

Violence as a tool for some and death for others

A look at instrumentalism in the debate on violent conflicts

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Conflicting Theories: Applying Theoretical Approaches of Conflicts

Word count: **2397**

Sunday 30 October 2022

In order to use violence to an end, people need to be mobilized to fight, if nobody fights, how can there be a? A theme in the research on why people mobilize to fight that rears its head in different debates on violent conflicts is that of instrumentalism. Yet, the exact definition of instrumentalism remains somewhat unclear and ambiguous. The most common case where instrumentalism is visible is in the debate on ethnic identities (Demmers, 2017; Fearon & Laitin, 2000; Oberschall, 2000), where the construction of identity is seen as a “*political function of ethnic boundaries*” (Demmers, 2017, p. 30). Because the construction in this case is often argued to be done by the elite (which is why the theory is sometimes also called elite theory), a critique is that it places *agency* only with this elite, and the masses remain merely trapped in the structure (Demmers, 2017, p. 31).

Instrumentalism is however not merely used in the context of ethnic identities. Debates ideological reasoning for joining groups (such as religion) argue that leaders of group merely instrumentalize an ideology for gaining followers, and fighters. (Sanín & Wood, 2014).

Yet another way that instrumentalism rears its head is by equating instrumentalism with the rational choice theory (Hempel, 2004; Keen, 2012). Here not only the elite, but every actor is seen to *instrumentalise* the situation (of a conflict) and attempt to create a favourable position for him or her. This interpretation slightly different from the first two definitions since in rational choice theory everyone, both the masses and the elites are deemed have all the *agency* to act as rational utility maximisers.

Furthermore, the value of this theory is also heavily debated. Fearon and Laiton (2000) argue in their paper on the social construction of Ethnic identity that instrumentalism has been able to construct peoples identity, and had led to conflict. They see it as one important way to assess the construction of (antagonistic) identities. In the debate on ideology, Sanín and Wood (2014) however argue against the usefulness of instrumentalism as a theory to explain ideological motives of a group. In this light, many more examples can be found where either the usefulness of this theory is underlined or played down. Take the greed vs grievances debate for example.

Of inspection in this essay is therefore the question **How can instrumentalist theories contribute to the understanding of violent conflict?** Here I will argue that instrumentalism theories focus too much on the *agency* of the individual, particular of the elite, and instead I argue the importance of structure and discourse is too much left out. To structure my argument, I will firstly outline what I mean with instrumentalism and where and how its ontological and epistemological roots are situated. Then I will continue and zoom in on three different current debates surrounding violent conflicts and assess the role, usefulness, and alternatives to instrumentalist theories. Finally, I will conclude with some final remarks and a personal reflection on the debate of violent theories.

Instrumentalist thought

What the aforementioned different interpretations of instrumentalism have in common is an agreement on the rationality of (some) actors. In this sense instrumentalism can indeed be placed in the corner of the *rational choice theorists*. The point where the interpretations differ is *who* is seen to be rational, and *who* is seen to be less rational, and more “trapped” in the structure. Political elites are in general always attributed with agency and rationality. Dommers (2017) in her book for example highlights the role elites play in the creation of violence for political gain. The idea is that for these elites, violence will lead to a loyal group of supporters, that have nowhere else to turn to and will thus strengthen the position of the political leader (*idem*). Oberschall (2000) highlights this very clearly in the case of Yugoslavia, where a Serbian political leader in many ways was able to bring about violence for his own political gain. The Masses on the other hand are more often pointed to as having less agency. Kalyvas (2003) however argues that many local actors can and do also instrumentalize an ongoing conflict to their advantage. Kalyvas argues that on a micro level many local actors use an ongoing conflict to solve local disputes. Even when these disputes might have very little or nothing to do with the so-called master cleavage. (*idem*)

Whether it is just the elites, or everybody, the theory assumes that the people act in fully rational manner. As a utility maximiser (*homo economicus*) (Demmers, 2017, p. 116). These ideas align well with an individualist world view where actors are seen as “*self-contained unites and the source of action*” (Demmers, 2017, p. 18). Instrumentalism can in this sense be seen as a positivist view: where the look is from the *outside* and we attempt to grasp some of the logic that we can see. However, are there other ways instrumentalism can be conceived? Structuralist views would critique the level of *agency* attributed to the theory. They, including myself, argue that agency is not the true “*source of action*”, and that rationality and agency alone cannot account for all actions taken. Instead, the focus of instrumentalism must shift more towards a look at the *structure* of the social where the search is for how institutions, discourses and the roles of the individuals *influence* the room for agency and rationality.

Demmers in her book (2017) outlines some variations of rational choice theory that are of interest here. Firstly, she talks of a *Homo sociologicus*, that essentially sees individuals as a “*puppets on a string*” (Demmers, 2017, p. 116), and highlights that actors are “*obedient rule followers*” (Demmers, 2017, p. 115). These rules are then set by institutions, and actors merely act in accordance with these rules. In this sense therefore, instrumentalists would research how a certain role decides the actions an individual can reasonably decide to employ. A second and more nuanced view between the *homo economicus* and the *homo sociologicus* is the one of *Homo politicus*. This variant is one where agency is attributed to individuals, they are not mere a puppet on a string, but instead they have “*room for manoeuvre*” (Demmers, 2017, p. 116). An individual is both “*enabled and constrained by institutional roles and normative expectations*” (Demmers, 2017, p. 116). Here an individual can indeed have some agency to employ instrumentalist ideas, but is limited in the methods, and reach these methods can have by the constraints the role brings. It is precisely this conception of the self that instrumentalist should focus on.

How can this practically be reconceived? The below section outlines three different debates where I would like to zoom in on three debates, and assess the role, usefulness, and alternatives of instrumentalism.

The tools of the trade

Firstly, I would like to touch on the debate related to social mobilization and the economic and political agendas. In this debate a dichotomy is made between greed and grievances as a driver for mobilization. The greed arguments advance the idea that all actors are indeed rational and will go to war if the perceived benefits outweigh the downsides. In this sense war is simply “*economics by other means*” (Sanín & Wood, 2014, p. 215). Keen (2012) and many other scholars (e.g. Cramer, 2002) highlight many flaws in the writings of Collier and others that advance the greed thesis. The greed theory essentially is a plea for the *homo economicus* and argues that actors will behave rationally and take certain positions if the perceived benefits out way the drawbacks.

The greed thesis very much places the analyses on the individual, and his or her rational motives. In this level, the idea is that groups are purely instrumentalised by individuals (Langer & Stewart, 2014). Cramer (2002) outlines a way more structuralist way this level of analyses could be employed by instrumentalist theories. He highlights that an Angolan rebel leader was “*shaped and constrained by the organization of political power and economic production*” (Cramer, 2002, p. 1857). Cramer here therefore still stipulates the value of economic motives but moves beyond the simple notion of greed by arguing for the *homo politicus* instead of the *homo economicus*.

Yet, at the level of the group, Langer and Stewart’s (2014) paper on Horizontal Inequalities highlight that perceived inequalities *between* groups are important for the explanation of conflict. They still argue however that the level of the individual is obsolete. Instead, actions by “greedy individuals” can in turn influence the dynamics of the group. In this sense therefore instrumentalist theories could zoom in on group dynamics. What is the role, agency, and rationality of the “greedy individual” (*idem*) in shaping and (re-)constructing inequality? In the same vein Langer and Stewart (2014) highlight the importance of the *perception*. This because “*people act as a result of perceptions rather than some possibly unknown facts*” (Langer & Stewart, 2014, p. 105). They highlight some discursive factors like government policies and the influence those had on the perception. Instrumentalists could here therefore focus on the way perceptions are shaped through for example discursive factors and how these again influence the agency of the greedy individual.

Secondly, people can be mobilized by antagonistic Ethnic identities. This debate on ethnic identities is characterised by how these identities have come to be. Primordialists argue that ethnic identities are essentially a *given* and not easily altered (Huntington, 1993). And constructivists on the other hand, argue that ethnic identities are *socially constructed* (Fearon & Laitin, 2000).

Fearon and Laiton (2000) talk about instrumentalism by engaging with the elite theory which essentially “*induce the masses*” (*idem*, p. 874) by construction antagonistic identities. They also state that in the books they reviewed elite theory was the “*dominant or most common narrative*” (*idem*, p. 846). In this sense therefore, instrumentalist theories hold much ground in the construction of ethnic identities. This puts these ideas in direct opposition to primordialism. Here “*ethnic ‘groupness’ is the result or violence, not the cause*” (Demmers, 2017, p. 31). This theory place emphasis on the elites and their ability to direct and influence the construction through rationality: *homo economicus*.

Although “the power of the predatory elites is widely recognized” (Demmers, 2017, p. 32) some alternative conceptualizations of instrumentalism exist. Circumstantialism is an example of hereof. This idea is an attempt to incorporate more structure into the explanation. In this theory the focus is on the circumstances of roles: how are these individuals put in such roles, and how does this encourage their actions (Hempel, 2004).

Yet Another approach focusses more on the *meaningfulness* of ethnic identities and highlight that there is persistence and emotional power to the attachment of ethnic identities (Demmers, 2017, p. 32). This Ethno-symbolic approach flips the elite duping the masses and instead focuses on how the masses, through myths, can create antagonistic ethnic identities (idem). This theory again places much more structure, through things like discourse and myth making into the mix.

Third and finally, I would like to focus on the usages of discourses and the framing of narratives. The first two debates stipulate the importance of discourses, and this is seems therefore a prime areas for a more nuanced version of instrumentalist theory to flourish.

The importance of discourse and narratives in shaping and construction violence are important. Oberschall (2000), Corstange & York (2018) but also other like Brown (1983) and Demmers (2017) all highlight the importance of narratives (and counter-narratives) in shaping the violence in conflicts. Autesserre (2012) also points out that narratives can have impact on humanitarian aid decisions. These decisions in turn, she argues shape the conflict, and sometimes for the worse. Kalyvas (2003) also highlights that the dominant narratives need not always be representative of the “on-the-ground” situation.

Discourses and narratives are important indeed. Instrumentalist theory would attempt to explain how these discourses are created for political ends. Oberschall (2000) and also Corstange & York (2018) both allude to the fact that elites would rationally do this to “rally supporters or else peel them away from the opponents” (Corstange & York, 2018, p. 454). In this sense such actors could be seen as “the great manipulators” (Oberschall, 2000, p. 991).

Alternative approaches to the analysis of narratives that move away from seeing these elites as rational manipulators can come by looking at structure and agency as complementing ideas (Demmers, 2017; Giddens, 1984). Demmers, through Giddens, argues that structure and agency both influence and reinforce each other making it a causal nexus of agency, structure, discourses, and social practices, as highlighted in the image below.

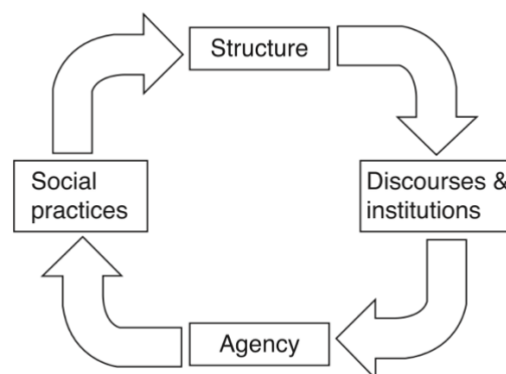


Figure 1. Causal nexus of structure and agency. From: Demmers, 2017, p. 130

In this sense, discursive analyses are very well placed for a reconceived version of instrumentalism where indeed agency can still be studied, but in the right context. Discourses,

structure, and the social practices will give much more detail in the explanation of agency and why and how some have more “*power to define*” (Demmers, 2017, p. 131) than others. These approach flips the instrumentalist theory from a study from *outside* to a study from *within*. It furthermore allows for understanding where certain actions might originate from yet still allows for room to look at instrumentalist ideas, making these approaches of research much better suited for the *homo politicus*.

Conclusion

All three debates highlight different ways in which instrumentalist theories rise to the surface to attempt to explain different debates on violent conflict. It is indeed a much-used tool to study violence. It highlights interests that certain groups of people have, and points to power structures of different groups in how it enables them to act certain ways.

This essay finds that many different iterations of instrumentalism exist, but that they broadly all align with rational choice theory. I argue that the future of instrumentalism should focus on the *constraints* of the structure and the situational *circumstances* of the situation to better understand how the *role* of the individual and the group allows for instrumentalization of aspect like ethnic identity and narratives. Role theory, discourse/narrative analyses but also other research methods are applicable here. Going beyond simple structure vs agency questions, and rather seeing them as complementing notions will prove helpful here. Instrumentalism should let go of the *homo economicus*, and instead focus more on the *homo politicus*.

From a personal point of view, I have found the instrumentalist approach rather intriguing, and from the literature on ethnic identities also rather convincing. However, as I started to research more, I have found myself changing my opinion and have become rather sceptical of the current instrumentalist approach. I do however, as I argue, not fully dismiss instrumentalism, but rather believe that bringing structure-based questions and research into the front will allow for more meaningful research.

Given this I would broadly still position myself in the **Constructivism** section of the Hollis matrix, but I have perhaps ever so slightly moved to the positivist side. This is also where I believe a discursive approach such as the one proposed by Jabri (1996) and the agency-structure nexus as outline by Giddens to be highly helpful. This would lead me to place myself more on the **understanding** end rather than the explaining end.

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