Discussion Questions and Comments

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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

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[1]Government 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 its 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*?

Session VI

- What happens to child soldiers inside rebel organizations as they grow up to be adults?

- Western observers, through our rose tinted vision, tend to assume child soldiers are abducted. The assumption being that no child would take up arms in a rebel organization voluntarily. I believe that the relative "excess" attention that child soldiers has received is due to the this assumption that causes child soldiers to occupy a more "mental real estate" due to their dual role as victims and perpetrators. A victim of strategic sexual violence on part of a rebel group, unspeakably horrible as it is, is still "just" a victim. "Just" in the sense that he/she only

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occupies that *one* mental category and not two. He/she is more easily mentally compartmentalized, and forgotten. Not forgetting is painful and leaves us with three options: bare this pain, do something about the problem, or forget about it. The issue of child soldiers thus receives more attention because it is more difficult to mentally compartmentalize, and by extension, to forget (although probably equally difficult to bare, as both issues are morally abhorrent).

A test of this hypothesis could be identifying other issues that are likewise difficult to compartmentalized, and see if these also receive disproportionate attention.

- How would Manekin (2017)'s theory apply to the classic case of widespread shirking, draft-dodging and dissertations of the Vietnam war?

Session VII

- Could the "surprising" ratio between irregular and conventional warfare in civil wars in Kalyvas & Balcells (2010) be due to the somewhat ambiguous and *low* threshold of "both incumbents and insurgents used heavy weaponry (artillery and armor)" to define conventional warfare? How much artillery and armor need to be used?

- Could it be because of the condition of only sampling the first year of conflict?

- I appreciate the pun in naming the prize-variable π (Findley & Rudloff 2012).

- This could just be me not understanding computational agent based models, but as far as I can tell Findley & Rudloff (2012)'s model assumes that fragmentation happens when actors loose a large portion of battles. In effect this means that they fragment when they are weak

in terms of capabilities because of how battles are defined to shape outcomes in capabilities, and how the outcome of battles is defined as a comparison between relative capabilities (before the battle) and a random component. With such a specification, how can they claim that the results that conflict durations decrease with fragmentation is "counter intuitive"? Their model is literally specified so that actors fragment almost exclusively when they are close to loosing. This specification does not conform with the literature they cite on fragmentation (which emphasises spoilers). And its only justification is an anecdotal reference to the Liberian civil war.

Session IIIV

- Kalyvas (2008) claims that: "The theoretical viability of constructivism, at least in the field of civil war studies, requires a multidirectional empirical prediction (i.e., toward both hardening and softening of ethnic identities)." Why should that be so? Unless we empirically observe multidirectional identity changes, which, until this article at least, does not seem to have been found.

- Is the appropriate category to examine "crossing", as Kalyvas (2008) does, or is it more appropriate to look at something closer to winning the middle ground? I.e. the two sides in the conflict (be they ethnic or ideological in nature) competing for the allegiance of those who have not yet decisively chosen sides (or had their side chosen for them).

- Although it is well outside my field, I am certain that there is substantial literature within social psychology that would be highly relevant for Checkel (2017). Perhaps starting from the literature around Skinners famous Harvard prison experiment and work around 'us and them' dynamics.

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