14. Individuals and families
14.3

The world-system, inequality and violent conflict

Shifting the unit of analysis

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Scholars have long sought to explain cross-national variation in levels of violent conflict. One area of research, generally focused on civil war prevalence, has highlighted the importance of the opportunity structure for engagement, as well as national economic and political indicators, in generating violence (Sambanis 2004). Adding another level of complexity to this first area of research, a second area has incorporated insights from the world-systems and world-polity perspectives into our understanding of the macro-level sources of violent conflict. In doing so, these scholars highlight the importance of stratification in the world-system in patterning violence (cf. Olzak 2006). This essay will begin by briefly summarizing what this latter area of research suggests the world-systems perspective offers to research on violent conflict, and will then outline the benefits of taking the individual as the unit of analysis in studies of violent conflict.

In examining ethnic conflict, Olzak (2006) provides a detailed discussion of the theoretical implications of integration into the world-system on violent conflict. To simplify her discussion, integration widens the economic gaps both within and between countries. In diffusing global capitalism, economic integration solidifies the dependency of peripheral states on core states, while integration into the world political system promotes the spread of human rights ideologies. This creates a situation in peripheralized states where poverty levels, economic inequality, and political inequality intensify, while the legitimacy of those inequalities is increasingly called into question. This, with the propensity for political instability and repression in peripheralized countries, increases the likelihood of violent political activity. In addition to direct effects then, integration is expected to have indirect effects on violence through inequality, political exclusion, and poor economic performance in peripheral states. This account is especially useful, as it explicitly incorporates global processes with national phenomena, but it raises several issues that suggest a need to examine these questions using data on individuals.

First, it raises the question of how these factors actually influence individuals. What, for instance, does it mean, in terms of individual motivations, to say that increases in GDP per capita are correlated with decreased intensity of violent activity? While group-level analyses move research toward answering these sorts of questions, recent work focusing on Nigeria (Oyefusi 2008) takes an important step toward integrating the theoretical insights from cross-national studies with data on individual propensities for violent activity. Oyefusi (2008) finds that having
greater opportunities for profit from rebel movements (e.g., the proximity of large oil reserves) and fewer opportunities to support oneself outside of rebel activity increases the likelihood that Nigerian youths will be willing to join rebel movements, while personal grievance is less important. If we seek to understand which individuals are most at risk to engage in violence and the ways in which global processes generate this risk, research should extend this sort of analysis to examine other regions of interest or cross-national comparisons, as well as to incorporate other theoretically important explanatory variables.

Second, integration into the world-system is expected to influence violence through political and economic inequalities; however, many cross-national analyses of violence fail to find a significant effect of income inequality. The lack of evidence has been suggested to be the result of using national, rather than ethnic or regional, measures of inequality as predictors (Sambanis 2004). This critique of economic inequality measurement highlights the need for a closer examination of inequality’s role in violent conflict formation. Specifically, arguments concerning the impact of unequal distributions of material and non-material assets on violence rely on the actor’s perception that their level of consumption, relative either to a previous level of consumption or to others in the society, is unacceptable (Gurr 1970). As analyses of individuals allow researchers to actually examine the actor’s perception of their social environment, they are particularly useful for examining the impact of inequalities on violent activity in that they alleviate the issue of operationalizing inequality in a way that may not be relevant to the individual actors or may not tap into the correct reference group (e.g., ethnic groups or the individual’s past position).

Analyzing the individual’s perception of their relative social position, then, would benefit our understanding of violent conflict in several ways. First, researchers could distinguish between the impact of unequal distributions, perceived and real, of particular material and non-material goods (e.g., income and access to effective political channels) on individual propensity for violence. Additionally, it allows for the identification of the relevant reference groups against which comparisons are made. For instance, are perceived inequities between ethnic groups or geographic regions the primary forms of inequality motivating violent action? Furthermore, researchers could examine the assumption that it is primarily those ranked lower in social hierarchies that are mobilized by inequalities. As integration into the world political system is expected to promote the eradication of systematic political and economic inequalities, it may be the case that those who hold politically or economically privileged positions feel threatened and turn to violent tactics to retain their advantaged position (Olzak 2006). Taking the individual as the unit of analysis, then, would not only provide a better understanding of how the process of integration into the world-system impacts individuals’ propensities for engagement in violent conflict, but also a more nuanced view of inequality’s role in this process. Combined with existing knowledge about the national determinants of violence, studies of this sort would thus provide a more complete understanding of the global and national processes driving violent conflict.

References