PART II

International Relations Theory and Internal Conflict: Insights from the Interstices

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The presumption that international relations theory can help explain internal conflict is widely shared and accounts for the hubris of many who came late to the topic of domestic violence and civil war from the study of international politics. There has been some useful arbitrage with theories of interstate war providing insights into the causes of intrastate war. But the belief that international relations theory has something uniquely important to contribute to the study of internal violence is wrong—or at least misstated. Rather, we are *approaching* a single, unified theory of political violence of which interstate and intrastate war *may* be particular forms. I emphasize approaching because this general theory has not yet been fully worked out and may because the particular forms of violence and the relationships between them have not yet been defined. Nonetheless, considerable progress has been made.

The real question is what does this general theory tell us about violence? What are the commonalities between interstate and intrastate war? What are the differences? How can the study of one help inform our understanding of the other? If so far scholars have arbitraged from international relations to civil war, it is important to recognize that trade is a two-way process; we should seek to exploit opportunities for gain in both directions. Doing so highlights the irrelevance of some analytic boundaries long taken for granted in the field of political science and focuses our attention for future research on the role of extremists within both domestic groups and states.

The Bargaining Theory of War

In the last decade, the field of international relations has undergone a revolution in the study of conflict. Where earlier approaches (Wittman 1979; Bueno de Mesquita 1981; Bueno de Mesquita and Lalman 1992) attempted to identify the attributes of individuals, states, and systems that produced conflict, the bargaining theory of war now explains violence as the product of private information with incentives to misrepresent, problems of credible commitment, and issue indivisibilities (for a synthesis and elaboration, see Fearon 1995). In this new approach, war is understood as a bargaining failure that leaves both sides worse off than if they had been able to negotiate an efficient solution. This general theory of violence, in turn, is similar to

¹I count myself as one of the latecomers, although my occasional collaborator, Donald Rothchild, is not and has saved me over the years from many mistakes of ignorance (see Lake and Rothchild 1998). Our work has focused primarily on ethnic conflict, but I have now come to the position that there are few if any unique qualities to communal violence and that we should be studying domestic, not ethnic, conflict.

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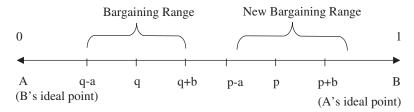


Fig. 1. The Costs of War and Efficient Bargaining. (Adapted from Fearon 1995.)

models of strikes and labor unrest, law (especially whether to contest disputes through trial or settle beforehand), and many forms of market failure.

The basic idea is quite simple. Two actors, A and B, have well-defined preferences over the division of an issue, say a piece of territory that lies between them or a set of rules (that is, property rights) that will generate income (for simplicity, a one time event). A prefers to control all the territory or enact that set of rules that gives it all the income, the same for B. Arrayed on a single dimension and valued (without loss of generality) between zero and one, A's ideal point is to the far right at one, B's ideal point is to the far left at zero (see Figure 1).² The division of the issue is determined by the (actual or expected) outcome of a violent contest (q). If the actors were to fight to alter the division, they would incur costs a and b, respectively. Their net benefits to fighting are, for A, q-a and, for B, q+b. Since fighting is costly, it opens up a bargaining space (between q-a and q+b) in which both parties would prefer any division of the issue to actually fighting. Even if one side becomes more powerful and could shift the division to, say, p (representing the expected outcome of a war under a new distribution of capabilities), a bargaining space would still exist between, now, p-a and p+b. Thus, even though one side becomes more powerful and the old status quo (q) is no longer satisfactory, both parties still have an incentive to negotiate rather than fight.

As James Fearon (1995) succinctly shows, bargaining may fail and war may occur in this framework only if (at least) one of three conditions holds. First, bargaining failures can arise when the parties have private information with incentives to misrepresent. Private information is knowledge an actor possesses that is not available to the other. Such knowledge can include information about the actor's own preferences as well as the strategies of bargaining and fighting it might use. For bargaining failures and war to occur, however, an actor must also have some incentive not to reveal its private information since doing so would otherwise allow a mutually preferred bargain to be reached and the costs of war to be avoided. War plans are especially prone to misrepresentation and, thus, bargaining failures. Since the utility of war plans is greatly reduced once known, as the opponent can then devise a more effective counter-response, actors have little incentive to truthfully reveal their strategies, thereby making successful negotiations less likely.

Private information with incentives to misrepresent may have contributed to the 1991 Persian Gulf War between Iraq and the United States-led coalition. Iraq anticipated a coalition invasion through Kuwait and counted on it being a long, bloody battle through that country, raising the costs of war to the United States.

²A single dimension is merely an expository simplification. The same framework carries over to an N-dimensional issue space. In such a case, the single line in Figure 1 is equivalent to the contract curve created by the tangencies of the indifference curves of the two parties and has the effect of enlarging the number of Pareto-preferred points (to include the entire lens created by the relevant indifference curves) but does not contravene the basic point that, as long as war is costly, some mutually preferred bargain always exists to war.

³Both sides incur costs in fighting. Adding b to q is required by the assumption that the issue ranges from zero to one. It does not imply that B sometimes benefits from fighting.

Expecting the coalition to bear a higher cost, Iraq held out for a bargain more favorable to itself. Coalition forces, in turn, planned the now famous "left hook" in which they deployed further west along the border of Saudi Arabia and Iraq driving rapidly north and then east to attack the entrenched and unsuspecting Iraqi forces. Expecting a low cost war, the United States refused any bargain with Iraq short of complete capitulation and retreat from Kuwait. Had the United States revealed how it intended to minimize its costs of war before the outbreak of hostilities in an effort to convince Iraq to withdraw, the value of this plan would have been negated. In this case, the two sides disagreed fundamentally about the expected costs of the war *ex post*, preventing them from reaching a satisfactory bargain *ex ante*.

Second, wars also arise when the parties are unable to commit credibly to respect the bargain they may reach. A bargain is credible only when it is in the interests of the parties to fulfill its terms when called upon to do so. Problems of credible commitment often follow from the informational imperfections just discussed. When one side is unsure of the other's preferences (its "type"), it may not put great faith in its opponent's promises of future behavior. Over the 1990s, for instance, the United States became sufficiently frustrated with Iraq's apparent failure to disarm as required under various UN resolutions passed after the 1991 war that it was unwilling to believe any statements from Baghdad indicating its weapons of mass destruction had been dismantled or any promises that it would not rebuild these weapons in the future. As a result, the administration of George W. Bush became convinced that the United States had no choice but to remove the regime of Saddam Hussein.

Even when both sides possess complete information about each other, problems of credible commitment may also arise when relative capabilities shift exogenously over time or there are random shocks that affect capabilities. If one party is expected to grow stronger in the future, any self-enforcing bargain the opponents might reach today will become incredible tomorrow; the actor that is growing stronger will not be able to convince the other that it will abide by the agreement possible today and not demand more later when it can. Uneven rates of growth, as a result, are especially destabilizing, and may have contributed to the outbreak of World War I.⁵

Third, bargaining failures may also occur because the issue contested by the parties is indivisible. The model above assumes that the issue under dispute can be divided into infinitely small gradations and that bargains, as a result, can perfectly reflect the balance of capabilities between the two parties. But if issues are "lumpy" and divisible only into relatively large units or not divisible at all, it may become difficult to find an acceptable solution. Despite the attempts of diplomats to persuade one another otherwise, few issues truly take an "all-or-nothing" form. In addition, "side payments" or linkages to other issues often allow actors to compensate one another for the lumpy quality of relatively indivisible issues. At least theoretically, issue indivisibilities would appear not to be major impediments to successful bargaining (Fearon 1995: 382). Nonetheless, strong "homeland" loyalties often carry great emotional appeal and, thus, serve to render issues less divisible and to make compromise more difficult for some actors (Brubaker 1996). This factor has been particularly important in some ethnic conflicts.

⁴Iraq's motivations and calculations in 1990–91 remain somewhat opaque. With the defeat of the Baathist regime in 2003, new information may become available. For a detailed study of the war based on then publicly available information, see Freedman and Karsh (1993).

⁵Traditional explanations for World War I emphasize Germany's growing economic power at the center of Europe (see Choucri and North 1975; Calleo 1978). Copeland (2000) argues that Russia's increasing might was the destabilizing force.

The bargaining theory of war has generated an active research program. Much recent work has focused on the problem of private information with the implication, described by Eric Gartzke (1999), that it is precisely the unobservable traits of the actors that lead to violence and, in turn, make war so difficult to predict. The major study using this approach, Robert Powell's (1999) *In the Shadow of Power*, examines exogenous changes in the distribution of capabilities and, in turn, the probability of war under different configurations of power. Problems of credible commitment have been addressed more fully in the literature on war termination (Walter 1997; Goemans 2000). Even more recent work is focusing on the anomaly of why, once they start, wars are not ended quickly with the idea that conflict is a process in which information is revealed, prior beliefs are updated, war aims are altered, and so on (Wagner 2000; Filson and Werner 2002; Reiter 2003; Slantchev 2003).

The theory has also proven remarkably useful in understanding war. Most visibly, it now provides the foundation for several important but still competing explanations of the democratic peace (among others, see Bueno de Mesquita et al. 1999; Schultz 2001). It has also been usefully applied to the study of ethnic conflict (Fearon and Laitin 1996; Fearon 1998; Lake and Rothchild 1998; de Figueiredo and Weingast 1999). It directs our attention away from ancient hatreds, animosity, and competing claims to territory to the proximate causes that turn domestic disagreements into violence. Moreover, it suggests clear mechanisms for enhancing peaceful bargaining through greater transparency, confidence-building measures, mediation, and third-party guarantees (Walter 1997; Lake and Rothchild 1998).

The Essential Irrelevance of Anarchy

As we recognize the similarities in bargaining failures across different arenas, we must confront the question of anarchy, the trait that supposedly sets international relations off from virtually all other areas of politics (see Waltz 1979). If the same general theory explains strikes and legal strategies that occur under the shadow of a hierarchic state as well as war and internal conflict, we can reasonably ask "does anarchy matter"?

Many scholars automatically assume that anarchy, defined as the absence of any higher authority, does matter to domestic violence. Indeed, that was the initial rationale for arbitraging theories from international relations (Posen 1993). When the wave of domestic conflicts broke out in the early 1990s, many international relations scholars, myself included, jumped to the topic with the idea that we now had something to contribute. We expected that as states "failed" and slipped into anarchy, our theories of interstate war would have direct relevance. This expectation, I believe, was not entirely wrong-headed. But equally true, thinking about the conditions for stability and effective bargaining in divided societies tells us just as much, if not more, about anarchy and international politics than vice versa.

Although Somalia, Sierra Leone, and other states descended into anarchy and then widespread violence, there are many other cases of fragile but still effective states being pulled apart by civil war. There is no simple correlation between failed states and domestic violence. In turn, there are states that "failed" but managed to avoid large-scale communal violence, including the "velvet divorce" between the Czech Republic and Slovakia and the several states of the former Soviet Union. Anarchy appears to be neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for violence to erupt.

If internal violence is as much a cause as consequence of state collapse, there must be some prior stage in which authority is reinforced or unravels. In other words, groups must either decide to accept and work within the rules of the hierarchical state or reject those rules and deny the state's authority—thereby

bringing about the anarchy that then characterizes the relationship between the actors. In short, anarchy is endogenous. Civil war forces us to see this fact, long ignored in international relations, with potentially profound implications for how we think about politics and especially the distinction between international relations and comparative politics.

Analytically, the endogenous nature of anarchy implies that the common and often-prized distinction between international relations (the realm of anarchy) and comparative politics (the realm of hierarchy) evaporates, at least when we try to understand internal conflict. When groups choose to take up arms and challenge the status quo through violence, they are opting to act outside the constitutional rules of politics and rejecting the current hierarchy within their states. For any one state, there is no inherent difference between anarchy and hierarchy. Just like agreements between states, a domestic hierarchy is self-enforcing and exists only so long as the parties to that hierarchy consent to its terms. Groups can seek to destroy hierarchy by challenging it, just as the anticipation of its destruction can cause groups to turn to self-defense to protect themselves. Lurking underneath every hierarchical façade is the potential for internal conflict.

This actuality presents an opportunity, then, for arbitrage back from the study of civil war to international relations and political science. In doing so, we see venerable international relations concepts in a new light. For instance, the security dilemma is one of the core concepts in international relations theory and was one of the first "exports" to the study of internal conflict (Posen 1993). It is typically understood as an inherent feature of anarchy in which the efforts of one side to improve its security must necessarily threaten others, who respond in return, precipitating a cycle of escalation and potential violence (Jervis 1978). Yet, when applied to cases of civil war, the security dilemma can exert its devastating effects even prior to state failure—indeed, it may be one of the prime motors of state collapse. Rather than being a necessary consequence of anarchy, the problem of internal conflict coupled with the bargaining theory of war described above help scholars to see that the security dilemma is actually a problem of asymmetric information coupled with a problem of credible commitment. Since each party is unsure of the preferences of the other—whether it is aggressive or not—and no party can bind itself not to exploit the other should the opportunity arise, each must attend to its own security and arm more fully than if these bargaining problems could be resolved. This point is not merely semantic. When reformulated as a problem of asymmetric information and credible commitment, it is immediately apparent that the security dilemma is neither unique to anarchy, since bargaining failures occur in many realms, nor inherent in international relations, since there are mechanisms for mitigating bargaining failures even in the absence of a third-party enforcer. This use of the concept is quite different from how those in international relations typically conceive of it. The challenge becomes to identify the conditions and processes likely to create this potentially lethal combination of private information and uncredible commitments. But if the distinction between anarchy and hierarchy is essentially irrelevant to this dilemma, then the conditions and processes that spur violence within and between states might well be quite similar.

The Role of Extremists

The great weakness in the bargaining theory of war, at least in its current guise, is the "bad men" of history phenomenon. We know that some leaders are, at the very least, willing to run a higher risk of war than others and, at most, may positively desire war. Informational asymmetries, credible commitments, and issue indivisibilities only go so far in explaining violence. There appear to be "war lovers," as John Stoessinger (2001) terms them, who pull countries into violence even

when bargains may not only be available but known to be available by all parties. Wars prompted by such individuals are hard to reconcile with a bargaining approach.⁶

This parallels the problem of "extremists" in internal conflicts who often appear to desire violence for its own sake or who possess aspirations that cannot be satisfied through bargaining and, therefore, resort to violence. Indeed, Stoessinger (2001) labels Slobodan Milosevic of Serbia a "war lover" as well, arguing that the same desires that drove Adolf Hitler and Saddam Hussein to attack their neighbors led Milosevic to seek Serbian supremacy through violence against other groups within the former Yugoslavia.

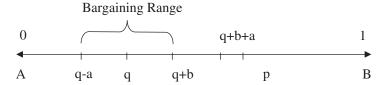
Although war lovers and extremists are no doubt important, they do not themselves bring nations to war. Given the costs of fighting that are imposed upon their countries or groups, how do these leaders recruit followers? Why do groups or whole societies follow these warriors into costly conflicts? International relationists often sidestep this question by retreating into models of the state as a unitary actor or assuming that extremists already control the instruments of state. But the case of internal conflict again imposes questions upon scholars more forcefully. At the start of civil wars, extremists are often not in power and, indeed, may exist as mere fringe groups within society. How do extremists build support in the first place and ultimately convince their followers that violence is the best course of action to accomplish their aims?

This is, in my view, the central question in conflict studies today. This essay cannot provide a complete answer. It would appear, however, that extremist leaders use violence or the threat of violence to bolster their own political power either visà-vis other states or internal opponents—and sometimes both. In turn, this behavior suggests the need for a more dynamic conception of bargaining and conflict in which the purpose of violence, at least in its early stages, is to alter the perceptions of moderates and shift their support to the extremists. (For a similar argument about terrorism, see Lake 2002.)

Extremists by definition hold political preferences that, in any distribution of opinion, lie in one of the "tails." In other words, their political beliefs are not widely shared by others.⁷ It follows from this condition that extremists typically lack the supporters necessary to obtain their goals, at least at first. They are a minority divorced, and often alienated, from the majority. The strategy adopted by extremists follows from their political weakness. Highlighting, accentuating, and even provoking foreign threats, extremists seek to create a "rally around the flag" (or cause) that expands their support. Such actions, of course, are similar to diversionary war hypotheses in international relations (Levy 1989), but the logic is more general. As is well known, Hitler played off feelings of German pride and vulnerability in throwing off the yoke of Versailles, although it is not clear that he was still using foreign threats to bolster his regime when he attacked Poland and began World War II. Similarly, ethnic extremists in the former Yugoslavia clearly precipitated violence toward outgroups to drive ethnic moderates into their arms, leading to a fractionalization and polarization of that state. Indeed, Serbian extremists disguised as Croats may even have used violence against Serbs and desecrated Serbian graves to heighten fears within their own communities and thereby drive moderates into their arms for protection.

⁶Knowing that B has a greater propensity for risk or for lower costs of war should induce A to offer a more favorable bargain to B but should not affect the probability of war. Only when B's costs of war are not only negative (that is, B gains positive utility from war) but greater than A's costs of war is violence inevitable. In short, war lovers must love war far more than others detest it to actually produce war.

⁷A bargaining approach does not itself explain why individuals hold the preferences that they do. For my purposes, it is necessary only to posit that preferences are diverse and randomly distributed over a population, implying that within any society some "extremists" do exist.



If p > q+b+a, as shown here, violence now "pays" to shift the bargaining range in the future.

FIG. 2. Extremist Strategy and the Shifting Probability of Victory.

Extremists use violence not so much against the other side—although that may be a not undesired consequence—but to mobilize political power for their own purposes. Their ambition is to shift the balance of power in their favor and, over time, to shift the bargaining range closer to their ideals. By running a greater risk of war or even fighting a war, extremists seek to build support for their cause. Just as leaders facing a difficult election or domestic crisis can resort to violence abroad, extremist leaders who lack broad domestic support can provoke ethnic violence and exacerbate threats to build group solidarity.

The success of this strategy depends, of course, on the reactions of the opponent and, in turn, the moderates in the extremist's own society or group. As Rui de Figueiredo and Barry Weingast (1999) demonstrate, for this strategy to succeed the threatening state or group must act in ways that confirm the extremist's dire warnings of the hostility of the other. A modest or moderate response from the target may well reveal the extremist as a demagogue or provocateur. But a vigorous and violent response can lead moderates to revise their view of the opponent in a more hostile direction. When the stakes are high, this revision may be sufficient to cause the group or state to rally behind the extremist and follow him into war. Indeed, if the issue is genocide or national survival, even small changes in the beliefs of the moderates about the true intent of the opponent may generate massive shifts in opinion in favor of the extremists; better to ally with the extremists who promise to protect you, the moderates may reason, than to be vulnerable to an opponent who may destroy you. By playing on these fears, war lovers who lack broad support may threaten or use violence to drive frightened moderates into their arms and thereby create new supporters.

In terms of the model above, provoking the opponent and even fighting a war can be rational as long as the increased support from moderates is large enough to shift the outcome of a future conflict (p) by more than the best deal the extremists could hope to get today (q+b) and current costs of fighting (a). In other words, extremist violence "pays" as long as future p > q + b + a (see Figure 2). Of course, future p is dependent upon the actions of the target as well as the new support obtained from the moderates, neither of which is captured in the simple heuristic model used here. But the key point is that violence now can sometimes be used to shift the balance of power in favor of the extremists later. In this way, war can be an effective part of a long term, dynamic strategy aimed not at bargaining over the division of an issue today but at shifting the bargaining range for the future.

In current bargaining models, the distribution of capabilities, even if evolving over time, is taken as exogenous. The case of extremist violence highlights that changing the distribution of capabilities can be an action available to actors and needs to be incorporated into the strategic setting—forcing us to reconsider how we model and, in turn, understand violent conflict. Even more important, it reveals

⁸Although Powell (1999:132–133) is concerned with long-term exogenous shifts in power and, therefore, does not consider the possibility that p might shift more than the total per period cost of fighting (a+b), inverting his proposition 4.1, as is done here, demonstrates that war will occur under these circumstances even in the presence of complete information.

once again that very similar processes are at work in both "domestic" and "international" conflicts.

Conclusion

There are important gains to be had from intellectual arbitrage on both sides of the interstate divide. It is not just researchers in international relations who may have something to add to the study of internal conflict, but the study of civil wars may help produce better theories of international politics as well. Internal conflict forces scholars to rethink cherished distinctions. Anarchy is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for violence, nor is it a cause of the security dilemma. Theories of war premised on the unique nature of international politics are thereby called into question. Indeed, there is a need to endogenize both anarchy and the distribution of capabilities—elements of international structure long taken as exogenous (Waltz 1979). Ultimately, differences between interstate and intrastate war may be found and recognized as important. But, we should not presume that such differences are large or profound or that one form of violence is wholly distinct from another. As always, insights are most likely to be found at the interstices.

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