Latin lessons on civil war

Internal conflicts now outnumber international wars – but are nothing new, as the Romans were aware

BY DAVID ARMITAGE

Civil war is now humanity's most characteristic form of organised, large-scale violence. In the decades since the Second World War, fighting within states has almost entirely replaced that between states: from Afghanistan to Yemen, all of the world's 40 or so ongoing conflicts are now civil wars, except for the struggle for Kashmir between India and Pakistan. For the moment, at least, intrastate war has almost entirely replaced interstate war across the world.

How are we to make sense of this mayhem? "Comparatively," political scientists would answer: "Take a broad sample of civil wars since 1989, or maybe 1945, and analyse their motivations, life cycles and aftermaths." Most historians, on the other hand, would advocate: "Individually – look at each conflict in context, and recover its specificity." To both groups I would reply: "Serially, but over 2,000 years, examining wars fought over the centuries from ancient Rome to the present."

In my new book, I argue that the long view of civil wars, from that instigated by Roman general Sulla to the current conflict in Syria, encourages humility, complexity and hope. Humility, because we can see that much of what we think we now know about civil wars has been discovered centuries, even millennia, earlier. Complexity, because our struggles over the meaning and significance of civil war arise from multiple histories that are still jostling and colliding in the present; and hope, because the long view shows that civil war is not be a congenital curse for humanity but something we might gradually cure.

First, humility. Social scientists now tell us that civil wars last longer, recur more often and leave deeper wounds than other kinds of conflict. The Romans discovered all of this during their own civil wars in the first century BC, and in their reflections on those conflicts over the course of five centuries, by thinkers ranging from from Cicero to St Augustine. They were not the first to suffer internal conflict, but they were the first to experience it as 'civil' – among fellow citizens or, in Latin, *cives* – and as 'war': formal armed conflict with, as they said, drums and trumpets, standards and generals, for control of the city itself. Their conception of civil war, their narratives about it and their moral analyses resonated through the centuries, shaping later views in the west and beyond, almost down to our own time.

Next, complexity. Starting in the 19th century, civil war came under the umbrella of law; in the late 20th century, the Geneva Conventions were extended to cover "non-international armed conflict" (the international humanitarian law term for civil war). This set up collisions over the definition and meaning of civil war, notably in Iraq during the Second Gulf War and more recently in Syria.

Those controversies pitted experiences among local populations on the ground against expert understandings within the international community of what was, or was not, civil war. Such disputes arise from civil war's multiple histories, which need to be carefully excavated to be properly understood.

Finally, hope. The incidence of civil conflict seems to be declining. Major civil wars characterised by decades of death and destruction have been terminated in the past few years, first in Sri Lanka and more recently in Colombia. The entire western hemisphere is now free from civil war for almost the first time in two centuries. Perhaps humanity is on the verge of dis-inventing what the Romans first invented 2,000 years ago. Until we do, we will need history – and a very long view of it – to assess future prospects for escaping our most disturbing discontents. 🌐

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