Stathis Kalyvas’s *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* addresses four interrelated questions: What explains the variation of violence in civil war? Why are civil wars so demonstrably brutal? What is the causal direction between preexisting loyalties and violence? And how do macro-level causes of the war relate to the pattern of violence on the ground? Kalyvas’s answers spring from two related key intuitions based on fieldwork in Greece: “First, local dynamics [are] of fundamental importance and, second, violence [appears] to be less the result of powerful political identities and deep divisions and more their cause” (pp. 14-15). Thus, in line with the current understanding of cleavage identities as fluid and context dependent, Kalyvas calls into question the conventional wisdom that the causal arrow in coercive violent conflict runs from preconflict social divisions to violence. Instead, he proposes a theory of selective violence; a privatization of the politics of civil war through the role of denunciation motivated by personal conflicts.

Kalyvas argues that civil wars are unconventional or irregular wars, which alter the nature of sovereignty in a fundamental way. In an irregular war, territorial sovereignty varies by zones between two rival actors, and boundaries between controlled and twilight areas are blurred and fluid. Each actor’s objective is to establish control over contested areas, and as the war evolves, control determines the level of collaboration by the population. Acquisition of control, in turn, is determined by military effectiveness, which itself is undermined by the cost and chaos of civil war. The question in civil war, thus, becomes how to use available military capacity for coercion to the maximum advantage.

Kalyvas posits that political actors have two coercive options. The first—selective violence—personalizes targeting. Actors’ abilities to use selective violence are limited, however, by the requirement of collaboration, which, in turn, requires some control. Alternatively, authorities can use indiscriminate violence, which involves collective targeting. Kalyvas argues that random violence cannot reliably induce compliance and may be counterproductive, because it does not provide a clear structure of incentives for noncollaboration and may even produce incentives for defection to insurgents. The exception is when there is a significant imbalance of power between the two actors and the gathering of information for selective violence is costly.

In turn, although many innocent people suffer because of the difficulty and cost in verifying collaborators’ information, selective violence is a highly effective deterrent strategy, because it creates the perception that political actors can monitor and sanction behavior. There are many motivations for denunciations (including the personal), but their supply is restricted by the likelihood of retaliation. Building on these ideas, Kalyvas develops a game theoretic argument on the probability of denunciations with
respect to civilians’ association with a particular political actor and that political
actor’s relative control of territory, with the objective of predicting the political
actor’s use of selective violence. In sum, the equilibria suggest that the number of
denunciations of fellow civilians has a concave curvilinear relationship with a change
from incumbent to insurgent control of territory. Defections to the camp of either
political actor, in turn, are positively associated with that actor’s control of territory.
Consequently, taking into account the costs and benefits of using violence, Kalyvas
conjectures that political actors have an incentive to use selective (homicidal) vio-

It is these theoretical insights that constitute the heart of the book. For example,
as correctly pointed out by the author, these predictions contradict the multitude of
theories suggesting that violence is most intense in the most contested areas.
Furthermore, this argument is capable of explaining and predicting many of the pre-
viously puzzling spatial and temporal variations in civil war violence. Clearly, the
model simplifies reality, and Kalyvas articulates some reservations about this. In

The theory of selective violence speaks to spatial variation in the level and type
of violence resulting from changes in control by political actors in subnational units.
Showing the generalizeability of this theory, Kalyvas first surveys anecdotal evi-
dence from subnational units in civil wars throughout the world. Second, he subjects
the predictions of the theory to rigorous qualitative and quantitative tests against data
collected in interviews, judicial archives, local histories, ethnographies, agricultural
studies, research articles, and from secondary sources in one country—Greece. The first set of tests focus on the region of Argolid in southern Greece. The second set of tests use data from across the country.

Although the internal conflict in Greece involved a foreign occupation, the author makes a convincing case for why this conflict was a civil war. By and large, the results of the analysis of the two phases of the war in Argolid support the hypotheses about the type and level of violence used by incumbents and insurgents as a result of change in their control over territory. Furthermore, the analysis attempts to resolve the question of endogeneity while controlling for other factors.

The results question conventional wisdoms such as beliefs about the distribution of violence between incumbents and insurgents, and the thick description accompanying the multivariate analysis casts light on local paradoxes such as why entire villages joined the Germans in 1944 when the war was being won by the Allies. Importantly, the qualitative evaluation of the predictions of the theory also highlights mispredictions and allows the author to speculate about their causes that may include positive reciprocity and revenge. The second set of tests examines the accuracy of the predictions in the region of Almopia, and finally, across a number of regions in Greece. The results are largely consistent with various predictions of the theory but also highlight the distinctive features of Argolid and draw attention to factors that were not as evident in the regional analysis.

Overall, this analysis is extremely well executed. Some points could, however, be further explicated to the advantage of future studies. For example, Kalyvas defines civil war as “armed combat within the boundaries of a recognized sovereign entity between parties subject to a common authority at the outset of the hostilities” (p. 17). According to this definition, however, every insurgent and terrorist group that perpetrates violence against the state—and thereby rejects the initial common authority monopoly on violence—is engaged in a civil war. Kalyvas clarifies that civil war “entails a de facto territorial division” (p. 18) but what this territorial division precisely entails is not explained further. Thus, when the author specifically discusses control (pp. 210-245), it theoretically and anecdotally ranges from none to full for both actors. Similarly, the different types of conflict discussed in the context of the privatization of the political presumably all qualify as civil wars. The precise onset of civil war is important, because in discussing what the author calls the “pathologies” in the preceding study of civil war, he posits that “war is a social and political environment fundamentally different from peace” (p. 38). Consequently, he argues that the treatment of civil war by many authors as “just a different kind of electoral process” (p. 38) is fundamentally mistaken. Although incentive structures in war unarguably differ from incentive structures in peace, it would aid future analysis of conflict situations if the author had helped operationalize this transition.

To put my questions differently: When precisely does an insurgency become a civil war? And when do incentive structures change? Without such operationalization, it is difficult to surmise when Kalyvas’s theory will better predict patterns of violence than, for instance, a theory of electoral incentives (Wilkinson, 2004).
In sum, this book combines much of the best that comparative politics has to offer: conceptually clear and rigorous theorizing based on insights from extensive field work, and tested in a methodologically solid fashion on a wealth of quantitative and qualitative data. The conclusions constitute a major contribution to our understanding of violence in civil conflict. The theory generates a multitude of implications—only some of which the author has tested—and invites extensions that themselves will generate multiple testable implications. The subject matter is fascinating, and the author’s encyclopedic treatment of anecdotes from the literature on civil wars in general and a detailed history of one such war, makes the book a highly enjoyable read. In addition, the meticulous construction of the theory and explicit objectives laid out as reasons for the structure of the empirical analysis in addition to the detailed appendices will endear the book to students and instructors of the comparative method.

Jóhanna Kristín Birnir

*University of Maryland, College Park*

**Reference**