

Discussion Questions and Comments

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28th April 2021

Abstract

For each class session, students are required to prepare a brief list of discussion questions and comments (3-5 in number); these should be based on the readings. Your questions/comments should reflect a critical assessment of those readings. What are their strong and weak points? Their methodological, empirical contributions? How do they relate to or build upon other readings or discussions?

Session I

- I would like to start the course with a discussion about *dynamics*. This is fuzzy term, that needs clarification given its place in the course title.
- Blattman & Miguel (2010) does a great job of summarizing the state of the field, albeit from a very economics centered perspective. However, the article is over 10 years old. What has changed since its publication? Are we able to answer any of the questions they raise?
- Something that I have not seen yet in my reading of principal-agent/rational choice models of the collective action problem in armed groups is formal modelling of the fact that they are armed. The possession of deadly weapon means that any actor can at any time enforce demands on other actors or even the principle, as long as he catches the other party off guard. This works in government troops too, but unless the actor committing treason is able too cease control of a majority or so of the military he will need to hide from the remaining forces.¹ Rebels on the other hand are all ready hiding from government forces, hiding from other rebels would be less of an addition. Defections and treason should be more common amongst rebel groups.

Session II

- How do the other course participants use/define ‘mechanisms’? Are there differences between quals and quants? Differences between scholarly backgrounds?
- Pragmatism in pursuit of mechanisms. How do we, from a methodological/philosophy of science perspective, avoid becoming quantum

¹Government defectors/traitors at the highest levels also play to the international community. Motivation will therefor vary with expectations of international condemnation or support, depending primarily of the incumbent regimes’ international standing.

physicists?

- What Johnson (2006) seems not to be fully aware of is that positivists are acutely aware of the empiricist problem of causation (the fact that causation itself cannot be observed). That is precisely why science (including social science) needs rigorous methods; to get as close to observing it as possible. A lot of Johnson (2006)'s hesitation comes from the ontological differences between KKV and himself (the old Plato/Aristotle dichotomy), something he does not address directly outside of criticising the emphasis placed on empirics. I suspect a lot of the criticism of positivism also stems from reading it as 'minimum requirements' instead of a (ultimately unachievable) goal to strive towards.

Session III

- I find that Epstein (2002)'s assumption that the legitimacy of the regime is exogenous to the grievances of its population is a bit too unrealistic even for an admittedly simple model.
- What is the criteria of truth for agent based computation? What makes one better than the other? Based on the three articles in the curriculum it seems to be 'eyeballed' resemblance to the real world, rather than systematic comparison.
- Do such models still have a place in social science, given that they examine causation of the (at least yet) unobservable? Or, as in the case of Bhavnani & Miodownik (2008), a subject that does not lend itself to large-N approaches.

Session IV

- Can we be sure that the number of refugees in Salehyan & Gleditsch (2006) is not just a visible proxy for the amount of movement across a border from a country in conflict? For example, when a rebel group in eastern DRC steps up its activities, this is likely to simultaneously drive refugees into neighboring countries and provoke a government response that could push them (or parts of the group) across the border as well. As this scenario unfolds in eastern DRC most of both movements will likely be into DRC's neighbors to the East.
- Why do Salehyan & Gleditsch (2006) use the natural logarithm of refugees? If not a linear relationship would it not an escalating function? Why is there no discussion of this even?
- Why do Salehyan & Gleditsch (2006) define neighbors as borders falling within 100 kilometers or less (or 950km or less)? Why not just use *neighboring countries*?

References

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