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# Rationality, Emotion, and Protracted Civil War Violence

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MANUS MIDLARSKY, SEP 23 2013

Why do some people initiate or prolong conflict when the odds are decidedly against them? We know that the cost-benefit calculations typically underpinning most political decisions do not apply here, or if they do, only in significantly modified form. Rationality as the maximization of preferred outcomes through means-ends calculations governs many of our political choices. Voting behavior typically, but not always, is one such example. But civil war protraction and increased violence may be another matter. Although social network analysis (Parkinson 2013) and game theoretic calculations (e.g., Garfinkel and Skaperdas 2000; Bester and Konrad 2004) can help supply a rational choice approach to civil war protraction, long ago Clausewitz ([1832] 1984 p.138) warned that:

Modern wars are seldom fought without hatred between nations.... Even where there is no national hatred and no animosity to start with, the fighting itself will stir up hostile feelings: violence committed on superior orders will stir up the desire for revenge and retaliation against the perpetrator rather than against the powers that ordered the action. That is only human (or animal, if you like) but it is a fact. Theorists are apt to look on fighting in the abstract as a trial of strength without emotion entering into it. This is one of a thousand errors which they quite consciously commit because they have no idea of the implications.

Although this statement was made in the context of interstate war, it can easily be applied to civil war, especially its protraction and increased violence. More generally, a theory has been offered that provides an emotional context for behavior at the onset of or during civil war. The theory is that of the ephemeral gain that proved to be robust in explaining the rise of extremism and consequent mass violence in a variety of settings (Midlarsky 2005; 2009; 2010; 2011a, b).

**An Emotion-Based Theory**

The ephemeral gain theory posits that anger and violent manifestations are more likely when, after an earlier period of subordination, an identifiable social group, often a nation-state, experiences a major societal gain (e.g., territory, population, authority), which is then followed by a critical loss, or the threat of its imminent occurrence. This theory incorporates Marxian or Davies J-curve like emphases on the future and dovetails with future-oriented game theoretic concerns (Garfinkel and Skaperdas 2000). But past events are crucial to ephemeral gain theory. The shadow of the past and the shadow of the future coincide in the bleak expectation that future political conditions easily could be just as oppressive as those of the past. The threat and fear of reversion to a subordinate condition can lead to the anger that fuels the mass murder of putative enemies, most of them innocents.

This theory has been applied to multiple forms of political extremism, including the rise of Italian, Hungarian, and Romanian fascism, Nazism, radical Islamism, and Soviet, Chinese, and Cambodian communism. Other applications include a rampaging military (Japan, Pakistan, Indonesia) and extreme nationalism in Serbia, Croatia, the Ottoman Empire, and Rwanda. Polish anti-Semitism after World War II and the rise of separatist violence in Sri Lanka are also examined (Midlarsky 2011b).

Instances of political extremism and conflicts of extraordinary length are rare, suggesting that the dynamics do not follow the cost-benefit calculations so common in other conflicts. Extremist behavior like suicide terrorism is a weapon of the weak in asymmetric conflict. Indeed, extremist groups such as the Nazis and Soviet communists

arose in response to defeats that suggested insufficient force capability, which had to be countered by radical means, including mass murder.

Ephemeral gains occur within authority spaces. Authority space is understood as the portion of society over which governmental influence legitimately extends. Territorially-based authority spaces are frequently encountered, as in the distance from a central (capital) city that its authority extends. In itself, territorial contestation has been understood to be an important source of the onset and prolongation of interstate conflict (Toft 2003, 2009; Vasquez 2009; Walter 2003, 2006; Hensel 2012). A major purpose here is to explicate a plausible dynamic for lengthy intrastate territorial conflicts.

**The Salience of Loss**

Important here is the salience of loss, especially after more recent gains. Surprise at a sudden loss has an important consequence in the form of vividness (Loewenstein 1996). Both emotional pain and satisfaction can be multiplied substantially by the experience of surprise (Elster 2004, 160). Or, as George Loewenstein and Jennifer Lerner (2003, 624) suggest, "people respond with greater emotional intensity to outcomes that are surprising – that is, unexpected."

It is necessary to understand the surprising nature of the loss, frequently because of the unrealistic expectations of insurgents. The emotions stemming from an automatic suppression of doubt and neglect of ambiguity, as well as the overweighting of small probabilities, lead to overconfidence in the face of daunting odds.

Finally, according to prospect theory, developed by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, losses are more highly valued than gains. Or put another way, the lost entity is psychologically more valued than an entirely identical entity that is gained (Kahneman and Tversky 1979, 2000). Experimental evidence has consistently demonstrated the asymmetry between losses and gains, even to the extent that, in contrast to gains, losses can generate extreme responses.

**Anger**

Protraction in and of itself suggests futility for the weaker protagonists, typically the insurgents. These lengthy conflicts persist through a succession of gains and losses, each of the later cycles in itself implying hopelessness for the insurgents. Yet the conflict persists despite the negligible probability of an outright insurgent victory. The sacrifice of human life, not to mention the daily hardships that continue in the face of overwhelming odds, needs to be explained. A consequence of the ephemeral gain, anger, has been importantly linked to risk acceptance. And it is this acceptance of the risk of failure that leads directly to a continuation of apparently hopeless (and at times hapless) insurgent activity.

Summarizing the remarkably consistent picture of anger that has emerged from a large number of studies, Paul Litvak et al. (2010, 290) conclude that "anger has been associated with a sense that the self (or someone the self cares about) has been offended or injured, with a sense of certainty or confidence about the angering event and what caused it, and with the belief that another person (as opposed to the situation or the self) was responsible for the event and with the notion that one can still influence the situation or cope with it" (e.g. Lazarus 1991; Ortnoy, Clore, and Collins 1988; Roseman 1984; Scherer 1999, 2001; Weiner, 1980, 1986).

Thus, loss generates anger at the injustice of the loss, especially when that loss occurred after a period of gain—the ascendancy that was preceded by subordination. The gain of that ethnic group has effectively been rendered null and void by the later loss. It is as if the gain had never occurred.

**Justice as Fairness**

Ever since the writings of John Rawls (1971, 1999, 2001), justice as fairness has been increasingly used as a basis for understanding the genesis of conflict or cooperation. At the same time, we may note the obverse. Lack of fairness can be perceived as an injustice. Hence, it is to our advantage to understand the conditions under which fairness

evolves in dyadic relations.

When distinguishing among the consequences of violating the ethics of three fundamental realms, autonomy, community, and divinity, violations of the ethics of autonomy were more clearly associated with anger than were violations of the ethics of the remaining two. Between 74% and 85% of American and Japanese respondents reacted with anger to scenarios invoking the encouragement of a child to hit another, a drunken wife beater, and the theft of a purse from a blind person (Rozin *et al.* 1999, 578).

Justice inheres in the possession of personal rights; their violation stimulates anger and rebellion. Not only is the autonomy of a group violated, but if that violation occurs after an earlier period of ascendance that followed a still earlier subordination (in some cases following an even earlier triumphal period), then the anger can be augmented many times over. Especially if repeated over time in successive ephemeral gains, the strength of that anger can account for the repeated emergence of violent dissidence, even against overwhelming odds. This is especially true if there are successive ephemeral gains occurring over time, as in the case of the Kurds, one of the most protracted insurgencies of the 20$^{th}$ and 21$^{st}$ centuries (McDowall 2004; Yassin 1997).

**Emotion, Anger, and Risk**

There has been considerable research on the emotional sources of risky behavior. X. T. Wang (2006), for example, found that the emotional choice preference was more risk seeking than the rational choice preference in two experimental studies. Focusing now on the specifics of anger and risk, there are several major analyses of this relationship. They typically focus on the differential impacts of fear and anger. Whereas fear leads people to be risk-averse, anger has the opposite consequence; anger yields considerable risk acceptance (Lerner and Keltner 2000, 2001).

These findings mapped onto reactions to the events of 9/11, suggesting that the analysis here has implications not only for civil war protraction and increased violence, but for interstate war onset and national political stasis. Angry respondents expressed greater optimism about the future after 9/11; fearful respondents were more pessimistic (Lerner et al. 2003). After the difficulties of the Cold War, including an American defeat in Vietnam and Soviet initial ascendancy in space exploration, the implosion of the Soviet Union was a clear US victory. This American ascendancy was reinforced by the stellar triumph of US arms in the 1991 Gulf War versus Iraq. But this ascendant period prior to 9/11 proved to be ephemeral. Many Americans were angry; it appeared as if things would never be the same (Packer 2011).

Anger yields perceptions of certainty and control, thereby suggesting a more optimistic future. Fear has the opposite effect (Lerner and Keltner 2001; Lerner et al. 2003; Lerner and Tiedens 2006; Litvak et al. 2010). The optimism that stems from perceptions of control among angry people can lead them to take greater risks than more fearful individuals. Anger stemming from an ephemeral gain can yield risk taking that appears to defy rational conceptions of cost-benefit analysis. The 2003 invasion of Iraq and polarizing politics in the US, protracted virtually beyond endurance, appear to have been consequences in part of that anger.

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