

Are High Levels of Violent Crime Inevitable After a Civil War?

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Civil wars leave a wake of violent destruction that seems to be matched only by the violence of their aftermath. Post-conflict societies have experienced visible and disturbing levels of violent crime, often and baffling, as MacGinty (2006) points, higher than the violence experienced during the conflict (2006: 101). This essay will look at whether high levels of violent crime are an inevitable product of experiences of conflict[1] according to the framework of culture of violence. With examples from Northern Ireland, South Africa, and Latin America, this essay examines how the normative and cultural internalization of violence reproduces violent crime as a tool of conflict resolution, as well as explaining manifestations of gratuitous violence, sectarian hate crime, gang warfare, and sexual violence as products of experiences in civil conflict.

However, the culture of violence framework has its limitations and dangers. This essay will look at a critique that argues that the culture of violence framework falls short by simply explaining violent activity as the direct product of experiences of direct violence. Instead, several authors look to how structural or indirect violence offers a more in depth framework to analyse how civil conflict leads to crime. While some critiques believe violent crime emerges from conflict as a result of both a culture of violence and the indirect structural violence that can accompany conflict and transitions to peace, others argue that high levels of violent crime are not necessarily inevitable products of conflict, and that promoting a discourse of culture of violence risks entrenching assumptions of division and proclivity of violence in post-conflict societies.

Cultures of Violence

Framework and Social Permissiveness

Cultures of violence are rooted firmly in the legacies of conflict where “post-war society has internalized violence-supporting norms and values to such an extent that it remains a remarkably violent society, lasting well into the ‘peace’” (Steenkamp 2005: 253). High levels of violent crime after a conflict can be understood, according to the culture of violence framework, as the products of society’s transformation during the civil war. Primarily, a culture of violence creates a culture of permissiveness that normalizes violence. Cruz (1998) argues that cultures of violence represent “system of norms, values or attitudes, which make possible or even stimulate the use of violence to resolve any conflict or relation with another person”[2] (1998: 92). Violent behavior in post-conflict societies may represent how the use of force by civilians, now deemed illegitimate in a ‘peaceful society’, is accepted as a viable tool to resolve issues at the community level, such as when Hamber (1999) contends that “socially sanctioned use of violence to solve problems has saturated South African life” (1999: 118).

The culture of violence framework contends that conflict generates a social permissiveness towards using violence to resolve everyday issues, as well as lack of confidence by society in the state’s effectiveness in resolving conflict or in punishing vigilante behaviour (Steenkamp 2005: 259). This argument explains extrajudicial violence, such as mob lynching in Guatemala, as a form of vigilante justice considered an acceptable resolution to transgressions at the community level (MacGinty 2006: 110), or how the “rough justice” delivered by the paramilitaries in Northern Ireland continues to be legitimised, tolerated and accepted (Monaghan 2005; Hayes and MacAllister 2005: 206). The

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culture of permissiveness, sense of impunity, and acclimatization to violence is a legacy of war that tolerates and even promotes extrajudicial violence as an acceptable course of conflict resolution.

Gratuitous Crime

The framework for cultures of violence also demonstrates how 'gratuitous' crime emerges as a product of experiences in conflict. A report drawn up by the Centre of the Study of Violence and Reconciliation in South Africa notes that observations of "unnecessary crime" (CSV 2009: 105), or disproportionately violent crime, is on the rise. Monaghan (2005) also points out how the youth in Northern Ireland are engaging in violent crime almost recreationally; the proclivity for violence in criminal activity in post-conflict societies indicates according to Monaghan (2005) the disruption of social fabric that still requires mending. In Argentina, statistics of armed robbery after the end of the authoritarian regime indicated a rise of what is seen as unnecessary violence in proportion to the crime, such as robbery with excessive, unprovoked violence perpetuated against the victim (Kruijt and Kooning 2004: 130). Steenkamp (2005) argues that when norms sustaining the use of violence have been maintained from war into post-conflict society, they foster the "growth of aggressive behaviour" (2005: 264); the victims of violence during conflict are transformed into overly aggressive perpetrators during peace (Hamber and Lewis 1997: 3). This psychological internalization of trauma becomes embedded in individuals in post-conflict society and manifests itself in disproportionately violent criminal actions.

Violence in Deeply Divided Societies

The ethnonational character of civil conflict in deeply divided societies also shapes and undergirds the emergence of violent sectarian or racial crime after the conflict has been settled. MacGinty (2006) indicates that crimes in deeply divided societies are predominantly intergroup and represent the continuation of conflict between ethnic groups even after official settlements (2006: 109). Monaghan (2005) maintains that violence in Northern Ireland is a product of the deep cultural and social divisions created by the armed conflict, while Simpson (1993) argues that the legacy of Apartheid in South Africa has continued to shape racially-motivated crimes and tensions. Civil wars of so-called intractable conflict recreate patterns of sectarian violence in post-conflict societies, which reproduce the construction of members of other groups as legitimate targets for violence (Steenkamp 2005: 262), a process that are not easily or quickly transformed in transitions to peace.

Power Relations and Violence

The construction of other groups as victims is part of the complex attitudes towards power relations that emerge from conflict and which lead to violent crime. In war, the use of force creates "hierarchies of domination and submission" (Nordstrom 2004: 61); the internalization of this norm can shape the construction of identities horizontally across society, such as in the case of constructing other groups as targets for violence, but also embed violence in intragroup hierarchies. In Central America, *pandillas*[3] are a direct organizational product of post-conflict local youth gangs that have inherited military hierarchies (Jutersonke, O, Muggah R., Rodgers, D. 2009: 7). These hierarchies glorify and maintain rituals of violence to establish intragroup social standing (Rodgers 1999). The culture of violence framework explains how conflict results in a set of norms that celebrates violent acts as praiseworthy and determinants of social hierarchy (Steenkamp 2005: 258)[4].

Sexual violence is another form of violent crime that cultural violence frameworks understand through experiences of conflict; violence against women perpetuates and internalizes concepts of dominance and machismo that are remnants of military culture and strategies employed during war to dominate the enemy (Fregoso and Bejarano 2010). Fregoso and Bejarano (2010) confront the burgeoning trend of *feminicidio* in Latin America[5] and argue that the culture of violence that emerged from the patriarchal structures and norms ingrained in military hierarchies during the civil conflicts are reconstructed afterwards to reaffirm notions and social understandings of masculinity (Fregoso and Bejarano 2010: 298). Nordstrom (2004) also argues that the proliferation of sexual violence after war is a legacy of how rape was and continues to be culturally internalized as a tool of power that attacks not only the physical, but "family, dignity, self-worth and future" (2004: 63). Rape also forms part of the normative structures that construct group identity in youth gangs following war; the youth culture of gang rape in South Africa reflects this link of crime to

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conflict (Nordstrom 2004: 63). The culture of violence framework therefore can explain how the norms that embed the use of force as a tool to establish power relations during conflict create normalized attitudes towards intergroup hate crime, sexual violence, or the violent crime of youth gangs in post-conflict societies.

Critique

Structural Violence and Post-Conflict Crime

The culture of violence framework provides a useful understanding of how civil conflict can lead to high levels of violence in post-conflict societies, but it is not totally comprehensive. Structural violence[6] can also explain how violent crime emerges in society by looking at the socioeconomic disparities and marginalization. Kruijt and Kooning (2007) agree that “violence in Latin America is a product of the decades long civil war” (2007: 14); but rather than attribute crime in modern Latin America to the social and cultural legacies of conflict they trace its roots to the structural inequalities that marginalise and impoverish the most underdeveloped sectors of society. Transitions from conflict play a large role in why violent crime emerges after civil war due to the underlying issues of structural inequalities. The demobilization of former combatants who have survived through threat and violence places them in an environment “where those skills are neither rewarded nor replaced” (Gamba 2003: 180). A structural argument for how these demobilized actors affect a rise in crime focuses not on their predilection for violence cultivated from social experiences in conflict, but in the failure of a peace process that does not properly address their reintegration into peaceful society.

Nordstrom (2004) maintains that it is the most marginalized in society who are excluded from the predominantly neoliberal processes of legitimate transition and therefore continue to operate in illegitimate or ‘shadow’ networks. She points out that these sectors of society have their lives integrated with the informal economic systems of conflict and which peace processes delegitimize but do not remove (2004: 149). The presence of peacebuilders also contributes to the emergence of crime after conflict: Smith and Miller-de la Cuesta (2011) look at the role of peacebuilders in human trafficking networks in Kosovo. High levels of violent crime are still associated with conflict and post-conflict societies but are not necessarily the legacy of cultural experiences of direct violence. Instead, the structural economic and political policies which marginalise disaffected actors (Nordstrom 2004: 149) and peace processes that do not address or potentially exacerbate structural inequalities (MacGinty and Richmond 2007) have as much of a role in shaping the emerging levels of crime as the experience of the civil war itself.

Waldmann (2007), when examining the culture of violence developing from the Colombian armed conflict, argues that violence in Colombia cannot be explained “without taking into account cultural factors that are in turn dependent on other explanatory factors, including economic ones” (2007: 593). Manifestations of violent crime are rooted in cultures of violence that are in turn developed by conflict and policies of exclusion and socio-economic marginalisation into what MacGinty terms a “dangerous nexus” (2006: 116). Therefore violent crime arises from conflict due to social experiences of direct violence as well as the structural effects of indirect violence.

Crime without conflict

However, drawing this direct link between conflict and high levels of violent crime is not without its issues. Hate crimes, sexual violence, and the rise of violent youth gangs do not exist solely within post-conflict societies. In Central America, gang violence is rising not only in El Salvador and Guatemala, but also in Honduras, which does not have a recent history of internal armed conflict (World Bank 2011). Olivera (2006) considers feminicidio in Mexico a product of neoliberal policies and not the legacy of civil conflict. The World Bank has identified drug trafficking and organized crime as the “main single factor behind rising violence levels in [Latin America]” (World Bank 2011); although organized crime networks do play a part in civil wars (Nordstrom 2003), they are transnational institutions and affect more than the states that have just emerged from civil conflict. Therefore caution should be applied by when looking at how conflict leads to violent crime; the factors that shape violent crime in countries without a history of civil conflict may be present in post-conflict societies, and potentially too much credit can be given to the role of conflict in the emergence of crime.

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Violent Orientalism

Finally, a critique is raised specific to the framework of cultures of violence in predicting the inevitability of violent crime in post-conflict society. In analysing violent crime in Cambodia, Springer (2009) argues that the framework of culture of violence not only lacks explanatory power in terms of failing to address structural violence, but it presents a discourse of 'violent orientalism'[7] that obscures the effects of neoliberal practices on war-torn societies (2009: 306). MacGinty also warns of the dangers of over-homogenizing post-conflict societies as lawless and criminal (2006: 107), which reduces manifestations of crime as the consequential products of civil conflict. The framework of culture of violence is useful in looking at discourses of hatred and division, but it is itself a constructive discourse; Nordstrom (2004) indicates through an interview with a *dezlocado*[8] in Mozambique, that it is important to "fight the idea the war-makers devise that hate and vengeance and ethnicity and division matter" (2004: 179). Concluding that sectarian and ethnic crime is an inevitable product of civil conflict perpetuates its own argument by continuing to construct identities as intractably opposed. This discourse of violence and division is also prolific in the modern media; Monaghan (2005) accuses the media in Northern Ireland of being 'war pornographers', complicit in the politics of division that create and reproduce sectarian division and hate crime. Violence in post-conflict societies arises from a multiplicity of factors relating to both social attitudes and socioeconomic inequalities and by reducing it to notions of cultural norms of division and hatred, scholars run the risk of perpetuating myths of intrinsic violent attitudes rather than understanding all elements of violent crime that emerges.

Concluding Remarks

The culture of violence framework attempts to understand violent crime as the product of experiences of conflict. It illustrates how the use of violence after a civil war may become normalized as a tool for conflict resolution after war despite its new 'illegitimacy' in post-conflict space. The psychological internalization of trauma experienced during conflict can lead to acts of gratuitous violence, while legacies of ethnic, sectarian, or racial division may continue to promote hate crime and violence against other groups. The framework of culture of violence also argues that conflict shapes social attitudes towards power relations after conflict that embed the use of force in constructing identity and establishing dominance. Hate crime, sexual violence, and youth gang violence in post-conflict societies can be considered the manifestations of these attitudes.

Structural violence also provides a lens through which the high levels of violent crime in post-conflict society can be understood. Authors such as Galtung (1976) and Kruijt and Kooning (2007) argue that structural inequalities perpetuate an indirect violence on the marginalised by society. The indirect violence inherent in post-conflict transitions and peace processes victimizes the marginalized in society and forces them into illegitimate spaces; manifestations of violent crime are a direct result of this exclusion and lack of available resources. Issues with successfully reintegrating demobilized combatants into the post-conflict economy, or transforming the peace processes that continue to marginalize the poorest sectors have significant ramifications for the stability of post-conflict society and the emergence of crime.

However, violent crime is not only limited to post-conflict societies, nor is its presence in post-conflict societies a necessary product of experiences of civil conflict. The high levels of crime generally attributed to post-conflict societies can be found in states that have not suffered the same internal division, as exemplified by states in Central America. An issue also arises in constructing violent crime as an inevitable product of social conditioning in conflict that reduces the complexity of violent crime through attitudes of 'violent orientalism'. Discourses of division and the 'inevitability' of violent behaviour in post-conflict societies do not only fail to accurately explain the link between conflict and violent crime but also continue to perpetuate intergroup tensions. Instead, the emergence of violent crime after war should be considered as the product of a multiplicity of sources associated with conflict but also with larger structural dynamics and issues. Conflict may shape the conditions and manifestations of crime, but it is not its sole determinant.

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Footnotes

[1] Civil war, conflict, and civil conflict will all be used interchangeably: all examples used are drawn from intrastate conflict rather than interstate. Examples from Latin America offer a wider variety of interpretations of intrastate conflict, as examples drawn from Argentina and Brazil represent post-authoritarian regimes rather than official 'civil wars', but which still suffered from internally divisive violent conflict (Kruijt and Kooning 2007: 13).

[2] As translated by Moser, C and Winton, A. "Violence in the Central American region: towards an integrated framework for violence reduction". *Working paper 171* (London: Overseas Development Institute). 2002.

[3] Youth gangs in Nicaragua and Guatemala

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[4] Steenkamp also notes how this use of violence has become ingrained in power relations and survival in the rural culture of South African farmers following the policies of Apartheid (Steenkamp 2005: 259).

[5] The targeted murder of women for the sake of being women

[6] Galtung (1976), in his seminal work on structural violence, highlighted how poverty, hunger, and disease could be attributed to an overarching framework that inflicted indirect violence against the poor and marginalized of society.

[7] Orientalism refers to the work by Edward Said (1978) in explaining cultural attitudes and misperceptions by the West on the values and traditions of the East.

[8] Person displaced by the civil war in Mozambique

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