



Civil War and Revolution

What can the study of civil war bring to our understanding of revolutions?

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The study of civil war has recently become academic big business, especially among political scientists and economists. A surge of intellectual interest in a major problem like this often has two sources: the internal dynamics of academic disciplines themselves, and external currents in the wider world that scholars hope their findings might shape. The ongoing 'boom in the study of civil war,' as it has been called, has both these motives. Economists who study underdevelopment, especially in Africa, have isolated civil war as one of its main causes. Students of international relations who focused their attention on wars *between* states have turned to the study of civil wars as they found their traditional subject disappearing before their very eyes: since World War II, the developed world has enjoyed a 'Long Peace' without interstate war, while between 1989 and 2006, 115 of the world's 122 wars were fought *within* states as part of a 'Long Agony' of civil war for many of the world's poorest peoples. Meanwhile, the rise of ethnic conflict since 1989 excited interest in the various causes of civil strife across the world from the Balkans to the Horn of Africa.¹ This has led to an explosion of social-scientific research on civil wars, especially those that occurred in the last half-century.

Civil war has gradually become the most widespread, the most destructive, and now the most characteristic form of organised human violence. Since 1820, an average of two to four per cent of all countries have experienced civil war at any given moment. This striking average disguises the fact that some periods were even more acutely afflicted by internal warfare: for example, the middle decades of the nineteenth century, the period of the US Civil War, the Taiping Rebellion and the Indian Mutiny, among other internal conflicts.² The decades since 1975 have seen a similar spike in the incidence of internal warfare. Indeed, in the last thirty years, an average of at least ten per cent of all countries at any one time have been suffering civil war: in 2006 (the last year for which complete data are available), there were thirty-two civil wars in progress around the world. As if these totals are not alarming enough, the global economic impact of civil wars has been estimated to be roughly US\$120 billion a year: that is more than the developed world's annual aid budget for the developing world.³ Civil war is therefore a global scourge and in every sense a costly one. Its occurrence has dipped slightly in the last few years, but it shows no signs of disappearing from the world any time soon.

- 1 Stathis N. Kalyvas, "Civil Wars," in *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics*, eds. Carles Boix and Susan Stokes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 417; Lotta Harbom and Peter Wallensteen, "Armed Conflict, 1989–2006," *Journal of Peace Research*, 44 (2007): 624, Table II.
- 2 C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 148–65.
- 3 Carles Boix, "Civil Wars and Guerrilla Warfare in the Contemporary World," in *Order, Conflict, and Violence*, eds. Stathis N. Kalyvas et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 206; Paul Collier, Lisa Chauvet and Håvard Hagre, *The Security Challenge in Conflict-Prone Countries, Copenhagen Consensus 2008 Challenge Paper* (April 2008), 22.
- 4 This essay is drawn from my own foolhardy work in progress, *Civil War: A History in Ideas* (New York: Knopf, forthcoming).
- 5 Kalyvas, "Civil Wars," 416.
- 6 James D. Fearon, "Iraq's Civil War," *Foreign Affairs* 86, No. 2 (March/April 2007): 2–16. See also the articles quoted in Note 9.
- 7 Mahmood Mamdani, "The Politics of Naming: Genocide, Civil War, Insurgency," *London Review of Books* 29, No. 5 (8 March 2007): 1–9.
- 8 Melvin Small and J. David Singer, *Resort to Arms: International and Civil Wars, 1816–1980* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1982), 210–20.
- 9 David A. Patten, "Is Iraq in a Civil War?," *Middle East Quarterly* 14, No. 3 (Summer 2007): 27–32; John Keegan and Bartle Bull, "What is a Civil War? Are We Witnessing One in Iraq?" *Prospect* 129 (December 2006): 18–19.
- 10 Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 17.

In light of the prevalence, the ruinousness, and the appalling price of civil war, it is striking how little attention historians have paid to it as a phenomenon central to both the past and the present. Yet they may have overlooked its importance for some of the same reasons social scientists have been transfixed by it. Few, if any, historians have the kind of influence over public policy that economists can command. Diplomatic historians can still study past interstate wars and hence have little need to redirect their energies to the study of civil war. Nor have historians generally been quite so professionally committed to tying their research agendas to current events and contemporary issues. When historians have studied civil war, they have treated it not as a single phenomenon, across time and around the world. Instead they have seen civil wars as a series of distinct events in discrete places: for example, the English Civil Wars, the American Civil War, the Russian Civil War and the Spanish Civil War. Each of those conflicts has its own massive and sophisticated historiography. The sheer size and complexity of those treatments has deterred all but the most ambitious – or foolhardy – historians from attempting any comparative or connected histories of civil war across space and time.⁴

A further reason why historians have not examined civil war outside its specific contexts might be the lack of consensus about just what counts as a civil war. 'Civil war is ... a phenomenon prone to serious semantic confusion, even contestation. The description of a conflict as a civil war carries symbolic and political weight since the term can confer or deny legitimacy to a warring party.'⁵ Its application can depend on whether you are a ruler or a rebel, the victor or the vanquished, an established government or an interested third party. Outside powers may hedge their bets or decide that such wars are beyond their control because they are solely 'civil,' that is, internal, matters: this was one major issue at stake in the British and American debates in late 2006 and 2007 over whether the violence in Iraq should be called 'civil war.'⁶ The consequences of such decisions have been central to major conflicts across the centuries and around the world. Was the American Civil War a war between equal opposing parties, or a rebellion

within the boundaries of a single sovereign state? Did calling the conflicts in Rwanda and Bosnia civil wars allow the rest of the world to wash their hands of responsibility for what took place behind closed borders? And does naming what has happened in Darfur 'genocide' rather than civil war render a fundamentally political conflict instead intractably ethnic, and hence beyond hope of reasonable resolution?⁷

The conventional definition of civil war used by political scientists stipulates that there must be 'sustained military combat, primarily internal, resulting in at least 1000 battle-field deaths per year, pitting central government forces against an insurgent force capable of ... inflict[ing] upon the government forces at least 5 percent of the fatalities the insurgents sustain.'⁸ This definition distinguishes civil wars from other kinds of warfare; it marks civil war off from other sorts of violence, like rioting, terrorism and genocide; and it allows analysts to generate large sets of data from which they can draw statistical conclusions about the duration, recurrence and total number of civil wars. But different criteria can, of course, lead to very different results. During the debate on whether or not Iraq was suffering a civil war, one author used the yardsticks I have just quoted to calculate that there had been *seven* civil wars there since 1945, while two journalists who used a less sophisticated version – that it 'must be "civil" and it must be "war"' – counted only *five* civil wars in world history since the 1640s.⁹

A less controversial working definition might be the one offered by Yale political scientist Stathis Kalyvas: 'armed combat within the boundaries of a recognized sovereign entity between parties subject to a common authority at the outset of the hostilities.'¹⁰ This less restrictive definition might help us to see one major area of historical study for which debates about the nature and meaning of civil war could have special relevance to historians: the study of revolutions. It defines civil war as organised collective violence within a single polity which leads to a division of sovereignty and consequently a struggle for authority. Put this way, I would suggest, the definition can encompass most, if not all, of what we think of as the world's great revolutions: English, American, French, Russian and Chinese, among others. Indeed, I would go

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further, and say that civil war is in fact the genus of which revolution is only a species.¹¹

On the face of it, there would seem to be excellent reasons to resist such a conflation of civil war and revolution. Our preconceptions about the two forms of violent response to political breakdown strive to keep them apart both conceptually and academically. Civil wars are destructive; revolutions are progressive. Civil wars are sterile; revolutions are fertile with innovation and transformative possibilities. Civil wars are local and time-bound; revolutions have occurred across the world in an unfolding sequence of human liberation. Civil wars mark the collapse of the human spirit; revolutions, its unfolding and self-realisation. Such preconceptions – even prejudices – about revolution and civil war were the product of revolutionaries’ own aspirations, beginning in the eighteenth century. As the late German conceptual historian Reinhart Koselleck argued, during the Enlightenment “civil war” ... acquired the meaning of a senseless circling upon itself, with respect to which Revolution sought to open up a new vista.’ Before this decisive semantic shift, “civil war” and “revolution” were not interchangeable but [they] were not at the same time mutually exclusive.’ The American and French Revolutions accelerated these semantic changes and rendered them effectively irreversible.¹² We now live with the consequences of those changes as we strive to maintain an analytical separation between civil wars and revolutions.

Yet before these revolutionary changes, Europeans and their settler descendants around the world would have viewed civil war through Rome-tinted spectacles. It was in fact the Romans who gave civil war its name, *bellum civile*, though they were not of course the first to suffer such internal warfare. They usually called their wars after the enemies they were fighting: a ‘civil’ war was thus a war against *cives*, or fellow-citizens, fought

within the city, or *civitas*, for control of Rome itself.¹³ A sequence of such conflicts had marked Roman history from the days of Sulla and Marius through to the victory of Octavian (later, Augustus) at the battle of Actium in 31 BCE which marked the transition from the Roman Republic to the Empire. Rome’s greatest historians established that civil wars, like sorrows, came not singly but in battalions: they knew intuitively, long before political scientists could prove it statistically, that civil wars rarely end cleanly and are likely frequently to recur. Rome’s legacies in the matter of civil war would be fundamental to later conceptions of internal conflict and for centuries before revolution became a leading category of political analysis.

Take those who lived through the American Revolution, for example. They had more civil wars than revolutions to call to mind when they wanted to place the conflict between Britain and its colonies in historical perspective. And they recalled these civil wars sequentially, as the Romans had, and distinguished them from mere rebellions. In this vein, Thomas Paine argued in *Common Sense* (1776) that that ‘the whole history of England ... since the conquest’ by the Normans in 1066 had been a record of almost constant turmoil in which ‘there have been (including the [Glorious] Revolution) no less than eight civil wars and nineteen Rebellions.’¹⁴ Civil war, not revolution, was what inhabitants of both Britain and the American colonies had most reason to fear and avoid. Just over six months before Paine published his pamphlet, the Continental Congress had argued in its ‘Declaration ... Setting Forth the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms’ (6 July 1775) ‘that we mean not to dissolve that Union which has so long and so happily subsisted between us’ and Great Britain but sought instead ‘reconciliation on reasonable terms, ... thereby to relieve the [British] empire from the calamities of civil war.’¹⁵ And indeed almost from the moment the trans-Atlantic conflict

11 Harry Eckstein, “On the Etiology of Internal Wars,” *History and Theory* 4 (1965): 133.

12 Reinhart Koselleck, “Historical Criteria of the Modern Concept of Revolution,” in Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 49, 47.

13 Robert Brown, “The Terms *Bellum Sociale* and *Bellum Civile* in the Late Republic,” in *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History* 11, ed. Carl Deroux (Brussels: Latomus, 2003), 102–20.

14 Thomas Paine, *Common Sense: Addressed to the Inhabitants of America* (Philadelphia: Robert Bell, 1776), 26.

15 See Declaration in *A Decent Respect to the Opinions of Mankind: Congressional State Papers, 1774–1776*, ed. James H. Hutson (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1975), 96, 97. Original spelling used in quote.

‘Our preconceptions about the two forms of [violence] strive to keep them apart ... Civil wars are destructive; revolutions are progressive. Civil wars are sterile; revolutions are fertile with innovation and transformative possibilities.’

- 16 See *Civil War; a Poem. Written in the Year 1775* [n.p., n.d. (1776?)], sig. A2r; David Hartley, *Substance of a Speech in Parliament, upon the State of the Nation and the Present Civil War with America* (London: J. Almon, 1776), 19.
- 17 Maya Jasanoff, “The Other Side of Revolution: Loyalists in the British Empire,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 65 (2008): 205–32.
- 18 Paul Collier, *Wars, Guns, and Votes: Democracy in Dangerous Places* (NY: HarperCollins, 2009), 139.
- 19 Jean-Clément Martin, “Rivoluzione francese e guerra civile,” in *Guerre fratricide*, ed. Gabriele Ranzato (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1994), 28–55.
- 20 Arno Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 4–5.
- 21 Jean-Clément Martin, *La Vendée et la France* (Paris: Seuil, 1987); David Andress, *The Terror: Civil War in the French Revolution* (London: Little, Brown, 2005).
- 22 Edmund Burke, *First Letter on a Regicide Peace* (20 October 1796) and *Second Letter on a Regicide Peace* (1796), in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke IX*, ed. R. B. McDowell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 187, 267. Original spelling used in quote.
- 23 Ernst Nolte, *Der europäische Bürgerkrieg, 1917–1945* (Berlin: Propyläen, 1987); John F. Kennedy, “State of the Union Address” (11 January 1962), in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy ...* (US Government, 1963), 9.

had begun, commentators in Britain had been calling it ‘the American Civil War’.¹⁶ What for Paine might have been the *ninth* English civil war was for such British observers (and for many colonists) the first *American* civil war.

Recent historians have confirmed contemporaries’ intuitions that the American Revolution should be understood as a civil war. On the broadest scale, it was indeed ‘armed combat within the boundaries of a recognized sovereign entity between parties subject to a common authority at the outset of the hostilities.’ The recognised sovereign entity was Great Britain, at least until British recognition of American independence in 1783. When the hostilities began, both sides were subject to the common authority of George III. Before 1776 (in the eyes of American patriots) and even until 1783 (according to Loyalists and British opponents of American rebellion), the American War was a civil war among fellow-citizens of the British Atlantic empire. It also encompassed a string of local civil wars in bitterly divided colonies such as New York and South Carolina. And as long as an estimated one-sixth of the population of the mainland British colonists remained loyal to the Crown, it would be experienced as a civil conflict by tens of thousands of people within the colonies, 60 000 of whom would form a global Loyalist diaspora as refugees from the infant United States.¹⁷ When the immensely destructive conflict known to posterity as ‘the’ American Civil War broke out eighty years later, both sides envisaged it (for very different reasons) as a second American Revolution. The fact that it was perceived as finishing business left unresolved since the 1780s may also have confirmed retrospectively the kinship between the two conflicts as civil wars: for, as the social scientists who study them have shown, ‘the most likely legacy of a civil war is further civil war.’¹⁸

The French Revolution has an equal claim to be seen as a civil war in multiple dimensions.¹⁹ This was the political and

social conflict which would do most to reconfigure conceptions of revolution for the future. Yet it was also the one that most amply confirmed Arno Mayer’s suggestion that civil war is a ‘common form of collective violence which fires the Furies of revolution, all the more so if it should interlock with quasi-religious foreign war.’²⁰ To an implacable opponent of the Revolution like Edmund Burke, the French after 1789 had fissured into two warring nations, each of which claimed sovereignty, one in the name of the King, the other on behalf of the people. The violence in the Vendée during the Terror in 1793 has long been seen as the localised civil war at the heart of the Revolution, and perhaps even typical of its violence.²¹ Later, in 1796, Burke argued that the French proponents of popular sovereignty had turned their ‘armed doctrine’ against the rest of Europe, and that for these Jacobins the ensuing conflict ‘in its spirit, and for its objects, ... was a *civil war*; and as such they pursued it. ... a war between the partisans of the anti-ent, moral, and political order of Europe against a sect of fanatical and ambitious atheists which means to change them all’.²² This was now a civil war not just within France but for all the inhabitants of Europe: a peculiar extension of the idea of civil war on Burke’s part, to be sure, but one that foreshadowed later appropriations of the term in the twentieth century to apply to the entire period 1917–45 (‘the European Civil War’) or to describe the Cold War, as John F. Kennedy did, as ‘a global civil war [that] has divided and tormented mankind.’²³

The sequence of great revolutions – American and French, Russian and Chinese – was seen for much of the twentieth century as the scarlet thread in a narrative of emergent modernity. These were the great pivotal moments in the progressive liberation of humanity. However, at least since 1989, it has been much harder to view these revolutions without an awareness of the appalling violence and human devastation that accompanied them.

Part of the revolutionaries' success had lain in obscuring the fact that all the major modern revolutions were, at their heart and for much of their course, civil wars. Lenin noted in 1916 that 'civil wars ... in every class society are the natural, and under certain conditions, inevitable continuation, development and intensification of the class struggle. That has been confirmed by every great revolution.'²⁴ The Chinese and Russian Revolutions, each of which spawned its own civil war, certainly confirmed it, but so, in their own ways, had the American and French Revolutions, as we have seen. Those revolutions spurred the impulse to rebrand earlier civil wars retrospectively as revolutions, as when François Guizot in 1826 became the first historian to call the English Civil Wars of the mid-seventeenth century the 'English Revolution,' on the grounds that 'the analogy of the two revolutions is such that the first [the English] would never have been understood had not the second [the French] taken place.'²⁵ Such revisionist renaming suggests a version of Sir John Harington's sixteenth century epigram on treason: 'Civil war doth never prosper, what's the solution? For if it prosper, it's called revolution.'²⁶

It is the historian's job to go back behind such mystifications, but also to attempt to understand the motivations for them. If we could get behind such preconceptions, what would be the broader benefits for studying revolutions in light of what we know about civil wars? First, it would give a renewed energy to the historical understanding of revolutions, a field that has somewhat lost direction in the last twenty years as

faith in revolution's utopian promises has precipitately declined. Second, it can serve to bring together a variety of historiographies – for example, those on the American and French Revolutions along with that on the era of independence in Latin America – which have lately had too little to say to each other. One common strain now emerging from these literatures is that the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Age of Revolutions was also an Age of Civil Wars, taking place within empires as much as within states.²⁷ Third, it can help to place the great political upheavals of the last two centuries into a longer historical perspective, stretching back at least to the Roman Civil Wars and forward to comparisons with civil violence around the contemporary world. Fourth, it might open up novel conversations between historians and social scientists about a major subject of common interest. Historians have not so far tested social scientists' assumptions or wrestled with their conclusions about the causes, course and consequences of civil war; nor have the political scientists and economists who study civil war been confronted by findings about civil wars that took place before 1815.²⁸ Finally and perhaps most importantly, a rapprochement between revolution and civil war would challenge our students to link the great political transformations of the past to some of the most costly and widespread disruptions in the present. If civil war has again become humanity's defining form of mass conflict, then the era of revolutions might appear to be an aberration from more enduring, but much less reassuring, patterns of collective human action.

- 24 V. I. Lenin, *The Military Programme of the Proletarian Revolution* (September 1916), in Lenin, *Collected Works*, 45 vols. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1960–70), XXIII, 78.
- 25 François Guizot, *Histoire de la révolution d'Angleterre* (1826), cited in J. C. D. Clark, *Rebellion and Revolution: State and Society in England in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 37.
- 26 The original epigram runs: 'Treason doth never prosper, what's the reason? For if it prosper, none dare call it treason.'
- 27 Jeremy Adelman, "An Age of Imperial Revolutions," *American Historical Review* 113 (2008): 319–40; *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c. 1760–1840*, eds. David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).
- 28 This is because the two major databases used by social scientists to study civil and other forms of war – the Correlates of War Project at the University of Michigan and the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Database at the University of Uppsala – begin, respectively, in 1816 and 1946.



LEFT
English Redcoat © James Nicholson. Fotolia.

PAGE 18
Union soldiers and band marching through a city street on their way to join the Civil War, 1800s. Hartford, Ct.: Calhoun Show Print. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-98810.