

How Civil Wars Help Explain Organized Crime—and How They Do Not

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Abstract

Large-scale organized crime occupies a gray zone between ordinary crime and political violence. The unprecedented scale of drug-related crime in Mexico has led to its description as an insurgency or even a civil war, a conceptual move that draws on recent studies that have associated civil war with large-scale criminality. By questioning both the “crime as civil war” and “civil war as crime” models, I argue that instead of folding the two phenomena, we should draw primarily from the micro-dynamics of civil war research program to identify areas of potentially productive cross-fertilization. I point to four such areas, namely, onset and termination, organization, combat and violence, and governance and territory. I conclude by sketching a theoretical and empirical agenda for the study of large-scale organized crime.

Keywords

organized crime, civil war, political violence

Civil Wars and Organized Crime: Insights from the Intersection of Two Phenomena

Large-scale organized crime occupies a gray zone between “ordinary crime” and political violence, an ambiguity that has been at the root of conceptual and analytical

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confusion. Rigid disciplinary and subdisciplinary boundaries have further contributed to this problem: crime has been a topic of choice for sociologists, while political scientists have focused primarily on political violence. Ironically, it is the very ambiguity of the phenomenon that is now forcing a long-due challenge of these disciplinary boundaries. This challenge has been motivated by the fact that large-scale organized crime has become both more visible and, in Central America at least, more prevalent (Seele, Arnson, and Olson 2013). However, merging the study of crime and political violence is not straightforward.

Motivated by the unprecedented scale of drug-related crime in Mexico, students of large-scale organized crime have borrowed various terms from the study of civil wars, describing it as a “criminal insurgency” or a new type of civil war. In doing so, they have drawn primarily from a recent paradigm in the study of civil wars. Inspired by the apparent absence of ideological agendas and the economic activities of several rebel movements, this paradigm treats civil wars as a form of organized crime. But is this the right conceptual move?

In this article, I question both the “crime as civil war” and “civil war as crime” models and advocate a different strategy of cross-fertilization, one based on the micro-dynamics of civil war research program. That is, rather than go the over-aggregation route by folding the two phenomena together, we should instead proceed by disaggregating and identifying dimensions where research can be particularly productive. I use the research on civil war as a way to suggest a way to do so in the study of organized crime.

I begin with a brief discussion of organized crime and provide a critical examination of both the crime as civil war and civil war as crime models. I then draw from the research program on the micro-dynamics of civil war to discuss four dimensions of potential cross-fertilization between the two fields: onset and termination, organization, combat and violence, and territory and governance. I conclude with theoretical and empirical recommendations.

What is Organized Crime?

Like other fraught concepts, such as terrorism or genocide, organized crime remains an ambiguous concept mixing empirical, legal, and normative dimensions.¹ The use of the term reflects a range of motivations, from the most abstract and analytical to the overtly political and partisan. Delegitimizing one’s opponent often tops the agenda. For example, it is not unusual for governments fighting insurgencies to describe their opponents as criminal. Conversely, governments dealing with large-scale organized crime may be tempted to describe it as a form of terrorism.

Reuter (2008) provides a useful definition of organized crime as a phenomenon comprising hierarchically organized groups of criminals with the ability to use violence, or the threat of it, for acquiring or defending the control of illegal markets in order to extract economic benefits from them. The core of this definition is the

presence of a coherent and hierarchical organization operating with a certain degree of stability and continuity. This feature differentiates organized crime from individuals engaging in criminal behavior in a sporadic and isolated way or small groups that lack hierarchy and organizational complexity and coherence. It also allows us to differentiate these organizations from politically motivated groups that seek to topple the government and replace it—although it overlooks a potential overlap with rebel groups which are involved in illegal markets in order to extract economic benefits that allow them to finance their insurgent activities, like the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) or the Taliban in Afghanistan. At the same time, this definition points to a key area of convergence between criminal and rebel groups: both effectively challenge the government's monopoly of violence, although their motivations in doing so diverge. Sooner or later, however, both criminal organizations and rebel groups confront the state's full might. This convergence has led several analysts to treat organized crime as a form of insurgency or civil war.

Organized Crime as Civil War

Societies experiencing large-scale organized crime for the first time often find themselves at a loss for the precise words to describe it. Until recently, large-scale banditry and piracy were considered phenomena that belonged to a vanished past or a geographically marginal present. Scrambling for the right vocabulary, analysts and scholars have relied on emotionally powerful but vague descriptions such as “hell,”² they have coined polemical neologisms such as “narcoterrorism,” and they have made liberal use of the term “war,” as in “drug war” or just plain “civil war” (Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research [HIICR] 2010). Lately, the term “criminal insurgency” has gained considerable traction (Grillo 2012; Sullivan and Elkus 2010). Some even speak of “the new Mexican Civil War” (Schedler 2013). In Mexico, war metaphors appear to be the most popular of all and the media mine recent wars for relevant examples, including such improbable cases as the Vietnam War. For example, the Mexican newspaper *Milenio* described a wave of coordinated attacks against federal police posts and a military base by a Mexican cartel following the arrest of a senior figure, as a “Tet offensive” (Grillo 2012; Mackey and Lopez 2009).

These metaphors are based on both empirical and conceptual foundations. Empirically, the key intuition is the scale of violence and the size and range of operations of criminal groups. The Mexican cartels have developed a high level of military capacity, including the ability to launch coordinated attacks against the police and the military (Mackey and Lopez 2009). The estimated cumulative number of homicides that can be attributed to Mexican organized crime from 2006 to 2011 exceeds 50,000, about 10,000 per year on average (Molzahn, Ríos, and Shirk 2012, 11). Close to 30,000 professionals of violence are estimated to work in the paramilitary branches of criminal organizations as bodyguards, street fighters,

kidnappers, torturers, or killers (Schedler 2013, 8). This type of organizational capacity corresponds to casualty counts that elevate organized crime in Mexico to the level of a civil war (Lessing 2012, 51).

Conceptually, the comparison between organized crime and civil war emerges out of a logic of elimination: since the scale of the problem has reached the level of a civil war and since it is not an interstate war, it follows that it must be a civil war. Schedler (2013) takes the metaphor to its farthest point by describing the Mexican polity as a “civil war democracy,” that is a democratic regime unable to contain organized violence. Moreover, he argues that civil war transforms the nature of democratic rule by diluting it and ultimately subverting it—and so does organized crime.

And yet, there is an obvious objection to the characterization of large-scale criminal violence as an instance of insurgency or civil war. Definitions of civil wars typically include “political objectives” among the goals of groups engaged in conflict against the state (e.g., Sambanis 2004). However, criminal organizations lack both an ideological profile and an explicit political agenda.³ Furthermore, they do not seek to take over the government—indeed, they don’t even pretend to be pursuing this goal.⁴ Unlike even the most predatory rebel groups, they do not attempt to disguise their profit-oriented motivations behind a political discourse. If anything, they are mainly interested in preserving the political status quo and co-opting existing political institutions rather than subverting them (Osorio 2013, 17). Those accustomed to seeing political conflict and revolution in a positive light, and they are many in Mexico—where these terms tend to be associated with heroic, justice-seeking agrarian revolutionaries, leftist urban insurgents, or politically conscious street protesters—abhor the use of this vocabulary to describe psychotic or cold-blooded killers motivated by profit alone. It comes as no surprise then, that the “organized crime as civil war” model could be interpreted as a poorly disguised attempt to glorify or legitimize crime.

A response to this critique consists in drawing from the “civil war as organized crime” model that dominated the civil war literature a few years ago. True, this response goes, criminal organizations lack an ideological agenda, but so do rebel groups in many civil wars, especially the so-called new wars that have proliferated since the end of the Cold War. And isn’t it true that many prominent insurgent groups, such as the Colombian FARC or the Taliban in Afghanistan, engage in drug production and trafficking (Piazza 2012)? In short, if we accept to designate non-ideological conflicts as civil wars, this argument goes, why not call the Mexican drug wars civil wars as well? This is precisely the argument offered by Schedler (2013, 6), “In terms of motivation, the driving motives of violence [in Mexico] are not ideology, but material gain. The new Mexican civil war is not a classical civil war in which ideological insurgencies strive to topple state power. It is a prototypical ‘new’ civil war, fought for material gain not social justice.” Thus, the soundness of this argument hinges on the validity of the “civil war as organized crime” model, to which I now turn.

Civil War as Organized Crime

A relatively recent body of studies of civil war, primarily by economists, has stressed the criminal dimension of rebellion and civil war. Building on a series of earlier studies that sought to model rebellion as organized crime (Grossman 1999; Brito and Intriligator 1992; Hirshleifer 1991), Collier (2000) characterized rebellion as an instance of quasi-criminal activity, bent on predation, looting, and greed; he also proposed a theory whereby rebellion was conceptualized as a particular instance of criminal activity, in contrast to the up-to-then widely shared perception of rebellion as essentially justice seeking. Now, rebels were depicted as primarily motivated by the goal of appropriating resources for their own benefit. Specifically, they were more likely to develop the military capacity necessary to challenge governments in poor and weak countries, where the biggest prize worth appropriating is revenue from exportable commodities. Therefore, this theory predicted that civil wars were more likely in countries that are both poor and endowed with natural resources, both licit (timber, oil, diamonds) and illicit (coca, opium). Collier's thesis that "the extent of primary commodity exports is the strongest single influence on the risk of conflict" was empirically tested and validated in a subsequent study by Collier and Hoeffler (2004, 26).⁵ This approach echoes a parallel argument by noneconomists, according to which the end of the Cold War gave way to apolitical rebellions motivated primarily by narrow material concerns and gratuitous predation on civilians, often referred to as new wars (Enzensberger 1994).

The civil war as organized crime model has been critiqued extensively and convincingly. Studies focusing on the nexus of natural resource wealth and civil war suffer from considerable measurement error, endogeneity, lack of robustness, and uncertainty about causal mechanisms (Ross 2006); using revenue from commodities or illicit resources to finance a rebellion does not necessarily imply criminal intent, and many civil wars that exhibit predatory behavior also reveal features suggesting a variety of additional motivations and processes (Kalyvas 2001). The "criminal rebels thesis" fails even in its most favorable case, Colombia, where the FARC insurgency has been using revenue from coca production to finance a war that has preserved a significant level of ideological content (Gutiérrez Sanín 2004); in fact, rather than initiating the cultivation of coca, the FARC have tended to move in places where coca cultivation is already established in order to tax it (Sánchez and Díaz 2007, 131-205). Recent studies have also rehabilitated the role of grievances as a driver of civil war onset, even following the end of the Cold War (Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug 2013; Wimmer 2012). In short, it is highly questionable whether the civil war as organized crime model holds sufficient empirical validity as a characterization of civil wars. For all these reasons, it should not be used to lend support to the description of large-scale organized crime as a form of insurgency and civil war.

Nevertheless, it is true that the civil war as organized crime model has made a valid point, namely that criminal activities are not a simple sideshow of civil wars but a key activity of many rebel organizations. Likewise, it is equally true that the

crime as civil war model has alerted us to the war-like dimension of large-scale organized crime.

How Can the Study of Civil War Contribute to the Study of Organized Crime?

To say that large-scale organized crime and civil wars are distinct phenomena is not to assert the absence of overlap. On the contrary, there are significant benefits to be reaped by exploring the intersection of the two phenomena (Kalyvas 2008a). Until recently, however, these areas of convergence were overlooked as the two phenomena were severely segregated by disciplinary boundaries.

On the one hand, the study of criminal violence is a leading research endeavor in sociology. Sociologists pioneered the study of crime, including urban street gangs and mafias, although their focus was primarily on the United States (e.g., Coughlin and Venkatesh 2003; Sánchez Jankowski 1991; Thrasher 1929, exceptions include Gambetta 1996; Varese 2013). Although sociologists were in the past leading students of political conflict and violence, conceptualized as revolution rather than civil war (Tilly 1978; Skocpol 1979), the decline of historical sociology all but removed that object of inquiry from this discipline. On the other hand, political scientists have traditionally overlooked crime, focusing primarily on its impact on political behavior (Romero, Magaloni, and Díaz-Cayeros 2013; Bateson 2012). Likewise, conflict scholars in political science have largely neglected the study of organized crime, despite its critical importance in developing countries and its impact on the political process. Only recently, have more political scientists turned their attention to it (e.g., Trejo and Ley 2013; Osorio 2013). On top of it, social scientists from a variety of other disciplines, from anthropology and history to economics, have researched organized crime, thus challenging the rigid boundaries of the past.

In what follows, I draw from areas of the civil war literature that hold the most relevance for the study of organized crime, and particularly the study of its micro-dynamics. My discussion is organized along four dimensions: the onset and termination of civil war and organized crime, the organizational features of rebel and criminal groups, the dynamics of combat and violence, and their relation to governance and territory.

Onset and Termination

Studies of civil war onset have sought to identify differences between states that have experienced civil war and states that have not. The list of potential correlates is long and includes almost every conceivable driver of civil war onset, from economic, political, historical, geographic, and demographic variables all the way up to global climate patterns. Partly because the etiology of civil wars is complex and partly because civil wars are rare events, this literature has resulted in largely indeterminate or contested findings.

There is considerable disagreement over the significance of a number of potential drivers of civil war, such as ethnicity or natural resources. This has been compounded by serious difficulties in operationalization, measurement, inference, and the identification of causal mechanisms (Ward, Greenhill, and Bakke 2010; Ross 2006). Overall, the most robust correlate of civil war onset is a country's per capita gross domestic product (GDP), which has been interpreted as proxy for either low opportunity costs associated with joining rebel organizations (Collier and Hoeffler 2004) or weak state capacity (Fearon and Laitin 2003). It is also possible to point to several empirical patterns. Civil wars, particularly when fought as irregular or guerrilla wars (or "insurgencies"), tend to take place in geographic contexts characterized by a human ecology of rural settlements located in rough terrain (Kocher 2004). Following the end of the Cold War, civil conflicts have erupted in very poor countries—Paul Collier's (2007) "Bottom Billion"—but also in the ruins of the fallen Soviet empire or in the broader Middle East.

International dynamics and macro-historical processes are also a key dimension of civil wars. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union and the United States provided states and rebels with ideological inspiration and material assistance (Westad 2007). The end of the Cold War is associated with both a decline in civil wars and a transformation of the way they are fought (Kalyvas and Balcells 2010). An acute need to finance insurgency following the drying up of Soviet assistance led many surviving or potential rebels to seek alternative resources, especially illicit ones. Insofar as insurgencies are receiving external assistance, it has come primarily from neighboring states in the context of regional power struggles (Tamm 2013). Often, these states are poor themselves and take advantage of the war to engage in widespread exploitation of natural resources, thus encouraging the emergence and spread of criminal activity, as suggested for instance by the practice of Uganda and Rwanda in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Samset 2002). How do these variables play out for the onset of organized crime?

We lack cross-national studies of the onset of large-scale organized crime violence, but the most visible cases, primarily located in Latin America, do not appear to fit into the Bottom Billion mold. They are neither very low per capita GDP/capacity states nor ethnically divided polities. Mexico is an advanced country with an industrial base and an extensive middle class (Molzahn, Ríos, and Shirk 2012, 25). Likewise rough terrain is not particularly relevant: violence appears to be largely urban in nature.⁶ Resources are clearly crucial, but they not exactly natural: they are the result of the criminals' own productive efforts rather than the looting of natural wealth. Obviously, geography is a critical variable. The prevalence of large-scale organized crime throughout Central America related to the proximity to the giant US drug market. More generally, the onset of large-scale organized crime appears to be related to external factors, such as geographic distance from drug suppliers and consumers, international supply routes, and shifts in the domestic policies of drug importers. For example, the rise of drug cartels in Mexico was partly a function of changes that affected Colombian producers. Initially, the US crackdown on

the Caribbean drug supply routes into the US starting in 1982 forced Colombian cartels to seek alternative delivery routes through Mexico, which led to the upgrade of Mexican criminal groups into “paid couriers” for the Colombian cartels. Then, the Colombian government’s decision to crack down on its drug cartels during the 1990s opened up the opportunity that ultimately resulted in the explosive growth of the Mexican cartels, eventually allowing them to turn the Colombians into their suppliers (Grillo 2012; *The Economist* 2011).

Perhaps the most important factor behind the rise of large-scale organized crime, at least in Mexico, is political (or institutional): the transition from autocratic, one-party rule to democratic, multiparty rule. There is a widespread consensus among scholars that the process of democratization destroyed a low-violence “equilibrium” that had been established between the state and extant criminal groups, thus opening the doors to the growth of organized crime. More specifically, during the period when it ruled Mexico, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) allowed the operation of criminal groups but contained their growth and checked their violence.⁷ As other parties made political inroads beginning in the 1990s, the PRI’s control of trafficking organizations gradually diminished. However, scholars diverge when it comes to the exact mechanisms that produced this change.

According to one account, democratization destroyed established patronage networks that had tied criminal groups to political bosses; it was, thus, the decline in political and social control that led to a rise in violence (Villarreal 2002). A second account highlights the massive defection of police and military personnel to the cartels in the late 1990s, possibly because the transition to democracy made many, especially in the army, nervous about their place in the new regime: “Badge-wearing officers were especially worried by demands to clean up abuses of the old regime. Families of the ‘disappeared’ marched daily in the capital, and several officers were court-martialed for human rights abuses or drug corruption” (Grillo 2012, 97). In turn, these defections had two effects. First, they undermined the police, weakening and dividing it. “In the old days,” Grillo (2012, 104) points out, “police officers were rotten, but at least they worked together. In democracy, police work for competing mafias and actively fight each other. Gangsters target both good police who get in their way and bad police who work for their rivals.” Second, these defections raised the military capacity of the cartels by injecting into them high-skilled professional muscle. Often, the security forces found themselves outgunned. A third account argues that democratization eroded the feasibility of long-standing, corrupt arrangements between the ruling PRI and organized criminal groups by making the political system more competitive and increasing the number of political elites. The rise in political competition motivated politicians to become more responsive to the electorate and address its demand for order and security. Thus, politicians took crime fighting seriously, but either because it was already too late or because they did so ineffectively, they caused an escalation in conflict and a rise in violence (Osorio 2013). Finally, according to a fourth account, democratization led to the renegotiation and breakdown of government protection deals that subnational police and

judicial agents had provided to criminal organizations for a long time, forcing these organizations to adopt new, more aggressive, strategies to defend their own turf, while also offering them a unique opportunity to try to conquer new territories (Trejo and Ley 2013).

Although institutional variables do not loom large in the civil war literature, a few studies report a positive correlation between “anocracy” or “semidemocracy” and the risk of civil war onset.⁸ Fearon and Laitin (2003, 85) argue that “anocracies” are weak regimes, lacking the resources to be successful autocracies or containing an unstable mix of political forces that makes them unable to move to crush nascent rebel groups. Although the causal mechanisms behind the surge of rebel groups and organized crime during democratic transitions appear to diverge, this parallel between civil war and organized crime suggests a research area that is worth further exploration.

To summarize, despite the indeterminate and contested findings on civil war onset and the early and tentative character of the literature on the onset of organized crime, a review of the two bodies of research suggests that the processes driving large-scale political violence on the one hand and organized crime on the other diverge in certain fundamental ways. In general, civil wars tend to erupt in the poorest countries of all and target the weakest governments. In contrast, large-scale organized crime appears to emerge in more developed countries experiencing a democratization process.

In an intriguing way, this comparison reveals that the onset of large-scale organized crime resembles the onset of terrorism rather than that of civil war. Terrorism’s overt political agenda aside, there are some striking parallels between the two phenomena: like large-scale organized crime, terrorism tends to entail clandestine, primarily urban, and nonterritorial operations more likely to occur in countries with intermediate levels of development, democratic governments, and older, more established states (de la Calle and Sánchez-Cuenca 2012). In turn, these suggest two policy recommendations. First, as more poor countries develop, urbanize, and democratize, the risk of large-scale organized crime may substitute for the risk of civil war risk. Second, understanding how to deal with the challenges posed by organized crime could productively draw from our existing understanding of how to deal successfully with terrorism.

The study of civil war termination is less developed than that of onset. The normative preference tends to be for conflict resolution, or the peaceful settlement of conflicts which has become much more common following the end of the Cold War. Considerable resources are invested in mediation, peacekeeping, and peace building. In contrast, mediation and negotiated settlements are not regarded as desirable ways to terminate the scourge of criminal violence. Indeed, the bulk of the policy-oriented literature focuses on ways to make state action against crime more efficient.

However, it may make sense not to dismiss from the outset the possibility of achieving tacit settlements between state authorities and criminal groups—normative and moral considerations aside. First, the evidence coming from Mexico suggests

that not only has the state's campaign against drug cartels failed to defeat them, but it has caused an enormous escalation of violence and has possibly worsened the problem instead of solving it (Osorio 2013). Second, cartels seem open to the possibility of some kind of negotiated settlement. In fact, they frequently make public calls for "dialogue" with governments, in hopes of agreeing on a "national pact" to end the country's violent drug war (Mackey and Lopez 2009). Third, there is evidence that negotiated truces between governments and gangs are already taking place. The most notable one is a truce between the government of El Salvador and the gangs Barrio 18 and Mara Salvatrucha. Although the government has denied its existence (and although the truce appears to have unraveled), there is credible evidence that it took place and that it helped bring down the rate of homicides from 70 per 100,000 in 2011 to a 40 per 100,000 in March 2012 (Martínez 2013).

Because, the cross-national study of civil war onset (and to some extent, termination as well) has failed to produce very strong results, researchers have increasingly adopted a strategy of theoretical and empirical disaggregation, focusing on the dynamics of civil war and relying on micro-level data—hence the micro-dynamics of civil war research program (Kalyvas 2008a). In the remainder of this article, I draw primarily from this area of research.

Organization

Groups engaging in large-scale criminal activity share common features with other organizations: they must recruit, train, monitor, reward, and sanction individual members. They need to preserve and enhance the structural integrity of the organization, ensure the efficacy of its chain of command, finance its operations, combat defection and fragmentation among middle management and rank and file, and fend off challenges from the competition. Obviously, criminal groups that employ violence differ from most other commercial organizations in terms of the risk faced by their members: because their activities challenge the state's monopoly of violence, their members are placed directly in the state's line of fire. Furthermore, competition for market share between groups is likely to turn violent. To evade and counter state crackdown and manage competitive challenges, these groups must deploy a paramilitary apparatus staffed by "specialists of violence." In this respect, their needs parallel those of rebel groups. Although, this parallel has been noted (e.g., Flanigan 2012; Schmid 1996), it has failed to stimulate systematic research so far.

Recent research on rebel groups has uncovered a substantial range of origins and has stressed the impact that these origins have on subsequent trajectories, including the groups' cohesion and performance. The attributes shaping group trajectories include the kind of resources initially available to political entrepreneurs (Weinstein 2006), their links to radical transnational social movements and the international system more generally (Kalyvas and Balcells 2010), and the type of social networks mobilized by "first movers" (Staniland 2012; Gould 1995). In general, rebel groups

that are able to develop coherent political ideologies, rely on networks with strong preexisting ties, link with transnational social movements, and become integrated into global cleavages tend to be more cohesive and more effective than groups that lack these attributes.

These studies hold a clear implication for criminal organizations. There is indeed a body of evidence suggesting that cohesive groups are more resilient in the face of state repression (Staniland 2012) and that groups composed of opportunistic individuals should perform poorly and victimize the population (Weinstein 2006). Because they generally lack the attributes listed earlier, with the partial exception of preexisting ties,⁹ criminal groups ought to display inferior effectiveness. By recruiting profit-oriented, opportunistic individuals, criminal groups should lack cohesion and be particularly vulnerable to state repression. However, criminal groups have displayed significant resilience. This is particularly puzzling when we compare criminal groups to their “peer” rebels, namely the least ideological rebel groups. Whereas the latter fight against failed or extremely weak states, large criminal groups, such as the Italian Mafia or the Mexican cartels, are able to withstand much more formidable states. One way to approach this issue is to examine on the violent interaction between armed groups and the state and disaggregate concepts such as “effectiveness.” Unlike an effective rebel group, which is either a group that succeeds in overthrowing a government or keep surviving and fighting, an effective criminal group is one that manages to transform itself while maintaining the capacity to profit from its core business.

As mentioned at the outset, a crucial difference between criminal groups and many rebel groups is a lack of an ideological agenda by the former. However, the absence of a formal ideology does not necessarily imply the lack of a group identity. Criminal groups do invest in such identities, often by means of elaborate induction rituals (Gambetta 1996) in order to enhance their cohesion and effectiveness (Kreps 1990). On the Mexican streets, being in the drug underworld is referred to as being in “the movement.” Members celebrate their heroes and express pride in their ability to beat back the military (Grillo 2012, 8; Grayson and Logan 2012, 75-76). They are ensconced into their own cultural milieu, the “narcocultura,” listen to particular genres of music and cinema (the “narcocorridos” and “narco-movies”), follow their own clothing fashion (“buchones”), and in some cases develop elaborate religious rituals. For example, the Familia Michoacana, which claimed to be a representative and protector of the people of Michoacán, required from its soldiers to carry Bibles (Grillo 2012, 169-85; Finnegan 2010).

Research on why and how individuals join rebel groups has punctured the long held assumption that the dominant motivation is grievance. It has pointed instead to a very large set of motivations that include grievances, opportunism, peer pressure, revenge, survival, or coercion (Humphreys and Weinstein 2008; Kalyvas 2006). In contrast, the dominant assumption about criminal groups is that the key motivation for joining is profit. Mexican cartels attract young street gang members by offering them money, cell phones and guns (Grillo 2012, 166). One of them, the

Zetas, have gone so far as to place advertisements in billboards offering “a good salary, food, and attention to your family” or “benefits, life insurance, a house for your family and children” (Grillo 2012, 105). These groups also hire professionals, such as policemen and former members of the military,¹⁰ while recruitment of foreign mercenaries (such as former members of the Guatemalan Kaibil commandos) is not uncommon (Grillo 2012, 105). In addition, many of the Sinaloa cartel’s recruits come from the Mara Salvatrucha gangs of El Salvador and Honduras (Grillo 2012, 102). Finally, Mexican cartels have developed a symbiotic, exclusive, and hierarchical relation to street gangs (Grillo 2012).¹¹ In contrast, and as would be expected, political motivations appear to be rare. “Many Salvadoran gangbangers,” writes Grillo (2012, 5), “are the sons of communist guerrillas—and call themselves combatants just like their fathers. But they don’t care about Che Guevara and socialism, just money and power.” However, studies of rebel group recruitment suggest that joining a criminal group could also be the result of a much broader range of motivations in addition to, or even instead of profit. Embeddedness in local social networks or revenge, for example, could be important individual drivers of joining.

A study comparing members of a rural rebel group and urban street gangs in Haiti reports that the biggest difference between them is that gang members are more likely to have been victims of a violent crime by a non-family member (Kolbe 2013, 5).¹² Unsurprisingly, street recruit from among the same demographic than the rebel group does (i.e., young males), but rather more surprisingly, individuals are equally likely to say that they joined the gang in order to serve their community. Of course, this could well be a rationalization, but it could also be a reflection of the effort that some criminal groups expand in order to present themselves as the protectors of local communities. For example, the Familia Michoacana placed a newspaper advertisement where they posed the question “Who are we?,” answering, “Workers from the Tierra Caliente region in the state of Michoacán, organized by the need to end the oppression, the humiliation to which we have constantly been subjected by people who have always had power” (Finnegan 2010).

In short, the study of organizational cohesion and performance among criminal groups stands to benefit considerably from existing work on rebel groups. Comparisons between various criminal groups, as well as between these groups and both opportunistic and ideological rebel groups, should shed considerable light on the sources of organization cohesion and effectiveness.

Combat and Violence

Combat and violence is the one area where researchers of organized crime have been most eager to emulate research on the micro-dynamics of civil war. Much remains to be done, however.

Violence encompasses two key dimensions. The first refers to the organization of the armed conflict (or simply “combat”) and the second to its direct human cost. The civil war literature has focused extensively on the various modalities of armed

combat. Guerrilla warfare, a war “with no fronts,” has been analyzed extensively, but civil wars are often fought conventionally (Kalyvas and Balcells 2010). Counterinsurgency, the state’s response to rebellion, has also been the object of wide-ranging analysis, producing long and inconclusive debates on the optimal mix of coercion and public good provision, the causes of the different forms of coercion (e.g., selective vs. indiscriminate violence), and their impact (Kalyvas 2006). Recent research has also highlighted the organizational fragmentation of civil wars and the tendency toward infighting (or “on-side” fighting) and side-switching (Christia 2013). In fact, there are almost twice as many “conflict dyads” (i.e., two sides locked in conflict) as actual civil conflicts—487 “dyads” in 236 conflicts between 1946 and 2007. In other words, most civil wars entail multiple simultaneous conflicts (Harbom, Melander, and Wallensteen 2008). Again, this body of research holds important insights for the study of criminal groups.

It is obviously difficult to characterize the type of combat in Mexico. Criminal organizations resemble terrorist groups since they operate clandestinely. However, they also appear to be able to exercise a limited measure of territorial control in some parts of the country (Grillo 2012, 106), as well as field an organized military force that can confront the state effectively under some conditions. At least one cartel, the Zetas, have contributed to the escalation of violence by fielding highly trained personnel and sophisticated weaponry, leading to a remarkable escalation of violence, reminiscent of a full-fledged civil war rather than an urban terrorist campaign. It is precisely this feature of the violence that has prompted comparisons of the Mexican case to insurgencies and civil war. At the same time, it is unclear whether this escalation is militarily sustainable insofar as the state remains stronger by orders of magnitude. Although the cartels lack the ability to defeat the government, they have been able to infiltrate the government apparatus and derive a tremendous advantage from it.

Combat takes place to protect supply corridors from competing groups or in response to state repression, with a substantial amount of violence taking the form of individual assassinations and massacres, occurring outside combat. According to the Mexican government’s breakdown of organized crime homicides, only 13 percent are the result of clashes with security forces (the equivalent of “battle deaths” in a war), with the great majority of victims (87 percent) murdered by participants in organized crime. The victims include innocent civilians, public officials (innocent or not), and—mainly—rival criminals (Molzahn, Ríos, and Shirk 2012, 6).

It is also the case that the state’s campaign against criminal groups has used well-known counterinsurgency tropes, such as the claim of “reconquering territory” (Grillo 2012, 112). As well, it has been plagued by problems that recur in counterinsurgency campaigns, including the counterproductive effects of indiscriminate violence by security forces lacking fine-grained, local knowledge and indifferent to the consequences of their behavior (Grillo 2012, 128-29). Police investigators regularly engage in abusive behavior, including the widespread use of torture and many defendants languish in jail for months or years without a sentence (Molzahn, Ríos,

and Shirk 2012, 27). The unreliability of the Mexican police and its complicity with cartels has led to the widespread use of the military—a blunt instrument to say the least—during the Calderon administration (2006–2012). The ultimate result of this campaign has been the escalation of criminal violence: like many counterinsurgency campaigns in civil wars, the results of anti-cartel law-enforcement campaigns have driven a ninefold increase in cartel-state violence in Mexico (Osorio 2013). In Brazil, however, the outcome has been different: criminal violence has plunged by two-thirds (Lessing 2013). A comparative analysis of counter-cartel campaigns could highlight differences in factors such as institution building and governance, selectivity of coercion, and provision of public goods.

The situation in Mexico is also characterized by increasing fragmentation and infighting between criminal groups. In 2006, six major transnational drug cartels were operating in Mexico, but four years after that there were at least twice as many, while over sixty local criminal groups had emerged (Guerrero 2013). Organizational fragmentation has been linked to infighting and violence; unfortunately, research on rebel fragmentation remains underdeveloped and the question of its causes have yet to be properly researched (Bakke, Cunningham, and Seymour 2012).

Turning to the second dimension of violence, one notices that levels of violence in countries experiencing large-scale crime, particularly in Central America, are of the same order of magnitude with many civil wars. Guatemala and El Salvador are bloodier now than they were during their civil wars (Bateson 2013, 2; *The Economist* 2011). The number of homicides in Mexico easily surpasses fatality thresholds that researchers use to classify armed conflicts as civil wars. Levels of brutality also match those of many civil wars. Descriptions of violence in Mexico evoke an incomprehensible, grotesque “stranger-than-fiction violence,” replete with torture, mutilations, and the most abject atrocities: dismembered bodies spread onto highways, severed heads in coolers delivered to newspapers, murdered policemen dressed up in a comedy sombrero with a carved smile on their cheeks, human faces sewn onto soccer balls (Grillo 2012, 203). Observers are now characterizing this extreme form of violence as the “South American method of warfare” (Johnson 2013). Although telling, these descriptions can be misleading, implying that criminal activity is inseparable from large-scale violence. However, organized crime need not produce high levels of violence (Gambetta 1996). Criminals are primarily interested in maximizing their profits and high levels of violence can disrupt their interests; bribes and pay offs to politicians, the police or local officeholders are preferable. In short, it is incorrect to assume that either criminality in general or the drug trade in particular, is inherently violent (Andreas and Wallman 2009).

How does criminal violence escalate to such levels? Recent studies have explored the sources of variation in the violence of civil wars. Arguments include signaling, whereby weak rebels try to show that the state is incapable of protecting the population (Hultman 2008), lose control exercised by commanders, allowing the rank-and-file to gratuitously victimize civilians (Weinstein 2006) and coercion, intended to minimize civilian defection and consolidate territorial control (Kalyvas 2006).

There is a clear coercive dimension in the use of violence by drug cartels in Mexico, serving to intimidate individuals from cooperating with either state authorities or rival groups. Murders are often accompanied by messages, such as “Talked too much,” “So that they learn to respect,” “You get what you deserve” (Finnegan 2010). Likewise, the observed concentration of violence in drug-trafficking areas (Molzahn, Ríos, and Shirk 2012) and the tit-for-tat nature of much violence, suggests an association between violence and territorial contestation. And, although individuals joining the cartels are opportunistic, there is little to suggest that their violence is independent of their leaders’ goals. In fact, the opposite seems to be the case: excessive violence was, initially at least, associated with the Zetas, the most tightly organized and militarized cartel. The subsequent expansion of the Zetas led to a widespread imitation of its methods. For example, the Sinaloa cartel copied the Zetas’ paramilitary way of organizing by creating its own cells of combatants with heavy weaponry and combat fatigues (Grillo 2012, 106). This suggests that practices of violence must have been the result of a strategic choice rather than an indicator of moral hazard.

The civil war literature distinguishes between selective and indiscriminate violence, suggesting that coercive state and rebel strategies tend to be more effective when their targeting is highly discriminate (Kalyvas 2006). Mexican data do not allow the disaggregation of violence into selective and indiscriminate, but the evidence suggests the presence of both. The violence of Mexican cartels ranges from the assassination of public servants, journalists, and individuals speaking or working against them (or for rival groups) all the way to indiscriminate massacres.¹³ In response, state security forces often lacking local information and feeling frustrated in the face of an invisible enemy, have been less than discriminate in their application of violence, a practice that has led to the escalation of criminal violence (Grillo 2012, 128-29).

Students of civil war have also pointed to the perils of imposing a macro-framework on a process that is often driven by local dynamics. What appears on the macro level to be ethnic or sectarian violence could be motivated, when one looks at fine-grained data, by feuding between competing individuals, neighborhoods, or villages that adopt the macro-cleavage as convenient cover. Civil wars, in other words, do not only politicize violence; they also privatize it (Kalyvas 2003, 2006; Martin 2014). It is very likely that the violence of organized crime may also conceal a similar dynamic, one that is ignored because either we lack the appropriate data or, when we do not, we tend to dismiss it.

An important recent strand in the literature focuses on the emergence and impact of pro-state militias and related paramilitary groups, often a grassroots result of the violence exercised by both rebels and the state (Peic 2013; Schubiger 2013; Kalyvas 2008b). As large-scale criminal violence escalates, it is possible to imagine that a similar self-defense movement can emerge in response. Indeed, recent reports from Mexico document the appearance of self-defense groups in the Mexican state of Michoacán, where they have been able to protect the local population from cartel

incursions and appear to enjoy considerable popularity (Le Cour Grandmaison 2013). It is still early to evaluate the potential of such a development, but its implications for both further escalation of violence and a different type of counter-criminal action are significant.

Territory and Governance

A key difference between rebel groups conducting insurgencies and those waging terrorist campaigns is the ability of the former to control and rule over territory—a difference due to their greater military capacity vis-à-vis the state (de la Calle and Sánchez-Cuenca 2012). The former often set-up governance structures in the areas they control—and a number of studies have investigated the various forms of rebel–civilian interaction and rebel state-building (Mampilly 2011; Arjona 2010). The policy implication is that effective counterinsurgency in civil wars requires the provision of public goods and the creation of effective governance. In contrast, counterterrorism is much more focused on the identification and neutralization of terrorists.

The relationship of criminal organizations to territory is ambiguous. On the one hand, it is argued that they are indifferent about territory; they fight states not in order to conquer territory or gain political control, but to coerce state actors and influence policy outcomes; this is why, the argument goes, violence escalates when state crackdown seeks to eliminate criminal groups as opposed to allowing them some room to operate (Lessing 2013; Molzahn, Ríos, and Shirk 2012). On the other hand, however, criminal groups cannot be wholly indifferent to territorial control since they need trafficking routes to move their product to the markets (Grayson and Logan 2012). Some groups place particular emphasis on territorial control: “The Zetas were not thinking like gangsters,” Grillo (2012, 106) points out, “but like a paramilitary groups controlling territory.”

Given the control of territory, criminal groups tend to evolve from roving to stationary bandits (Olson 2000), similar to urban gangs whose professed need to protect territory and claim turf is extensively documented (Venkatesh 2000). This turns them into de facto rulers who are often perceived as providers of public goods by the populations they interact with (Kolbe 2013, 3). From the Honduran Juan Matta to the Colombian Pablo Escobar, there are many examples of local gang leaders and drug lords providing goods to the local population to generate goodwill. Finnegan (2010) provides several telling vignettes of how the Familia Michoacana has been exercising local governance:

They’re a second law,” a schoolteacher in Zitácuaro said of La Familia. “Maybe the first law. If you need to collect a debt, you go to them. They’ll charge you a fee, but you’ll get your money. The police work for them. When they arrest people, they don’t take them to police headquarters but to La Familia.

“You see that *auditorio*?” Medina asked. She was pointing at a tall yellow pavilion beside a village primary school. “La Familia built that. Also the volleyball court.” She pointed to a bullring on the other side of the road. “They offer the people fiestas in there. Those fiestas are very popular.”

When La Familia was in charge, nobody stepped out of line. You didn’t even need to lock your door at night. “If they find you drunk in public, they’ll take you off, pull down your pants, and beat you with a long stick with holes in it.”

A single mother who lives in Morelia told me proudly, “I have a number I can call.” She meant she knew somebody in La Familia. . . . “If I have a problem, somebody threatening me, somebody trying to steal my car, I just call, and they send a police officer, a woman. The police work for them.” Once, she said, she had a major problem—a man trying to defraud her over a piece of land. She called La Familia, and they sent a team to visit the fraudster. “They told him he had so much time to pay me. He paid, and he won’t bother me again.” She did not say how she might be called upon to return these favors. But her grateful relief for this protection against thieves and other threats was clear and understandable.

The range of goods provided by criminal groups varies considerably. In some instances, criminal groups can out-administer the states they operate in and can evolve into institutions that resemble actual governments (Johnson 2013). Insofar as their rule is perceived as more real, and often even more legitimate, compared to the actual government’s, this strengthens their capacity to grow and develop. Again, the scope of potential research in this area is considerable.

Conclusions

This article has identified four areas where the study of civil wars can inspire student of large-scale criminal violence.

On the theoretical front, the main take away from this discussion is that the study of large-scale criminal activity would benefit from a research strategy based on disaggregation. Presently, this type of research has focused on violence (e.g., Osorio 2013; Lessing 2013). Drawing from the literature on civil wars I have suggested additional areas where the study of large-scale crime could move in: cross-national studies of onset and termination; micro studies of organizational trajectories and practices with a focus on cohesion and performance; micro studies of combat and violence, with an emphasis on both the “military” logic of criminal groups but also the various forms of targeting the civilian population; and micro studies of governance and territory with an emphasis on the interaction between criminal groups and the population they rule over.

On the substantive front, I point to four implications that the study of civil war holds for organized crime.

First, the Latin American experience highlights the emergence of a political and social landscape characterized by recently democratized states with emerging economies, weak institutions, and rapidly urbanizing populations, where large-scale

organized crime has effectively substituted for insurgency as the main challenge to the state's monopoly of violence. Presently, there are two significant alternatives to the Latin American experience: first, the "Bottom Billion" model, capturing the dynamics of sub-Saharan Africa and characterized by the emergence of mostly ethnically based and looting-prone insurgencies, in extremely poor and ethnically divided countries; and second, the "Middle Eastern" model, capturing the dynamics of the vast region encompassing North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia and characterized by the emergence of highly ideological rebels in autocratic and religiously divided countries that are closely linked to the geopolitical dynamics of the (unipolar) international system. It is worth asking whether the Latin American experience represents the future or organized violence or is just an outlier. Studies of organized crime in Latin America will help us see more clearly into these global trends.

Second, unlike ordinary crime, the "war" against large-scale organized crime must take into account political dimensions, such as governance and public goods. Put otherwise, even if criminal groups lack a political agenda and are not interested in taking the government down, their activity has clear political implications. Like governments facing insurgencies and coming slowly to the realization that the problem cannot be solved in a strictly military way, those beset by organized-crime violence must learn to develop a multipronged approach to the problem. An effective counter-criminal strategy, like an effective counterinsurgency, must include the collection of fine-grained information—rather than the blunt and indiscriminate application of military force—and the provision of competent local governance in the context of a policy of institution building. It is hard to think, for instance, that the Mexican government will defeat the cartels without addressing the endemic corruption of local government or the poor performance of the criminal justice system. Obviously, these are processes that require persistent work and a long time, though not as long as pursuing an elusive military victory would.

Third, students of civil war have long realized that dichotomous outcomes are exceptional and that civil wars are far from binary or "Clausewitzian" contests (Simpson 2012). Many civil wars end not with victory and defeat but in a negotiated settlement that grants some of the insurgent demands and opens the political institutions to them. Despite the negative connotation of such an outcome, it should not be impossible to imagine a range of tacit or informal arrangements that would allow a more discreet operation of cartels without the massive violence of the past decade. In Mexico, these arrangements could resemble the old low-violence equilibrium of the PRI era. From a humanitarian perspective, such a development would not be entirely negative; however, from a normative, moral, and political perspective, it would be clearly far from ideal—to say the least. Alternatively, states could try to decouple local and national actors, accepting local criminal activity as a cost to get rid of its national-level counterpart. Again, such an outcome sounds (and is) highly unpalatable, but it may be nevertheless more practical than we like to think.

Finally, some of the most intractable civil wars of the Cold War era ended only when the Cold War did. In other words, systemic problems require systemic

solutions. Presently, it is as difficult to think of an end to the drug cartels in Central and South America without some drastic change to the more general problem of drug consumption in North America and its illegal status, as it was hard to imagine how some Cold War conflicts could have ended without some drastic change in the international context from which they sprang.

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Notes

1. For example, von Lampe (2013) has compiled over 170 definitions of organized crime. Compare to Schmid and Jongman (1988) who supply 109 definitions of terrorism.
2. *El Infierno* was the title of Luis Estrada's 2010 Mexican hit on drug violence.
3. There are potential exceptions. Recently, the Mexican cartel Caballeros Templarios has been promoting itself as a social movement and even proclaimed the formation of a guerrilla army to defend "its territory" (Parkinson 2013). However, it is unclear whether these pronouncements are purely rhetorical or not.
4. In a public message, the leader of the cartel La Familia Michoacana declared that the group "was created to serve the people of Michoacán" and claimed "all we want is peace and quiet." He added that the group has nothing against Mexican President Felipe Calderón or his government but they "fight the federal police only because they are bothering our families . . . fabricating charges and taking innocent people away" (Mackey and Lopez 2009).
5. This study was subsequently challenged by, among others, Fearon (2005), who pointed to its lack of robustness. "One does not have to depart much from Collier and Hoeffler," he points out, "before commodity exports cease to matter in statistical terms" (Fearon 2005, 485). There is still no consensus on the effect of natural resources on civil war onset. At a minimum, some resources (e.g., petroleum and alluvial diamonds), in some locations (e.g., not offshore) and in some quantities, tend to be associated with conflict onset (Ross 2015).
6. But see Villarreal (2002) for an (admittedly early) finding linking criminal homicides and rural areas in Mexico. Also note that some of the original drug smugglers hailed from the state of Sinaloa, which Grillo (2012, 20) compares to Sicily: a hardscrabble, mountainous area with a long tradition of feuding families and scarce state presence.
7. According to Grillo (2012, 53), the "police were the top dogs in the deal. Officers could smack gangsters around and, if they got too big for their boots—or showed up on the Drug Enforcement Administration radar—take them down. Police could also bust anyone who wasn't paying his dues, showing that they were fighting the war on drugs and clocking up

- seizures and arrests. The system ensured that crime was controlled and everyone got paid.”
8. These are regimes that score between -5 and 5 on the difference between Polity IV's democracy and autocracy measures (the difference ranges from -10 to 10).
 9. Even when they are able to tap into existing networks, criminal groups face a huge challenge. According to Staniland (2012), in the absence of a link with sophisticated politically oriented groups, traditional networks (which he terms “parochial” organizations) fall short in terms of effectiveness.
 10. “The path from policeman to villain is alarmingly common in Mexico” (Grillo 2012, 4).
 11. For example, the Barrio Azteca gang works for the Juárez Cartel, whereas the Artist Assassins gang is affiliated with the Sinaloa Cartel (Grillo 2012, 2). There is concern that if the Mexican cartels managed to absorb the gangs or “maras” of Central America, the violence could escalate considerably (*The Economist* 2011).
 12. In fact, this difference may be an artifact of differential rates of victimization in urban and rural settings.
 13. Grillo (2012, 203) cites a case where criminals threw grenades into crowds of revelers and massacred innocent teenagers at parties.

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