# Challenges to Civil War Research

## Introduction to the Special Issue on Civil War and Conflicts

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From 1945 to 1999, there were roughly 130 civil wars that each killed at least 1,000 people.[1] As of 2009, there are still many ongoing civil conflicts, e.g. in Sudan, Pakistan and Iraq. Civil wars and conflicts have been the subject of much research from many different perspectives. Historians, anthropologists, economists, political scientists, lawyers and sociologists have all studied them. It is, however, rare that these researchers cooperate and exchange ideas. For that reason, the Department of Border Region Studies organized a multidisciplinary conference entitled, 'The Roots of Civil Wars and Conflicts and Their Influence on the Transformations of State and Civil Society Institutions' held at Alsion, University of Southern Denmark, Sonderborg.

Thus, this Special Issue presents papers related to the topic of civil wars approached by scholars from different fields. The first article 'Disaggregated Perspectives on Civil War and Ethnic Conflict: Prospects of an Emerging Research Agenda', written by Tim Dertwinkel, presents an economic/political science approach to the study of civil war. The second article is Kenneth Øhlenschlæger Buhl's 'Legalization of Civil Wars: The Legal Institutionalization of Non-International Armed Conflicts', which presents a legal understanding of civil war. These two articles relate to the concept of civil war as well as its implications for their respective fields. The third article is Steen Bo Frandsen's 'The Breakup of a Composite State and the Construction of a National Conflict: Denmark and the Duchies in the 19th Century', which brings in a

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[1] J. Fearon and D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War", 97 *American Political Science Review* (2003), 75-90.

historical perspective. This article is highly empirical as Frandsen focuses on a particular location. 'A Simple Tool needed to a Complex Situation: A Development Worker's Perspective on the use of Vocational Training to Augment the Peace Process in Sudan' rounds of this special issue presenting a practitioner's perspective.

Certain constraints have made it necessary to split this Special Issue in two. The majority of papers are included here, but one of the next issues of the *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe* will contain a special section devoted to the last three papers on this topic. These are a sociological and two anthropological papers: the first is entitled 'Wars, Civil Wars and State-formation in the Twentieth Century', by Lars Bo Kaspersen; and the second is Tom Trier's examination of 'Inter-Ethnic Relations in Abkhazia'; and the third is Christian Kordt Højbjerg's 'Root Causes: The Inversion of Causes and Consequences in Civil War'.

Before introducing the papers in this issue, some common themes and issues are presented below. Even though the papers are drawn from different academic disciplines, they often face the same difficulties. However, the ways in which these are addressed may differ and a theme can be approached from many angles.

Civil wars are generally understood as conflicts located internally within a state's territory. However, as this collection of articles illustrates, there are significant difficulties involved in defining the concept of civil war, as well as in determining the differences between war, civil war and civil conflict. This is true both within each field of research and in the interdisciplinary research field as a whole. As Tim Dertwinkel states in the context of political economy, there is: "[...] a lack of theoretical clarity on the very concept of civil war itself and on the theoretical problem how to disentangle civil war from other forms of political violence such as military coups or large scale ethnic riots" (cf. Dertwinkel). Discrepancies between the disciplines also illustrate a lack of conceptual clarity; the legal definition of a civil war is "a non-international armed conflict" (cf. Buhl) in anthropology, civil war is "a complex concept", the definition of which depends on the context in which war occurs (cf. Højbjerg); and, in military terms, "there are no civil wars only wars" (cf. Kaspersen). This lack of conceptual clarity is not a problem in itself. However, before it is possible to engage in interdisciplinary exchange on the causes and societal consequences of civil wars and conflicts, it is first necessary to establish a degree of clarity over how each discipline refers to the respective terms. Hence, to construct a viable foundation for interdisciplinary work, we need to ask ourselves whether civil war should remain a contested concept or whether we should streamline our concepts.

Moreover, conceptual clarity is also important because it has consequences for how we designate the causes of war. Different definitions of civil war and conflict illuminate very different underlying motives, for example struggles over autonomy or the economic motives of private agents, and thus have consequences for how we identify driving factors and responsible agents. Steen Bo Frandsen's article on the causes of the 1848 and 1864 wars in Schleswig illustrates how important definitions are for our understanding of the occurrence of, and motivation behind, warfare. Frandsen argues that the consensus in Danish historical research about the Schleswig wars has hindered understanding of the importance of state-constellations and power struggles in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. Consequently, the wars are still understood as *inter*-state wars when it might be more appropriate to understand them as *intra*-state wars.

As mentioned above, civil wars are usually considered to be intra-state phenomena. However, as Kenneth Ø. Buhl states in his article: "Several non-international armed conflicts have transnational elements such as a state supporting a non-state within another state, or a non-state actor fighting a state from the territory of another state, or an international intervention force that uses armed force against a non-state actor within the territory of a state" (cf. Buhl). Buhl's statement, taken together with Sambanis', that "two thirds of all civil conflicts can be considered ethnic conflicts"[2], highlights how difficult it is to maintain a conception of civil wars as phenomena located within state boundaries, as ethnic groups are often scattered across state boundaries. Christian Kordt Højbjerg's article on conflicts in the West African borderlands of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone illustrates this empirically, as does Tom Trier's article on Abkhazia, which functions as a de facto state but has only recognized to date by only a very small number of states.

This relates to an ongoing discussion in the social sciences as to whether or not we can begin referring to civil wars and conflicts as 'new wars'. New wars represent a type of warfare which is more limited in scale than state wars, often crosses state borders, and is supposedly more prevalent today than wars between states.[3] The discussion is supported by quantitative arguments that the number of intra-state and border crossing conflicts have increased after the end of the Cold War.[4] Moreover, the discussion repeats qualitative

[2] N. Sambanis, "Do Ethnic and Nonethnic Civil Wars Have the Same Causes? A Theoretical and Empirical Inquiry (Part 1)", 45 *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (2001), 259-282.

[3] P. Hirst, *War and Power in the Twenty-first Century* (Polity Press: Cambridge, 2001); R.B. Ferguson (ed.), *The State, Identity and Violence: Political Disintegration in the Post-Cold War World* (Routledge: London, 2003); M. Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organised Violence in a Global Era* (Polity Press: Cambridge, 2004); P. Richards (ed.), *No Peace No War: An Anthropology of Contemporary Conflict* (Ohio University Press: Athens, OH, 2005).

[4] Cf. for instance Richards, *No Peace No War*, above note 3.

arguments about the technological developments of warfare and the possibilities these open up.[5] One question is whether there are any recognizable paradigmatic changes in the causes, consequences and practice of warfare, which make it conceptually justifiable to distinguish between new and old wars. However, even if we do not agree that civil wars have replaced state wars, the articles still illustrate that a redefinition of our concept of civil wars and conflicts is necessary to meet contemporary practical and empirical challenges. Moreover, we have to ask substantial questions about the consequences for state and civil society institutions operating in conflict zones. For instance, it is important to ask whether an increase in civil wars and conflicts mirrors alterations in the strength of states *vis-à-vis* populations and whether our conceptions of conflicts need to be altered accordingly.

The discussion of different conceptions of civil wars and conflicts, including notably whether or not we can legitimately use the term 'new wars', is not only an issue with and methodological importance but, as Buhl demonstrated in his article, it is important to have "internationally recognized conceptions of civil wars" and legal definitions of armed conflict for the international community to develop measures to deal with them at a practical level. If there are no recognized conceptions, it remains a matter of multilateral state negotiation to determine whether it is legitimate for the international community to interfere in a specific conflict. Obviously, this has implications for actors present in a war zone, not least of all civilians. It is thus also important that the international community agrees on whether or not we can refer to civil wars as twenty first-century 'new wars' that warrant recognition and new responses from the international community. This includes developing policy advice based on concepts that are developed in response to current events, and thus practically applicable, rather than sticking to an outdated vocabulary that might not accurately address the real dynamics of warfare.

This collection of articles also illustrates how important it is to consider the underlying aims of a particular analysis, not least because a discussion of civil wars is more than an academic exercise. For example, is the aim to answer research questions of a general nature, such as those relating to the causes of civil war, or simply the question 'what is war'? Is it to analyse the specificity of conflict in one particular area, either with no intention of making generalized results or with the aim of emphasizing their specificity as generalized results? Is it to interfere in conflicts to prevent them from occurring? And what are the consequences of different aims? It seems as if generalizations correspond better to the practical end of international legal institutions; if we can agree on general conceptions of civil wars and conflicts, and their causes, we will be better equipped to deal with them at the international level. However, as Dertwinkel and Højbjerg argue, it is also important to investigate conflicts at the micro level for, even when such analyses make it difficult to

[5] M. Hardt and A. Negri, *Multitude* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 2004); P. Hirst, *War and Power*, above note 3.

discover general root causes of civil wars, they might nevertheless reveal mechanisms that will be important in solving a specific conflict.

Moreover, it is important to raise the question of the active role played by the international community in the construction of conflicts, for it seems that in some cases there comes a point at which the community no longer prevents conflict but rather helps to generate them. Højbjerg's example of conflict resolution among the Loma and Mandingo raises this issue in a context where conflict seems to be sustained by so-called 'peacekeeping activities'. That which may have been recognized as causing the conflicts is forgotten and is replaced by religious and historical identity work, which in turn generates the potential for more enduring conflict. In other words we need to be aware that consensus in the international community, and the associated legal norms, also influence conflicts, and not always in a constructive way.

Finally, we want to mention a few of the many important new perspectives developed for the interdisciplinary work and the practical assessment of civil wars of this Special Issue. First and foremost, it is important to begin *integrating micro and macro level analyses* when conceptualizing civil wars. As Dertwinkel suggests, it would be beneficial for political economy to rid itself of the state perspective, which has black-boxed the discipline's analyses of civil war. Economic and political factors at the micro level need to be integrated into the analysis, thereby uniting the micro level with analysis undertaken at the macro level. Buhl's description of legal conceptions of armed conflict also indicates that the international community is unproductively caught in the very same state-centred bias. Højbjerg argues in a similar vein when he engages with the discussion of new wars through an anthropological study of local conflict. More specifically, Højbjerg asks what this close-up perspective can contribute to a discussion of new wars that deals primarily with changes at the technological, inter-state and global level.

This attempt to better integrate the micro and macro perspectives also makes it important to engage more explicitly with the question of *agency*. This is true at many different levels. Foremost, and as suggested by Kristian S. Gleditsch during the conference[6], agency should be regarded as an explanatory factor in the onset of civil war. This might include the motivations of different ethnic groups or the private motives of individual persons to enter an armed conflict. If we begin using the question of agency to understand civil war and its occurrence, we also notice the importance of intention and motivation in understanding how conflicts evolve over time, not least because civil wars become integral to how actors construct identity and historical narrative. As Højbjerg illustrates, the self-perception of the actors involved also influences conflict dynamics over time. Finally, when dealing with peacekeeping, agency might be one of the most important

[6] See also, L. Cedergren and K. S. Gleditsch, "Introduction to Special Issue on 'Disaggregating Civil War'", forthcoming in *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (2009).

issues. Frank So's article on entrepreneurship in Sudan, which concludes this Special Issue, underlines this by emphasizing attempts to provide young men with the ability to act in ways that are different to those generally determined war. In order to understand the causes of civil wars and conflicts, and then to develop the relevant legal tools and policy advice, we first have to recognize agency as an important factor in their onset, development and solution.

Civil wars and conflicts contain many more aspects and problems than could be examined either at the conference itself or in the papers here. Nevertheless, it represents an interdisciplinary beginning which could form the basis for further research and academic discussion. Below, each paper and its themes are briefly introduced.

Tim Dertwinkel surveys the existing quantitative, empirical literature on civil war. He points to a number of shortcomings in what he labels the 'first generation' studies of civil wars. These studies use country-level data to study which factors correlate significantly with the onset of civil conflict. Among these he points to the much-cited studies by Collier and Hoeffler[7] and Fearon and Laitin.[8]

Dertwinkel points to three problems with these first generation studies. First, he notes that there is no standard civil war data set. Second, he points to the potential 'aggregation bias' or 'ecological fallacy' associated with using country-level data. The example given by Dertwinkel is the hypothesis that armed conflicts occur more often in poor areas, because poor and uneducated males are more easily recruited as fighters. He observes that this hypothesis cannot be tested on aggregated country-level data, but in fact requires a study of fighter recruitment. The third and final problem is that many results in the literature do not survive the so-called 'robustness' tests. However, while this is clearly an important concern, the concept of robustness is in itself problematic from an econometric/statistical point of view.[9] As an alternative to cross-country data, Dertwinkel points to 'second-generation' studies that use disaggregated data.

The legal dimension of civil war and conflict is covered by Kenneth Øhlenschlæger Buhl who focuses on non-international armed conflict, the challenges it presents to international humanitarian law, and the developments to which it gives rise. Even though non-international armed conflicts outnumber international

[7] P. Collier and A. Hoeffler, "Greed and Grievance", 56 *Oxford Economic Papers* (2004), 536-595.

[8] The quantitative empirical literature on civil conflict is carried out by both economists and political scientists. Collier and Hoeffler (2004) is one of the prominent studies in civil war research carried out by economists, whereas Fearon and Laitin (2003) is one of the prominent studies carried out by political scientists.

[9] See P. Jensen, "Testing the Null of a Low Dimensional Growth Model", forthcoming in *Empirical Economics* (2009).

armed conflicts, the legal framework developed by international humanitarian law for dealing with non-international armed conflict are modest.

Buhl addresses this issue in several steps. First, he offers a characterization of the different conflicts. The different rule sets developed within international law apply to different situations, and international humanitarian law can thus only be applied in the context of armed conflicts. In his classification, the author also examines the grey area between war and peace.[10] Related to this point is the question of whether an armed conflict is international or non-international in character, which again has consequences for the relevant rules that can be applied. The author explains both types of conflicts and the relevant legal provisions.

Buhl applies the international relations theory of institutionalism to his analysis. He works within the model of legalization of international institutions and examines the three dimensions of obligation, precision and delegation in relation to the treaties introduced in the first section of his article.

In a third section, Buhl addresses the delineation between international humanitarian law and human rights law.[11] Although they address different issues, they must sometimes be applied concurrently, which in turn can lead to problems and maybe even less protection than covered by one single set of rules.

Steen Bo Frandsen's article is a historical contribution to the discussion of inter- versus intra-state war. It illustrates the complexity of the issue by reference to the fall of the Danish composite state and the rise of the national state with the loss of the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein in the mid-1800s.

First, Frandsen discusses the construction of nation states in a historical European context. He argues that we should not conceive of nation states as the inevitable outcome of a historical process. Rather, it is valuable to shed light on the complex processes of nation state formation, thereby emphasizing that the historical process of state formation could have given rise to very different results.[12]

[10] D. Stigall et al., "Human Rights and Military Decisions: Counterinsurgency and Trends in the Law of International Armed Conflicts", 30 *University of Pennsylvania Journal of International Law* (2009), 1367-1381.

[11] The relationship between human rights law and humanitarian law is a matter of much discussion. See T. Meron, "The Humanization of Humanitarian Law", 94 *American Journal of International Law* (2000), 239-278.

[12] Cf. E. Hobsbawn and T. Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1983); B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (Verso: London, 1991).

Frandsen goes on to substantiate this claim empirically. He illustrates how Danish state formation from the 1400s until the mid-1800s was part of the European landscape of state formation, influenced by changes in power structures between and within states.[13] In the 1800s, these changes resulted in a variety of discourses on future power structures; discourses, which were also significant to Danish state formation at the time. At one end of the spectrum in Denmark, there was the traditional discourse of the king, who did not recognize nationalist and regionalist sentiments and wished to maintain an integrated and multiethnic composite state. At the other end was the liberal nationalist discourse, which stated that it was inevitable that Danes and Germans would live separately as they were different peoples with different languages. With hindsight, we know that the latter discourse was to dominate in the years that followed. This was also the reason why the conflict in the duchies was understood as a war between nation states rather than a civil war. However, Frandsen demonstrates that there were many competing discourses on future Danish power structures at stake, and that it was never inevitable that the liberal nationalist narrative would end up pulling most weight.

By inviting us to understand the conflict as a civil war within the Danish composite state, Frandsen questions the usual assumption that the 1848 and 1864 wars in Schleswig were wars between nation states.

Frank So concludes this volume with a practitioner's perspective on the reconstruction of society in Darfur, Sudan. He focuses on vocational training for young males as a tool for 'augmenting peace'. So develops three main points. First, he explains the conflict in Darfur and its developments; here, he points out some of the problems, including: a high rate of illiteracy, millions of internally displaces persons and, centrally, the tribal structure.

Second, So argues for the importance and necessity of providing society with the possibility of a better future. Based on first-hand experience, he argues that young males in refugee camps are especially prone to seeking illegal ways of sustaining their own and their families' existence. He points out that the overwhelming majority of young males that participate in vocational training programs find them useful.

The article concludes with a discussion of which kind of external aid is needed most in Sudan, and how it would be best applied. This section also gives examples of some of the practical work undertaken. So regards education as a central component of efforts to secure peace, and as a first step in the transformation from a conflict society to one that is sustainable and peaceful.

This completes our summary of the first part of the Special Issue. We invite readers to study the papers in detail and to note that, as indicated above, the last three papers from the Conference on Civil Wars and

[13] Cf. for instance J.H. Elliot, "A Europe of Composite Monarchies", *Past and Present* (1992) IV, 48-71.

Conflicts will be contained in a Special Section in the forthcoming issue of JEMIE. We extend our thanks to the authors of these papers, to the referees, and to the European Centre for Minority Issues for giving us the opportunity to contribute this Special Issue.