Stathis Kalyvas: The Logic of Violence in Civil War

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The Logic of Violence in Civil War by Stathis Kalyvas is a serious and pioneering attempt to demonstrate the mechanisms that explain violence in the context of civil war. Kalyvas examines the dynamics of internal wars by focusing on the micro level and by differentiating between the broad concept of civil war and the phenomenon of civil war violence. He shows that violence in a civil war can neither be reduced to irrational factors, such as strong emotions or illogical behavior, nor to pre-existing ideological cleavages. On the contrary, violence against civilians has its own rationale and logic.

Kalyvas' study breaks new ground for political science and the study of violence in two senses. First, his analysis separates the violence-and-civil-war pairing by distinguishing 'between violence as an *outcome* and violence as a *process'* (p. 21, emphasis in original). While previous studies focused on violence as a direct outcome of civil wars, Kalyvas understands civil war as an exogenous shock and deals with violence as a dependent variable. His nuanced theory breaks civil war violence down into two basic categories. Indiscriminate violence is executed *en masse* without regard for the actions or preferences of individuals. In contrast, selective violence describes aggression directed towards individuals who are targeted based on specific information about their actions.

This distinction between indiscriminate and selective violence leads Kalyvas to a second novel contribution. Contrary to conventional literature on violence and civil wars, Kalyvas understands the use of violence as rational. For him, violence is the end product of many individual rational actions by political actors and civilians, who work to fulfill their interests within a given territorial space. More specifically, Kalyvas claims that despite the frequency and planning that go into indiscriminate violence, it often proves to be counterproductive. Faced with death regardless of their actions, 'many people prefer to join the rival actor rather than die a defenseless death' (p. 160). Since armed groups in civil wars eventually realize that the incentives fostered by indiscriminate violence are against their interests, they replace it with selective violence. Though more costly, as it requires armed groups to collect specific information about individuals, selective violence gives individuals incentives to cooperate. Since selective violence requires information about specific people, which is most easily collected from individual non-combatants, Kalyvas argues that selective violence is 'a joint process, created by the actions of both political actors and civilians' (p. 209, emphasis in original). Instead of seeing the civilian as a mere pawn caught between the rebels and the state, he shows that noncombatants are agents in their own right.

The key variable in determining the availability of information and thus the ability of political actors to practice selective violence effectively is control. Kalyvas explains variance in the level of violence by the degree of control that the warring factions have over a particular geographic region. Differing levels of control give rise to different calculations, leading civilians to defection or denunciation. According to Kalyvas, the logic of violence unfolds as follows: the irregular warfare of civil war enables contenders to meddle and hide among the civilians. Hiding produces uncertainty and causes identification and communication problems. To overcome these obstacles, the competitors use violence to encourage active participation and denunciations from oppressed civilians. The stronger the actor's control of the area, the higher the rate of collaboration and denunciations. Also, the higher the control, the less likely it is that the actor would resort to violence. Perhaps most controversially, Kalyvas predicts that the parity of control between the actors 'is likely to produce no selective violence by any actors' (p. 204). This statement holds for two reasons. Firstly, in areas where control is evenly divided, political actors will be unable to collect enough information to practice selective violence. Secondly, they will be loath to engage in indiscriminate violence, for fear of encouraging mass defections to the other side. While areas of parity may experience large amounts of direct violence between political actors, as their armed forces come into direct contact with each other, this aspect is exogenous to the scope of Kalyvas' theory.

The dependent variable of Kalyvas' hypothesis varies across spatial lines, while the temporal lines are regrettably not fully developed. Kalyvas tests his theory rigorously on the case of the Greek civil war, focusing primarily on the micro level of the Argolid region in 1943–1944. Lacking in his argument is the intensity of selective violence, which can also be explained over a period of time. For instance, prewar or wartime grievances and feuds that fuel violence on ideological and intimate levels could decrease over time. Moreover, while Kalyvas explains the role of actors, he does not give the reader sufficient insight about the long-term impact of institutions. For example, within certain governmental structures, incumbents could well determine the logic of violence. Also, different types of political and judicial institutions, developed in areas controlled by the insurgents, might affect the use of violence against civilians.

While Kalyvas' thorough theoretical and methodological approach deserves much praise, it raises a few additional questions. Though his theory focuses on civil wars, his testing is based on the foreign occupied Greece during World War II. Since the majority of the combatants fell under Greek sovereignty before the outset of hostilities, Kalyvas contends that this case falls within his fairly broad definition of 'civil war', i.e. an 'armed combat within the boundaries of a recognized sovereign entity between parties subject to a common authority at the outset of

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hostilities' (pp. 5 and 17). However, this is pushing an already broad definition of civil war to the extreme. Though Kalyvas argues that the war had 'features parallel to many civil wars' (p. 249) despite the Nazi occupation, it would be important to see his theory tested on a civil war without external occupation.

Furthermore, though the theory focuses on explaining the incidence of selective violence, this accounts for only half of the homicides in Kalyvas' dataset (see Table 9.2 on p. 267). This suggests that indiscriminate violence deserves greater attention, even if it is harder to gain leverage on both theoretically and empirically. However, despite these concerns, rooted primarily in Kalyvas' omissions, which may be addressed in future research, this book is exemplary both as an overview of the civil wars literature in general and as a new approach to the study of violence within civil wars.

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