

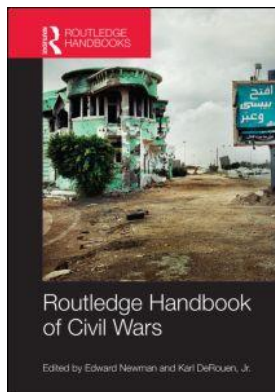
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CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

Richard Jackson

The study of civil war has grown tremendously in recent decades, particularly since the end of the cold war, but also in the wake of the occupations in Afghanistan and Iraq by Coalition forces after 2001 (Kalyvas 2012). As this volume attests, the field is now very large and diverse, with contributions from many different academic disciplines, theoretical approaches and methodologies. In this context, it is perhaps something of a surprise that an explicitly ‘critical’ subfield of civil war research has not yet coalesced in the same way that it has in the related fields of security studies (see Booth 2004) and terrorism studies (see Jackson *et al.* 2009). It is not that there are no ‘critical’ studies of civil war and organised political violence – there are many important studies which challenge accepted wisdom and apply alternative analytical and normative perspectives (see, among others, Campbell 1998a; Hansen 2006; Kaufman 2001; Lemarchand 1994; Newman 2004; Richards 1996; Wilmer 2002; Zulaika 1984). Rather, there have to date been few attempts to systematise, articulate or develop what ‘critical’ civil war research might entail, and nor have many civil war scholars openly self-identified as ‘critical’ scholars.

Drawing from the existing literature, as well as from comparable fields like critical security studies (CSS) and critical terrorism studies (CTS), the aim of this chapter is to briefly map out what an explicitly ‘critical’ approach to civil war research might look like in terms of its ontology, epistemology, methodology, normative standpoint, ethics and research agenda. The next section briefly discusses what is meant by the term ‘critical’. The following section outlines some of the main assumptions, commitments and characteristics of a critical perspective on civil war research in terms of the key dimensions noted above. The conclusion to the chapter reflects on some of the implications of adopting a critical perspective and suggests a research agenda for critically oriented civil war research.

‘Critical’ research

As it has been applied in CSS, CTS and the social sciences more broadly, the term ‘critical’ has been the subject of intense debate, argument and contestation. What does it mean to adopt a ‘critical’ perspective to the study of civil war? In this chapter, I conceive of ‘critical’ research in two primary senses. First, in a very broad sense, I take it to simply mean an intellectual orientation or attitude that attempts to stand apart from the existing order (while at the same time acknowledging that one can never fully escape one’s own situatedness or biases), which questions

widely accepted 'common sense' and dominant forms of knowledge, and which asks probing questions about how existing social and epistemic orders came into existence and how they are sustained. Second, and more narrowly, the term 'critical' refers to approaches which draw upon the analytical tools and insights of Frankfurt School-inspired Critical Theory, as well as related critical–normative social theories and disciplinary approaches such as critical constructivism, post-structuralism, feminism, post-colonialism and others.

Both broad and narrow critical approaches share a number of key concerns and commitments. In the first place, they are rooted in serious concerns about what Max Horkheimer and later Robert Cox termed 'traditional theory' or 'problem-solving theory' in social science. The problem with traditional theory, according to Horkheimer and Cox, is that it fails to recognise the ways in which all theorists and analysts are submerged within particular social worlds, histories and practices (Glynos and Howarth 2007: 9). Partly as a consequence, traditional theory 'takes the world as it finds it, with the prevailing social and power relationships and the institutions into which they are organised, as the given framework for action', and then works – consciously or unconsciously – to 'make these relationships and institutions work smoothly by dealing effectively with particular sources of trouble' (Cox 1981: 128–9). In other words, instead of directly challenging the status quo with all of its hierarchies, inequalities and injustices and the operations of power in the making of those inequalities and conflicts, traditional approaches assume that existing power structures are somehow natural or immutable and they work to allay, manage or control challenges to the existing order. It therefore attempts to solve the 'problems', whether they be disorder, rebellions, terrorism, civil war, criminality, corruption and so on. Moreover, by adopting what appears to be scientific language and methods, with their impression of accuracy and objectivity, traditional theory transforms the study and management of these 'problems' and challenges into a series of technical issues, thereby obscuring deeper political and ethical questions.

In contrast, critical approaches are characterised by a healthy scepticism towards accepted knowledge claims and dominant ideas, rooted as they tend to be in traditional theory and problem-solving approaches. Instead, critical approaches seek to continuously question and interrogate that which is taken for granted in academia and society at large. In particular, critical scholars are committed to interrogating how the status quo is implicated in some of the very problems that traditional theory seeks to solve. In part, this is because critical approaches recognise that knowledge and power are intimately connected – that knowledge is never neutral, but 'theory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose' (Cox 1981: 128; original emphasis). From this perspective, all efforts to explain the social world are tied up with the interests and perspectives of their creators (Held 1990: 192), and, just as importantly, they all have consequences for the worlds that are being explained. Critical scholars therefore accept the need for a commitment to careful and continuous self-reflection about their work and its outputs, in particular, the question of how knowledge is being used.

Lastly, in contrast to the social scientific adoption of a purportedly neutral standpoint on political and ethical issues, critical approaches are characterised by an openly ethical–normative commitment to human rights, progressive politics and improving the lives of individuals and communities – or what is often called 'emancipation' or praxis (see McDonald 2009). They follow the dictum that the point of knowledge is not just to understand the world, but to try and change it for the better.

Critical civil war research

Drawing from existing critical traditions in security studies (see Booth 2007), terrorism studies (see Jackson 2012) and social theory more broadly, as well as from civil war research, which adopts

various kinds of critical orientations or analytical perspectives, it is possible to discern a series of ontological, epistemological, methodological and praxeological commitments which might conceivably characterise what we describe as an explicitly 'critical' approach to civil war research.

A critical ontology of civil war

What exactly is the thing called 'civil war' that we study, and how should we conceive and speak of it? Critical perspectives would suggest that civil war is not a free-standing, ontologically distinct phenomenon that is discoverable by objective social scientific study. Instead, it is a social formation and set of social activities that are in large part contingent upon, and constituted by, the terms, languages, narratives and discourses used to describe and study it (Mundy 2011). In other words, whether a particular violent conflict is described as 'disorder', 'troubles', 'rebellion', 'coup d'état', 'insurgency', 'terrorism', 'genocide' or 'civil war' is not a value-free fact or 'truth' waiting to be discovered by a scholar, but in large part a consequence of the operation of a series of academic, political and social discourses and practices in different locales, including a set of pre-existing narratives and discourses relating to political violence, legitimacy and identity, among others. That is, there is a discursive, political, cultural and academic process by which real-world acts of violence are given social meaning through the negotiated application of different kinds of political and intellectual labels and narratives relating to 'rebels', 'combatants', 'civilians', 'ethnic groups', 'the state', 'war' and so on.

Moreover, such labels, concepts and meanings are prone to change and contestation; actions and events never just 'speak for themselves'. A 'rebellion' might become a 'terrorist campaign' or 'The Troubles', before being designated a 'civil war', a 'genocide' or a 'counter-insurgency campaign'. Similarly, a 'civil war' might be considered an ideologically motivated conflict based on a set of real grievances, before being reconceptualised as a greed-based scramble for resources by criminals – as occurred in Mary Kaldor's (1999) novel articulation of 'new wars'. In an important sense, this speaks to the instability of historical narratives about civil wars. As David Campbell notes (1998a: 279) in his review of the literature on the Bosnian civil war,

Events in a chronology do not by themselves legitimate one particular narrative over and above others. Those events, which attain that status by being emplotted in the first place, can be narrated in different ways (or overlooked entirely), often to support contradictory conclusions.

This is not to say that critical approaches do not recognise actual violence in the 'real world' which is experienced by people as civil war. Rather, it is to adopt a Frankfurt School-inspired ontology which maintains a 'minimal foundationalism' in which the ontological distinction between subject and object is preserved, and discourse and materiality are conceptualised as shaping each other in a dialectical, never-ceasing dynamic, rather than the one being solely constituted by the other (Jackson *et al.* 2009: 223). Debates within civil war studies over the nature of so-called 'new wars', for instance, reflect observed changes in the practices of civil wars after the cold war when rebel movements could no longer rely on superpower patronage and had to find alternative sources of funding for their campaigns (see Kalyvas 2001; Mundy 2011; Newman 2004). Such an ontological standpoint recognises that there are observable 'regularities' in human activity (what positivists might call laws), and that one can distinguish between different phenomenon on the basis of their delineated characteristics, while at the same time recognising that these characteristics, and how they are interpreted, are a product of their social and historical context and thus, are not 'objective facts' in the positivist sense.

In part, this might explain why there is no consensus on the precise conceptualisation of civil war (or even whether 'civil wars' are properly called something else, such as 'internal wars' or 'intrastate conflicts'), whether there are different types and forms of civil wars, whether they are really internal in an age of globalisation, or indeed how many civil wars have taken place since the Second World War or before (see Mundy 2011: 280; see also Smith 2003). More importantly, the act of labelling and distinguishing a 'civil war' from a 'terrorist campaign', for example, is neither neutral nor without consequence (Kalyvas 2006). If it is designated as a terrorist campaign, for example, it will not only be analysed in very different ways by scholars and treated very differently by various state actors than if it is described as a civil war, but there will likely be a series of real-world consequences for the protagonists, the victims, third parties and observers. 'Terrorists' may be assassinated in a drone strike (as in Afghanistan today), while 'civil war faction leaders' may be invited by the United Nations to negotiate a truce (as in Somalia in the 1990s), for example.

Consequently, for critical scholars, the acceptance of the relative ontological insecurity of the concept of 'civil war' results in a real sensitivity to the politics of labelling and extreme care in the use of the term during research and teaching. For example, in the broader civil wars literature, civil wars have frequently been referred to as 'peripheral wars', 'small wars', 'irregular wars', 'low intensity conflicts', 'third tier wars', 'quasi wars', and even 'little wars', 'peasant wars' and 'bush wars' (Smith 2003). Critical scholars would argue that such terminology is not neutral nor without consequence. Rather, it reflects current power-knowledge structures and functions to trivialise and marginalise the impact and importance of such conflicts, especially in comparison to the more important wars fought by Western states and recognised regional powers.

However, critical approaches go much further than simply recognising the role that language and social scientific processes play in constituting civil wars as an object of analysis. They also recognise that civil wars and the violence they are made up of are themselves constituted by social and political narratives, discourses and practices; that is, they recognise that war and organised political violence – including civil war – is fundamentally a social construction (Jackson 2004). As a consequence, critical scholars are interested in the constitutive nature of norms, ideas and other discursive elements which make the social practices of war and violence possible in specific historical and spatial contexts (Alkopher 2005: 716).

For example, there is a growing body of critical research which examines the central role of identity (re)construction and manipulation in civil wars and violent conflicts (see among others, Bowman 2003; Campbell 1998a; Kaufman 2001; Lemarchand 1994; Mertus 1999; Prunier 1995; Wilmer 2002). In contrast to a great deal of civil war research which treats identities as unproblematically exclusive and relatively fixed, at least for empirical coding and analytical purposes, a critical ontology of civil war assumes that identities are not pre-existing, prior to society and culture, or immutable; rather, they are context-dependent, highly malleable and continuously evolving. That is, identities are never settled or essential, but are made, remade and continuously constituted through a vast array of discursive processes and social practices, including history, myth, culture, symbols, ideology, religion, political practice and many more. As such, their content is always open to change – even if discursive practices make it appear as if identities are fixed and immutable. Importantly, critical approaches argue that violence and conflict itself acts as a discursive structure which constructs or constitutes identity in particular kinds of ways (Campbell 1998a). In some cases, for example, violence may be deliberately constructed as 'ethnic' or 'communal' violence by elites in order to obscure its origins in other kinds of material or political struggles, but this construction nonetheless has significant effects on the identities of the conflicting parties.

From this perspective, critical approaches suggest that civil war cannot be fully understood apart from the particular kinds of conflict narratives, discourses and social practices which make

it possible by rendering it conceivable, legitimate and reasonable (Jackson 2004; Jabri 1996). Such conflict narratives or discourses typically draw upon a mix of existing discursive and normative structures, such as national myths, political symbols, cultural norms, popular narratives, historical memory and newly introduced discursive elements deriving from recent events and processes, all of which are historically and spatially contingent. Crucial to this process is the role played by existing normative structures which function to construct identities, interests and modes of social action (Alkopher 2005: 720; Jabri 1996). From this perspective, it is argued that conflict discourses are embedded in the normative and discursive structures of society and everyday reality – the status quo – and both draw upon and reflect the cultural and historical context in which they operate.

Ontologically, this suggests that civil war is not a functionalist breakdown in essentially peaceful social systems, the result of external forces or macro-level structures acting on a society, or a temporary abnormality; instead, it is rooted in, and constituted by the structures, practices and conditions of social existence at the present juncture (Duffield 1998). In other words, a critical ontology of civil war questions the role of the status quo in the production of violence. For example, it asks questions about how the state-centric international order and its norms of legitimate violence are implicated in the construction of civil war, how the structural inequality of the neoliberal international economic order produces the poverty and social inequalities which are correlated with civil war outbreak, and how great power politics and the spread of arms by members of the P5 transforms local disputes into large-scale violence – among others.

A critical ontology also suggests that civil wars are not so much an essential recurring phenomenon which manifests in the same way across historical and spatial contexts, but are instead quite singular, highly contingent social formations. Each civil war is in reality a complex social formation with its own history and context, within which there are many different micro-violences (see Kalyvas 2012), and in which there is fluidity of identities over time and space: victims become perpetrators, warlords become presidents, soldiers become rebels and so on (Mundy 2011: 288). In many respects, a ‘civil war’ is sometimes better conceived of as a number of simultaneously occurring wars (see Lubkemann 2008).

Moreover, forms of violence in civil wars have locally and culturally defined rationalities and meanings; they may convey messages and achieve goals only understandable in the cultural context in which they occur (Ellis 2003). What appears to be pointless, irrational violence to a Western observer, for example, may have multiple encoded meanings in the society in which it occurs. Similarly, the technologically advanced remote violence of a drone strike might be considered ‘surgical’ and ‘clean’ from a Western perspective, but cowardly and dishonourable in a tribal society where honour codes are prevalent. This is not to suggest that civil wars do not have points of similarity or that we cannot learn from comparative forms of analysis. Rather, it is to embrace complexity and contingency, to acknowledge that generalisations about civil wars are limiting and tend to break down as soon as they are applied to a specific case, and that there are multiple productive standpoints from which to view civil wars.

A critical epistemology of civil war

In addition to the ontological commitments and concerns outlined above, a critical perspective on civil war research also entails the adoption of a number of important epistemological positions. In the first instance, from a broad perspective, critical approaches accept that creating knowledge is ultimately a social process which depends on a range of contextual and process-related factors, not least the social position of the researcher, the institutional context within which they conduct research, and the kinds of methods they employ. Such factors impact on the

kinds of knowledge produced, as well as the purposes to which it is ultimately put. In part, this means that what we 'know' about civil wars today differs from previous societies and will probably differ from future ones. Importantly, it does not mean that all knowledge about the social world is hopelessly insecure, that scholarly standards and procedures in research should be rejected, or that 'anchorages' – relatively secure knowledge claims – cannot be found and built upon (Booth 2008). Rather, it suggests that, in addition to a commitment to the highest standards of scholarship, research on civil war should also be characterised by a continuous and critical reflexivity in regard to its own epistemology and assumptions. It also means that there are few if any knowledge claims about civil war that cannot be challenged or questioned.

Related to this, a critical perspective also recognises that no individual, including academic researchers, can completely put aside their personal identity, values, perceptions and world-view and then engage in purely objective, dispassionate, value-free research. Rather, every researcher brings with them a particular culture and set of values and understandings which shapes their research in important ways. Critical scholars argue that recognising and acknowledging the personal subjectivity of the researcher is an important step (see Breen Smyth 2009), not least because such continuous reflexivity acts as an antidote to the dangerous claim that some kinds of knowledge are objective and wholly unbiased – and therefore superior to others.

Crucially, such an epistemological stance does not entail a wholesale rejection of the social scientific notion of objectivity, but instead the adoption of an alternative approach to objectivity which accepts the validity and value of multiple perspectives and standpoints. That is, a critical perspective accepts that there are multiple ways of knowing about civil wars, that it is beyond the capacity of any single narrative to provide the best account of civil war(s), and that through a pluralisation of perspectives and their inevitable clashes a more justifiable knowledge can be assembled (Campbell 1998b: 279–81). As Kalyvas puts it, even with *more* information and *better* information we will never have access to the 'truth' or essence of a war (Kalyvas 2003). A critical perspective therefore suggests that 'continual contestation, rather than the aspirations of synthesis and totality, should be the aim of inquiry' (Campbell 1998b: 281).

A third important epistemological stance is a deep awareness of the linkages between power and knowledge, particularly in terms of the different ways in which knowledge can be employed by actors as a political tool of influence and domination. For example, critical scholars are sceptical of the way in which certain kinds of knowledge claims about civil wars – that certain rebel groups are driven primarily by greed, or that some civil wars are rooted in cultural predilections and primordial identities, for example – have been used by governments and international organisations to de-legitimise certain kinds of struggles and support certain kinds of externally imposed 'solutions' (see Duffield 2001). More recently, questions have been raised about the way social scientific research during war has functioned to support counter-insurgency in Afghanistan and the war on terror more broadly. For example, there has been controversy over the US Army's Human Terrain System (HTS) in which anthropologists and other social researchers were recruited to provide 'cultural knowledge' for the purpose of more effective counter-insurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan (see Forte 2011). Consequently, critical scholars begin by asking: who is civil war research for? How does civil war research support particular interests? What are the ideological effects of civil war research, particularly on those societies being studied?

Another important epistemological issue for critical civil war research is the notion of categories and how they are applied, particularly in research on political violence. While categories can be very useful for understanding complex realities and uncovering salient aspects of a particular phenomenon, they are at the same time profoundly problematic (see Jackson *et al.* 2011: 158–64). For example, categories can function to obscure real and important differences between actors or behaviours within one category, fostering the illusion that they represent an

essential, homogeneous and universal phenomenon. They can also slip from pure description – ‘these rebels are inspired by religious extremism’ – to causal inference – ‘the rebels are violent because they are religious’ – even if such an explanation is not supported by empirical evidence. In other words, classification according to a particular criterion can create the impression that that criterion is the key factor influencing behaviour, turning what starts out as a descriptive practice into a causal explanation. As mentioned, a key problem with some of the broad categories commonly used in civil war research is that even the simplest binary categories break down and appear to lose their analytical utility under close empirical examination.

Most importantly, critical scholars are concerned that when typologies are presented as universally applicable, without recognition of the specific power–knowledge structures in which they emerged and which sustain them, they can function as a tool of ideology, in part through their assumptions of ‘sameness’ and ‘otherness’, and their reliance on presumed essences and binary differences. As Foucault argues in *The Order of Things* (1970), at their root, orders or categories are never natural or objective, but part of a political–historical structure. In contrast, critical scholars do not view their categories as timeless or universal, but as products of a particular set of power structures and their regimes. While categories may be useful as shorthand descriptors, they are not to be treated as self-evident ‘Truths’. Instead, they should be continuously interrogated, their boundaries, dichotomies and causal implications problematised, and their political and ideological effects exposed. What are the effects, for example, of categorising particular wars as ‘new wars’ or greed-based wars, instead of ideological or grievance-based wars? Is the binary distinction between civil war and peace really useful in cases where the period categorised as ‘peace’ involves greater lethal violence than the period of ‘civil war’ – such as occurred in El Salvador following the 1992 Peace Accords?

In the end, an important consequence of these epistemological positions is an opening up of the broader intellectual project of studying civil war to new questions and topics which go beyond seeking to isolate its causes and provide solutions, as well as new methods and approaches. At the very least, questioning the knowledge produced by the dominant social scientific approaches which stress objectivity and quantifiable data, suggests that other kinds of knowledge produced by ethnography, discourse analysis, constructivism, sociology, history and many others, could also be extremely helpful to our understanding of civil wars. It also suggests a need to embed civil war research in broader social and political theories.

Methodological issues

The ontological and epistemological commitments outlined thus far have a number of important specific consequences for method and approach. First, critical scholars of civil war are committed to transparency about their own values and standpoints, particularly as they relate to the interests and values of the societies in which they live and work. For Western-based scholars, this translates into an abiding commitment to being aware of, and trying to overcome, the Eurocentric, Orientalist and patriarchal forms of knowledge often prevalent within civil war studies, security studies, international relations and social science more generally (see Henderson 2013; Toros and Gunning 2009; Sylvester and Parashar 2009; Smith 2003).

Related to this, critical scholars are committed to taking subjectivity seriously, in terms of both the researcher and the research subject (see Dauphinee 2007, 2013). This means being aware of, and transparent about, the values and impact of the researcher on the process and outcomes of the research, and being willing to seriously engage with the viewpoint and perceptions of the Other, particularly those who have been demonised or silenced in the broader civil war discourse. Like ‘terrorists’, certain rebel groups – the Serbs in Bosnia, the Hutu in Rwanda, the RUF in

Sierra Leone, the Khmer Rouge and others – have at various times been constructed as inhuman savages and beyond the boundaries of civilised society, while a great many other voices – women, children, the displaced – have been largely ignored. Such discourses are dangerously dehumanising and a clear hindrance to greater understanding. In many ways, this implies an additional commitment to engaging in primary research whenever relevant, as opposed to the all too frequent habit of relying largely on secondary accounts and sources for data.

A third commitment of a critical approach is to methodological and disciplinary pluralism – a willingness to embrace the insights and perspectives of different academic disciplines, intellectual approaches and schools of thought. In particular, critical scholars see value in post-positivist and non-international-relations-based methods and approaches, such as discourse analysis, post-structuralism, constructivism, Critical Theory, historical materialism, history, ethnography and others. As such, a critical perspective refuses to privilege dominant social scientific methods and approaches to civil war research which stress rationalism, empiricism and positivism. Instead, it argues that interpretive and reflectivist approaches can be equally valuable in expanding the study and understanding of civil war. There is little doubt that our understanding of the Balkan wars of the 1990s – and civil war in general – has been greatly enhanced by a number of constructivist and post-structuralist studies of these conflicts (see Campbell 1998a; Hansen 2006; Mertus 1999; Wilmer 2002).

In one respect, this means refusing to be limited by the narrow logic of traditional social scientific explanation based on linear notions of cause and effect – in which civil war is caused by rebel greed, weak states or religious extremism, for example. Instead, a critical perspective argues that adopting an interpretive ‘logic of understanding’ rooted in ‘how possible’ rather than ‘what causes’ questions, can open space for subjects, perspectives and affective forms of understanding that are often foreclosed by traditional social science (see Doty 1993). Asking ‘how does civil war become possible in a particular social and political context’, for example, can open up new possibilities of understanding which may be foreclosed by the question ‘what causes civil war?’. Importantly, such a stance is more than simply methodological; it is also political in the sense that it does not treat one model of social science as if it were the sole bearer of legitimacy (see Smith 2004: 514).

A final important methodological commitment is a permanent adherence to a set of responsible research ethics which take account of the various end-users of civil war research, including informants, the communities from which insurgents or rebels come, vulnerable populations like refugees, and the populations who bear the brunt of counter-insurgency campaigns – as well as the wider public, other academics and policy-makers. More concretely, this means ‘recognising the human behind the label’ (Booth 2008: 73), identifying marginalised and silenced voices, the adoption of a ‘do no harm’ approach to research, operating transparently as a researcher, recognising the different kinds of vulnerability of those being researched, honouring undertakings of confidentiality and protecting interviewees, utilising principles of informed consent and taking responsibility for the anticipated impact of research and the ways in which it may be utilised (Breen Smyth 2009; Dauphinee 2007).

A critical praxis of civil war research

Simultaneous with the ontological, epistemological and methodological commitments described above, critical approaches to civil war also tend to adopt a broad set of ethical–normative commitments. These commitments are based first and foremost on the recognition of the inherently degenerate nature of war and political violence, and the harm caused by forms of structural and direct violence. Consequently, critical research implicitly and explicitly questions

both the ways in which dominant Western narratives have constructed their own practices of war as legitimate and others as illegitimate, and the power structures, practices and narratives in the Western-dominated status quo which make civil wars possible – including narratives of ‘new barbarism’, ethnic essentialism, worthy and unworthy victims, and the efficacy of legitimate political violence (see Jabri 1996).

More specifically, a critical approach involves a shift from state-centrism and making state security the central concern, to a focus on the security, freedom and well-being of human individuals and communities (see in relation to terrorism research, Toros and Gunning 2009). Just as Critical Security Studies has argued that the primary actor to be secured should be the human individual and not the state, critical civil war scholars also tend to be more concerned with ending the avoidable suffering of human beings than with bolstering the state or improving counter-insurgency – while recognising that ineffectual states might also be part of the reason for continuing violence in some contexts. In other words, critical scholars tend to prioritise human security over national security, and they are committed to minimising all forms of physical, structural and cultural violence (Toros and Gunning 2009).

Related to this, they take seriously the scholarly and practical exploration of nonviolence, conflict transformation and reconciliation as practical alternatives to both rebel and government violence. Importantly, this entails the adoption of an explicitly critical approach to conflict resolution practice, whether it is third party peace-making (Hansen 2008) or peacekeeping (Meyer 2008; Pugh 2004) during the open conflict stage, or stabilisation and peacebuilding (Mac Ginty 2012) during the post-conflict stage. In either case, critical approaches to civil war mitigation and transformation entail a commitment to nonviolent alternatives to the use of military force, local ownership and empowerment, the priority of social justice, the transformation of structures of structural and cultural violence (which may therefore entail the rejection of neoliberal economic and political forms) and agonistic forms of politics (see also Shinko 2008; Richmond 2008).

Critical scholars are also committed to trying to influence public policy, because not being concerned with policy is not an option for scholars committed to improving human security and well-being (see Toros and Gunning 2009). Importantly, this does not mean that they limit their research to the needs of state elites. Rather, critical scholars are committed to engaging equally with both *policy-makers* – the officials who have to make policies to deal with civil wars and political violence – and *policy-takers* – the groups and wider societies who have to bear the brunt of counter-insurgency or peacebuilding policies. Engaging with policy-takers lessens the risk of co-option by the status quo, particularly if those thus engaged include members of communities labelled as ‘rebels’ or ‘insurgents’. However, to be effective in realising the potential for positive change within the status quo, critical scholars must simultaneously strive to engage with those who are embedded in the state, international officials and so on.

From a philosophical perspective, an explicitly critical perspective involves a continuous process of ‘immanent critique’ of society’s power structures and oppressive practices, and a simultaneous commitment to action and struggle aimed at bringing about the positive transformation of existing structures (Toros and Gunning 2009). More specifically, critical scholars see an important task in questioning both morally and intellectually the dominant paradigm of political violence which promotes the idea that violence can be a rational instrument for bringing about positive change, whether by governments or non-state groups (see Burke 2008). From this perspective, critical civil war research can be understood as a kind of ‘outsider theorising’ which seeks to go ‘beyond problem-solving within the status quo and instead... to help engage through critical theory with the problem of the status quo’ (Booth 2007: 40, 266).

Collectively, this set of commitments – to human security over state security, to ending avoidable suffering, to minimising and questioning all forms of violence, to continuous immanent

critique and to positively transforming existing structures – can be described as a broad commitment to the notion of emancipation (Jackson *et al.* 2009: 226–7). Despite objections to the term and its past implication in hegemonic projects, critical scholars for the most part see emancipation as a process of trying to construct ‘concrete utopias’ by realising the unfulfilled potential of existing structures, freeing individuals from unnecessary structural constraints, and the democratisation of the public sphere (Wyn Jones 2004: 229–32). In other words, like all ‘critical’ research, critical research on civil wars involves an underlying conception of a different social and political order (*ibid.* 217–20; Alker 2004: 192), one in which neither domination nor liberation is pursued through political violence. Importantly, emancipation should be seen as a continuous *process* of struggle and critique rather than any particular endpoint or universal grand narrative. It can never be fully and finally achieved; rather, it is something for scholars, students and practitioners of global politics to continuously aim towards.

Conclusion

The value of a critical approach lies not only in the insights it can provide through the critique of an existing field, but also in the extent to which it can provide an expanded research agenda (see Jackson 2012). The critical perspective outlined here aims to encourage three broad developments in the field. First, it argues for a *broadening* of civil war research to include subjects that may have been neglected, including the discursive processes which have structured the field thus far; the role of the international context and processes like unequal development and the war on terror in generating political violence; the part played by national and international narratives, discourses and discursive practices; the practices and impacts of counter-insurgency; the interaction between different kinds of micro-violences and broader kinds of organised political violence; the role of nonviolence and conflict resolution in ending civil wars – among others. A broadening of civil war research would also include greater focus on new regions historically neglected by civil war research (for example, while there is a large literature on the civil wars of the former Yugoslavia, studies on West Papua, Thailand, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and elsewhere are rare), as well as broadening perspectives on actors in civil war (for example, while there is a growing literature on women as victims of violence in civil war, there is limited research on women as active agents in civil war).

Second, a critical perspective would argue for *deepening* civil war research by uncovering the field’s underlying ideological, institutional and material interests through deconstruction, exploring the forms of knowledge and practice which socially construct war and political violence, and making the values, perspectives and normative commitments of both researchers and the researched more open and explicit. Deepening civil war research also entails pluralising methods and approaches beyond the very large quantitative literature, and embedding empirical research more deeply in social and political theory.

Lastly, it would argue for making a commitment to *emancipatory praxis* more open and central to the civil war research enterprise. This would entail, among others, putting greater efforts into the deconstruction of violence-legitimising narratives, discourses and practices, replacing state-centricity with human security, studying and campaigning for arms control and disarmament, and developing research-informed policy advice aimed at building cultures of peace by a variety of actors, both state and non-state.

In the end, some might contend that the critical perspective on civil wars I have briefly outlined here simply amounts to a call for more rigorously conceived and sensitised research. However, I would maintain that it is more than this. Instead, a critical perspective is marked out by its alternative ontological position, epistemology, methodological orientation, research ethics

and praxis, its normative commitments, particularly in regards to emancipation, its reflexivity and its expanded research foci and priorities. While this critical agenda shares a great deal with Frankfurt School Critical Theory and the Welsh schools of critical security studies and critical terrorism studies, it cannot be reduced to a single perspective, and there is room for a multiplicity of perspectives and methodologies in the critical study of civil war.

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