (2003) influential study in an article in the New York Times, Bass (2006, p. 2) draws similar policy inferences: "The Fearon-Laitin thesis suggests that the debate over the future of fragile countries

should turn from questions of ethnic demography to the need for good government, economic development and adequate policing."

In view of our findings, however, without attention to ethnonationalist grievances, such policies are likely to be ineffective, and in some cases possibly even counterproductive, especially in the long run. In very hard-to-solve nationality conflicts, interventions based exclusively on "all sticks and no carrot" policies that do not address the underlying sources of grievances will typically fail (Petersen 2011). Instead, the best way to break the cycle of violence driven by political exclusion and economic inequality is to involve groups that have been marginalized by giving them a real stake in their country's future. Indeed, some of the most intractable and damaging conflict processes in the contemporary world, such as the Israeli–Palestinian civil war, are to a large extent rooted in political and economic injustice. It is very unlikely that they will ever be resolved by shoring up the coercive capacity of the state alone unless the claims of marginalized populations are taken seriously. In the concluding chapter of this book, we will return to these important policy implications. For now, we turn to the task of preparing the conceptual ground for our empirical investigations.

PART I

# THEORIES AND CONCEPTS

The first part of the book contextualizes our theoretical arguments with respect to the civil war literature. After reviewing this literature in Chapter 2, we introduce our causal mechanisms in Chapter 3.