

Trends and Causes of Armed Conflict

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1. Introduction

From the start of 1990 to the end of 1999 there were 118 armed conflicts world wide, involving 80 states and two para-state regions and resulting in the death of approximately six million people. If we seek to prevent conflict from escalating into armed warfare, or, failing that, to at least achieve an end to fighting as soon as possible, and if we want to maximise the opportunity for avoiding the return of the war after apparent settlement, we must first be sure that we properly understand armed conflicts and their causes.

This chapter attempts to provide a brief overview of what is known and understood about the causes of armed conflict. The theoretical basis of that knowledge is both limited and important. It is limited, in that it does not offer much by way of general explanation of the phenomenon of armed conflict; this is, perhaps, hardly surprising, given its complexity and diversity. It is also important because it provides valuable guidance as to where to look when analysing individual conflicts for signs of potential escalation and when seeking opportunities for preventing violent escalation. Given the limitations of current theoretical knowledge and the objectives of this volume to assist in the development and dissemination of practical knowledge, the theoretical discussion in this article is relatively brief. The emphasis, however, will not be on theory but rather on an applied methodology for studying and analysing armed conflict.

The chapter begins by discussing the incidence and nature of armed conflicts during the 1990s. It then reviews the current state of theoretical knowledge with the aim of providing not only an overview but also a source of further reference, before proceeding to methodology. A key issue is that there are not just a variety of causes of armed conflicts but different types of causes. This in turn calls for different types and levels of theory and analysis. For that reason, the methodological issues are in part typological; they concern the organisation of theory and data. The article then identifies the paired concepts of justice and mobilisation as the best way to link different types and levels of causes, to connect the short-term with the long-term and to relate the socio-economic background with the political foreground. It illustrates this by looking more closely at the category referred to as ethnic conflict.

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¹ Data on armed conflicts in this chapter update the information, and use the same definition and data rules, as in the atlas, *The State of War and Peace* (Smith 1997). Compared to the data produced at the Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University, and published annually in *Journal of Peace Research* (see Wallensteen and Sollenberg 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, and 2000) these data are similar in broad outline but significantly different in detail. Both data-sets use 25 war-deaths per year as a threshold for inclusion, but I place the annual total in a context of a total of several hundred war-deaths, rejecting a more precise total figure as too demanding for the available data. I do not follow the Uppsala team in including as part of the definition the involvement of a recognised state on at least one side.

Region	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Asia & Pacific	21	21	25	24	23	21	22	24	19	20
Central & South America	7	6	5	3	4	5	4	3	3	2
North Africa & Middle East	7	8	8	9	9	9	8	8	6	4
Sub-Saharan Africa	17	22	18	18	23	21	18	19	18	16
Europe	4	10	12	8	6	4	2	3	3	5
Total	56	67	68	62	65	60	54	57	49	47

2. Armed Conflict in the 1990s

Armed conflicts are defined as open, armed clashes between two or more centrally organised parties, with continuity between the clashes, in disputes about power over government and territory. Of the 118 armed conflicts which ensued from 1990 to 1999, ten can be strictly defined as inter-state conflicts. Although it is often these conflicts that dominate the headlines and shape the popular view of how contemporary wars are fought, today they account for only a relatively small proportion of overall war. Five can be strictly defined as wars of independence, although the insurgents in many more wars would themselves define their conflicts in those terms. One hundred wars were largely, primarily or even exclusively internal conflicts. The fact that such loose terminology must be used is an indication of the extent to which many wars defy neat categorisation. For instance, two wars that are not included in 1999 and 2000 in that total of 100, were entirely internal Ethiopian affairs in every respect except that the site of most of the fighting took place in neighbouring Somalia. The war that went on in the Democratic Republic of Congo (former Zaire) from 1998 into 2000 is in a category by itself that is perhaps best regarded as trans-national. It was, in part, a civil war, fought to determine whether President Laurent Kabila should remain in power, and in part an international war for regional power and influence. Angola, Chad, Namibia, Sudan and Zimbabwe were allied with President Kabila's forces, while Rwanda and Uganda fought against them and, in 2000, against each other as well.

As Table 1 indicates, the global, annual number of armed conflicts rose sharply in the early 1990s, from 56 in 1990 (and 47 in 1989) to 68 in 1992. In those years the initial optimism about the end of the Cold War was quickly supplanted by a new pessimism, in reaction to the apparent wave of new conflicts in the post-Cold War era. As it turns out, however, the number of armed conflicts each year has since stabilised and then even declined (the total of 118 wars 1990-1999, therefore, is made up of 100 primarily civil wars, 2 essentially civil wars, 5 wars of independence, 10 inter-state wars and 1 trans-national war).

New violent conflicts in Europe (including Russia, Turkey and the Caucasus) account for two-thirds of the increase in the annual incidence of wars in the early 1990s. At that time, the region quickly became one of the most violent in the world. The decline in the annual number of armed conflicts after 1992 is likewise largely due to changes in Europe, until the particularly sharp fall between 1997 and 1998. The upsurge in violent conflict in Europe was itself highly concentrated in the Balkans and the Caucasus, in the context of the processes of disintegration in Yugoslavia and the

USSR. The fact that that upsurge has now abated suggests that the proliferation of war in Europe in the early 1990s did not herald a new era of violent conflict on the continent, as many commentators feared at the time. Those conflicts were, rather, the violent and tragic symptoms of social, economic and political readjustment following the collapse of the systems of power in Yugoslavia and the USSR. As the effects of those complex readjustments are assimilated at both the national and international levels, their consequences have fortunately become less dramatic and less violent.

Nevertheless, any optimism generated by this conclusion should be tempered by two further considerations. First, on the global level, the old conflicts are very much present. Of the armed conflicts active in 1999, 66 per cent were more than five years old, and 30 per cent had lasted for longer than 20 years. These protracted armed conflicts have proven to be extremely difficult to bring to an end. The world, therefore, is not necessarily entering a new and more peaceful era. Second, in Europe, most of the armed conflicts that began in the late 1980s or early 1990s, and that are now inactive, have not really been brought to an end. Rather, they have been suspended.

This difference between 'ended' and 'suspended' is crucial to understanding the problem of armed conflict today. The international political landscape is disfigured by wars that resume after not only the signing of cease-fires, but even after the conclusion of peace agreements. In the past decade alone, among the wars that have resumed after the conclusion of cease-fires or apparent peace agreements, it is possible to count those in Angola, Burundi, Cambodia, Chechnya, Croatia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea and Ethiopia, Kosovo, Liberia, the Philippines, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka. Often the wars return with even greater ferocity and destructiveness, and almost always at particularly high cost for the civilian population.

There are many different reasons for the resumption of war: these can be grouped under four headings. The first is simple insincerity by one or both parties (the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone is a case in point; it cannot be trusted to keep any agreement). The second reason is disappointment on the part of one or both of the parties. This may often seem, from the outside, to be the same thing as insincerity. There are many cases in which one side's acceptance of a peace agreement is only conditional, although the condition is neither publicly stated nor part of the peace agreement. In some cases, one side strongly expects to win the post-war election and only for that reason agrees to sign the peace agreement. If that expectation is not realised, they go back to war. UNITA in Angola is an example.

The third reason is internal disagreement and even fragmentation on one or both sides. This, too, may seem to be insincerity. Peace agreements often bring the tensions and conflicts within each party to the surface; the unity that was maintained for the sake of the war can quickly disintegrate if and when peace comes.

Indeed, the imminence of peace can often appear to be a threat to one part of the coalition on one side of the conflict, frustrating their capacity to fulfil long-term aims. Consider the splinter groups from the IRA in Northern Ireland in this context, or the rejection of the peace process in Israel and the West Bank by militants both in Israel and among the Palestinians.

The fourth reason for the resumption of war is that the underlying causes of armed conflict remain. Failure to address the long-term causes of the conflict will mean that all efforts at reconstruction are doomed to be, at best, cosmetic. Five years after the Dayton Agreement to end the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, most observers continue to see a high risk that the war will resume if the international armed peacekeeping force were to withdraw.

The fundamental instability of peace agreements is one primary explanation for the fact protracted conflict is common – a major feature of contemporary war, as noted briefly above. Taber (1970, p45) explains a second reason for contemporary wars lasting for many years in terms of the

relative weakness of the insurgent forces. The guerrillas can control the pace and intensity of combat by deciding where and how to strike; unless government forces are able and willing to locate major targets and strike pre-emptively the result will be a long, limited war, a rumbling conflict that erupts intermittently.

This is why combat zones are very often confined to one part of the country. It is perfectly possible for reporters, politicians, researchers, businessmen, diplomats, World Bank experts and other outsiders to visit the capital of a war-torn country and yet not to know that a war is going on. Because many armed conflicts are localised and remain relatively low-level for several years on end, they do not make good stories for the international news media. These conflicts rarely produce clear-cut events such as victories, triumphs and disasters; they simply linger on as a slow torture for the participants. However, this should not create the illusion of their capacity to escalate suddenly and viciously. When that escalation occurs, it often seems to international observers to have come out of a clear blue sky. Such was the initial reaction to the massacres in Rwanda in 1994. Regardless of this, not only did those massacres take place against a historical background of repetitive cycles of mass killings, but also it is now known that there were many signs of imminent tragedy that were ignored until after it was too late (Adelman and Suhrke 1996).

3. Theories of Conflict Causes

The decision to take up arms is a complex process involving many actors in a wide range of conditions and circumstances. Thus the history of a war's outbreak is usually complex, and the historian must make carefully nuanced choices as to which factors to stress and what evidence to trust. Attempting to develop theoretical explanations for the causes of armed conflict as a general phenomenon involves the analysis of multiple, interactive variables. This is true even when looking at a limited period of time such as the post-1945 era, or even the years since the end of the Cold War. The task is complicated because, as Welch (1993, p8) points out, there are very few necessary conditions for war and very many sufficient conditions, of which only a few of these may apply in any single conflict. War is possible as soon as weapons are available with which to fight it and as long as there is a dispute between two or more parties. What makes war probable, however, is a far more complicated question.

Despite the work of scholars such as Gurr (1970), Horowitz (1985), and Rapoport (1989), most research conducted before 1990 on the causes of armed conflict focused on international conflict. This is remarkable, because, since at least 1945, civil or internal conflicts have been more common than international or inter-state conflicts (Singer 1996, p35). However, the relative importance of internal or civil conflicts from a global perspective has only been generally recognised since the end of the Cold War. Even as recently as that, the conclusions of a major analytical review of the University of Michigan's Correlates of War database concentrated almost exclusively on inter-state wars (Vasquez 1987). Since 1990, however, there has been an impressive growth in the scope of scholarly research and literature on the causes of armed conflicts that are not between two or more established states. Current research on internal conflicts focuses particularly on ethnic, environmental, political and economic factors.

Relative deprivation theory (Gurr 1970) offers an explanation that is based on the contrast between groups' expected and actual access to prosperity and power. This approach is closely related to group entitlement theory (Horowitz 1985), which places more explicit emphasis on ethnic factors which accompany the economic and political (see also Gurr 1995). However, ethnic diversity does

not in itself seem to be a cause of war. If it were, the most war-prone states would be the most ethnically diverse, which is in fact not the case (Smith 1997, p30). Indeed, it may well be that ethnic and religious factionalization even reduces the risk of violent conflict (Collier 1999), perhaps because it encourages divergent groups to learn the skills of living together despite diversity. When this learning process fails, however, ethnic diversity may turn out to exacerbate conflict and increase the likelihood of serious escalation, precisely because it offers fertile material for political mobilisation. A prime example here is the disintegration of Yugoslavia during the 1990s, which is discussed below.

Research on the links between environmental degradation and conflict explores the varying (sometimes catastrophically low) capacity of states and societies to adapt to changing environmental conditions without resorting to violence (Homer-Dixon 1994). Those research approaches that have identified significant, simple and direct connections leading from environmental degradation to violent conflict, have, however, been strongly challenged (Gleditsch 1998, Lipschutz 1997). The most recent exposition of the argument downplays its theoretical claims considerably (Homer-Dixon 1999). The contention now is simply that there are some armed conflicts, such as those in Haiti and the Philippines, whose causes cannot be understood without reference to environmental degradation.

Research on the relationship between political systems and peace starts with the observation that democratic states almost never go to war with each other (Russett 1993). Levy (1989, p270) describes this finding as being „as close as anything we have to an empirical law in international relations.“ This claim has generated controversy (reviewed by Chan 1997), both as to its empirical robustness and as to its theoretical soundness. MacMillan (1996) contends that such a conclusion is based on a misguided research focus. The empirical assertion, however, is widely accepted, even if further theoretical and conceptual clarification is still necessary (Starr 1997).

The hot topic today in this aspect of research on the causes of armed conflict is the question of whether democracies are in general as peaceable with themselves as they are with each other. The argument that they are in fact more peaceable is set out by Rummel (1995), and disputed by Risse-Kappen (1995). Hegre, Gates, and Gleditsch (1999) introduce an essential nuance to the discussion by identifying the different propensities to internal conflict of different kinds of democracies. They conclude that it is the not quite democratic, yet also not quite autocratic regimes that are the most war-prone. Transition towards democracy is particularly dangerous (Jagers and Gurr 1995, pp477-8). This argument throws considerable light on the violent conflicts in former Yugoslavia and the ex-USSR as societies in the midst of systemic change and the disintegration of a federal state, and likewise on the upsurge in violence in Indonesia since the end of the Suharto regime in 1998.

Overall, however, economic conditions emerge as the most important explanatory factors. The key issue here is a low level of economic development (Hauge and Ellingsen 1998). This may be indicated by a low average Gross National Product per capita, by a disproportionately large agricultural sector, or by a country's economic vulnerability to shifts in world markets in commodities and capital (Avery and Rapkin 1986). Like Hauge and Ellingsen (1998), Auvinen (1997) identifies lack of democratic openings as an important secondary factor in addition to poor economic conditions. These findings are qualified by the arguments and evidence put forward by Collier (1999; see also Collier and Hoeffler 1999) that, even in poor societies, leaders are usually competing with one another for control of the available economic surplus, small as that may be. When the available surplus is small, as in poor societies or where there has been catastrophic slump, competition for it may be particularly intense, and a violent escalation will very likely result. The

terrible violence in Liberia from 1989 to 1997, the war in Sierra Leone since 1991, decades of warfare in Angola and the cycles of massacre and brutality in Burundi and Rwanda are among the many examples highlighted by this approach.

A very general conclusion from all this could be drawn as follows:

- Poor economic conditions are the most important long-term causes of intra-state armed conflicts today;
- Repressive political systems are also war-prone, especially in periods of transition;
- Degradation of renewable resources (specifically soil erosion, deforestation and water scarcity) can also contribute significantly to the likelihood of violent conflict, but are in general not as central to the problem as political and economic determinants;
- Ethnic diversity alone is not a cause of armed conflict, but parties to a conflict are often defined by their ethnic identities.

4. Background Causes and Foreground Factors

Social science theories of the causes of armed conflict concentrate on background conditions and long-range causes in order to develop general explanatory power. However, these theories should not be regarded with much greater respect than we might give to any other reasonable generalisation. They are based on statistical generalisations, to which there are almost always exceptions. Poor, undemocratic countries, for instance, are especially prone to armed conflict, but there are many armed conflicts in countries that are not among the poorest and most repressive of the world. Likewise, there are countries that are both extremely poor and repressed, yet in which there is no war.

One problem in the academic literature is that it usually focuses attention on the question of which is the most important cause of armed conflict. In most cases, however, this is a misleading way to look at the issue. The question is not which cause is more important than any other, but rather how do the different causes interact? In particular, the attempt to force a choice between economic and political explanations of armed conflict is misguided. Explanations that highlight economic deficiencies and environmental degradation deal with how the problems of securing the basics of life can lead people into conflict. Violent conflict can easily develop if large numbers of people become convinced that taking up arms is not only legitimate but may perhaps be the only way to secure the necessities of life. In other words, they feel that they are in an unjust situation and must therefore decide to rectify it. However, large numbers of people do not make such decisions spontaneously. They mobilise politically, as leaders win their hearts and minds, as well as their loyalty and commitment, and as they are persuaded and exhorted into war. No meaningful analysis of violent conflict and of its escalation and diminishment can therefore afford to ignore the political dimension.

One of the analytical problems in this connection lies in the incompatibilities between political theory and political practice. Theory tends to focus on long term conditions and general explanations, and loses precision by aiming for universality (Levy 1989, p297). In the big picture, the details of political behaviour are likely to be lost. By contrast, although political leaders are often prone to emphasise grand strategic visions, ultimately their survival depends on their capacity to deal with the details. Social science theories take the long view, but in politics the short term predominates. Thus any attempt to understand armed conflict as a global phenomenon must deal with the big socio-economic picture, while efforts to analyse a particular armed conflict will need to focus instead on politics and on the actions of specific organisations and individuals.

Rather than allowing these different levels – broad theoretical generalisations on the one hand and detailed analyses on the other – to exist in complete isolation, it is more productive to seek ways to combine them. Only then can the broad generalisations give the analyst useful guidance as to which cases to prioritise, and where to look for the greatest dangers.

If such an approach is taken, causal explanations will not only need to reflect the social, cultural, economic and environmental background, but also consider the political foreground. Put differently, in addition to longer-term structural explanations, we need to also consider politics. The great Prussian military philosopher Clausewitz (1832/1976) defined war as „an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will“ and „the continuation of policy by other means.“ Keegan (1994, pp3-12) argues that such a definition of war is misleading because it ignores the way that culture shapes both why and how people go to war. To allow Clausewitz to dominate the exploration of causes would be a clear error; yet background factors influence events in the direction of armed conflict only via politics. Wars are conscious and consciously decided affairs. Explanation of their causes must embrace the background as well as the foreground, both the structural causes and the factors that lie within the decision-making power of political actors. A comprehensive explanation of the causes of armed conflicts, in short, must be based on a combination of both levels and types of analysis.

5. Methodology and Typology

Dessler (1994) offers a good point of reference for such a multi-level analysis. In the multiplicity of potential causes of armed conflicts, he sees not just different causes but different types of causes, and presents a four-part typology in which to organise them. With just a few changes in terminology and one of content, the analytical framework derived from his arguments can be summarised as follows:

- **Background causes** (channels in Dessler, 1994) are fundamental lines of „political, social, economic, or national cleavage ... found at the level of the group, rather than the individual.“ These may be constituted by the exclusion of some groups from power, by the systematic favouring of others, or by regional economic differences. What is seen here, in short, are the basic elements of social and political structure. To explore them is to explore the background causes and underlying conditions of conflict.
- **Mobilisation strategy** (targets in Dessler, 1994) consists of both the objectives of key political actors and (this is my variation on Dessler’s theme) the way in which they go about trying to fulfil their objectives. In other words, when we analyse mobilisation strategy, we are considering the full range of political behaviour – both how issues are conceptualised, and how they are presented. Therefore, we are looking at the causes for which people fight and considering how they understand their cause.
- **Triggers** are the factors that affect the timing of the onset of armed conflict; referring to these can help explain not why a conflict started at all, but why it started then. They are often events or actions undertaken by significant actors, which narrow the choices of the players, making peaceful approaches less, and violent options more, attractive.
- **Catalysts** are factors that affect the intensity and duration of the conflict; they may be internal, such as the military balance between the opposing sides, or external, such as UN intervention. These may include tactics (whether insurgents avoid attacking civilian areas, for example), or natural phenomena such as the terrain, the seasons and the weather. They may be material factors,

such as the availability of arms, or even less concrete but no less important factors like cultural views on how war should be fought.

This typology switches the focus from background conditions to actors and back again. It does not provide a theory of causation, but is rather a way of organising theory. It also indicates the angles we should explore, and suggests ways of organising the analysis of individual cases of conflict escalation. It is particularly the first two categories – the background causes and the mobilisation strategies – that must be addressed in any attempt to prevent violent conflict escalation. The last category – catalysts – may be equally important when considering how to bring violence to an end.

6. Injustice and Mobilisation

There are two concepts that together depict the point at which the long-term and short-term causes intersect, where political actors address structural, background issues. Those concepts are justice and mobilisation.

The combination of poor economic conditions and a lack of political openings functions as a double injustice. Political mobilisation occurs around the theme of injustice: people commit themselves to a cause because they believe it to be just, or because they at least think that it will redress the injustice they see in their own lives. An exploitable sense of injustice, arising out of the underlying divisions of power and prosperity in a society or between different countries, is thus the basic material for political mobilisation.

Some careful distinctions need to be made at this point in the discussion. The argument here is not that, for example, Yugoslav leader Slobodan Milosevic has acted as he has out of a burning sense of injustice about the plight of the Serbs. The evidence is rather that he has been primarily interested in perpetuating his own power and that of a narrow group united around his leadership (Little and Silber 1995; Judah 1997; 1999). But Milosevic's rhetoric is replete with complaints about the injustice suffered by Serbs. Since 1987 he spoke regularly and repeatedly of Serb grievances. Regardless of whether he felt injustice himself, he knew how to utilise the concept. In this aspect of his political career, he is an archetype. He played effectively upon an exploitable sense of injustice.

This idea of justice as a motivating factor in armed conflict has been challenged by emphasising „not the loud discourse of grievance, but the silent force of greed“ (Collier 1999). In part, the argument revolves around just how much emphasis should be placed on language and discourse. The key methodological point is the contention that, for research purposes, „[t]he demand for justice can be reformulated as the circumstances which generate grievance“ (Collier and Hoeffler 1999, p5). However, to reformulate a subjective demand as objective circumstances is misleading, for it is precisely in the demand that mobilisation and perception lie. In part, however, the argument about greed versus grievance can be summed up and put into a proper perspective by asking whose greed, whose grievance? That Milosevic is greedy for power, for example, does not in itself mean that ordinary Serbs feel no grievance. In other words, it may not be necessary to choose between greed and grievance as explanatory variables. These may rather be complementary and mutually reinforcing elements of political mobilisation.

7. Ethnicity and Conflict

To illustrate the themes above and to explore their implications for analysis, it might be helpful to look more closely at the category referred to in both the scholarly literature and more popular commentaries as ‚ethnic‘ conflicts. This is usually understood to mean not only that the parties involved are ethnically different, but also that that ethnic difference is central to the conflict. It implies not only a description of at least one of the parties, but also an ascription of at least one cause (if not the cause) of conflict as ethnic difference.

The definition of ethnic difference is much contested and notoriously difficult to pin down. Generalisations are particularly difficult and misleading because ethnic identity is recognised on a wide variety of different bases. In different cases, groups identify themselves as an ethnically united community by means of some combination of markers such as language, skin colour, religion, location, or history. What is decisive in constituting a particular ethnic identity is not shared historical experiences, myths and religious beliefs, or other features per se; these only become decisive when there is a shared perception that they distinguish members of that group from those who belong to other groups in some significant way. Two factors that can foster this kind of shared perception are experiences of discrimination compared with other groups and deliberate political mobilisation in defence of the group’s perceived interests.

In the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s, diplomats and politicians of the external powers began by regarding the problem as easily amenable to treatment by stern diplomacy – just a matter of banging a few heads together (Little and Silber 1995, p159). It was as if there were no underlying causes more profound than simple irresponsibility. When that view proved to be clearly wrong, deeper causes were sought, but no more accurately. US Secretary of State Warren Christopher stated that war in Bosnia-Herzegovina was caused by „ancient ethnic hatreds“ (Calhoun 1997, p61). The International Commission on the Balkans (1996, pp13-14) noted and at the same time criticised a common view which blamed the problem on the hot-blooded nature of the Balkan people. It is implicit in such arguments (though not always in the use of the term ethnic conflict) that not much can be done to resolve such conflicts or to help such people.

This form of argument uses the same terms and sometimes arrives at the same conclusions as those reached by protagonists in what are called ethnic conflicts. Kaufman (1996), for example, concludes that ethnic civil wars can only be ended through forced separation of the populations. This is otherwise known as ethnic cleansing and appears to assume, as the ethnic cleansers themselves do, that everybody is either in one group (e.g., Serb) or another (e.g., Bosniak), with no possibility that anybody is the off-spring of a mixed marriage.

Leaving aside the moral problem, the intellectual shortcomings of this way of depicting the causes of conflicts are best exposed when analysts make use of the abstract categories of the typology outlined above. The ancient hatreds and hot blood explanations of wars in the Balkans make three errors about the present (and usually many more about the past): they understand ethnicity exclusively as a background cause; they understand it to be the only background cause and they fail to consider the role of any other type of cause. Especially significant is the fact that they entirely ignore mobilisation strategy.

The error lies not in regarding ethnic difference as one of the underlying social divisions and therefore as a background cause. Rather, it is to neglect the question of how that underlying division can create the conditions for war. Numerous case studies have made it clear that ethnic difference is often embroiled in conflicts and that the individuals affected frequently believe that the

fundamental issue over which they are fighting is in fact ethnic difference. This is important, but it is not sufficient, for, as we have already noted, it is not the most ethnically diverse countries in the world that are the most prone to violent conflict. This suggests that, even in cases of armed conflicts involving parties divided by ethnicity, we cannot analyse the situation adequately by looking at ethnicity alone. The results of the quantitative research cited above indicate the importance of economic conditions and of the political system. It would therefore make sense to examine other background causes beyond ethnicity.

The second change of focus is to look at political mobilisation. Ethnicity is very often a central component of group identity and therefore also a powerful component of common prejudice. As such, it can easily be manipulated by political leaders seeking to mobilise a population, especially when a society is undergoing major socio-economic change. It is at such times that nationalist politics come to the fore.

Nationalism is a political ideology claiming that nations and states should be territorially congruent (Gellner 1983, p1), but it is also more. It can be regarded as a complex social, cultural, intellectual and emotional reaction to socio-economic and political destabilisation (Plamenatz 1976). Such destabilisation can come in the shape of the impact of modernity (Smith 1983), the imposition of colonial rule (Anderson 1991; Seton-Watson 1977) or the collapse of state socialism (Smith and Østerud 1995). It can be argued that the creation of a single world market, the driving force behind the process known as globalisation, has a similar destabilising impact. The effect of globalisation on ethnocentrism and nationalism is ambivalent. On the one hand, it is a force that homogenises cultures and life styles and promotes a more cosmopolitan awareness. On the other hand, the fast relocation of investment capital and the integration of markets world wide create new winners and losers, which can lead to fragmentation and marginalisation of some ethnic and national groups and a reaction against cultural homogenisation.

The social destabilisation that these large and blind historical processes can unleash not only creates the conditions for intense power rivalries between different factions of a country's social and political elite. It can also throw large numbers of ordinary people into a situation of deep insecurity and uncertainty. The impact of such historical changes on individuals' lives is arbitrary, often devastating, and difficult to understand. The assertion of group identity at such a time is attractive to many ordinary people; it may be the only thing that helps them make any kind of sense out of what is happening to them. Thus, whatever the issues at stake in a conflict that itself arises out of such large-scale change and destabilisation, political leaders are most likely to mobilise their constituency successfully if they can present their stance as a battle for national identity, pride and justice.

We could summarise these arguments as follows: it is not ethnic diversity as such that is a cause of armed conflict, but rather ethnic politics. It is the injection of ethnic difference into political loyalties, and the politicisation of ethnic identities, that is so dangerous.

In explaining the break-up of former Yugoslavia, it is important to note not only that Yugoslavia was a multi-ethnic state, but also that that state looked back on a history of ethno-nationalism for more than 100 years. Ethnicity had long been politicised, and the period of Tito's rule from 1945 to 1980 was no exception. While Tito repressed the kind of nationalist politics that could have threatened the unity of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, he at the same time distributed constitutional and political power on an ethno-national basis. This shaped the organs of both state and party. When Tito died, his rule was replaced by a Presidency that rotated, year to year, between the six republics and two provinces that made up the Federation. Thus, when in 1987, nationalism started to become the strongest political currency in Yugoslavia, it did not come out of the blue; neither was it a product of hot blood. It was the direct product of

the political system.

The renewed salience of nationalism began in Serbia where Slobodan Milosevic was the first post-Tito communist leader to play the nationalist card in 1987. Within two years, nationalist politics in Serbia had brought forth responses, first from Slovenia, then from Croatia. As soon as nationalist rivalries started to be expressed by the leaderships of the different republics, momentum towards break-up was created, bolstered by the system of the rotating presidency.

Milosevic's motive, however, was not to destroy the Federation. His initial aim was to mobilise popular support in order to gain control of the Serbian party (Little and Silber 1996). The first instance of the systematic sense of grievance on which he was to play effectively came in a 50-page memorandum issued by the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1986. In this now famous document, sixteen academics complained at length about the unfair treatment of the Serb people under the 1974 Yugoslav constitution, and in particular about 'genocide' against Serbs in Kosovo (Vetlesen 2000).

Whether or not Milosevic truly believed in and felt the sense of resentment and injustice that he exploited in political mobilisation is irrelevant to the argument here. In former Yugoslavia, neither Milosevic, who played the nationalist card first, nor Slovenia's leader Milan Kucan, who played it second, had any record of previous nationalist views. On the other hand, Croatia's Franjo Tudjman, Bosniak leader Alija Izetbegovic, and several of the rivals for leadership of the Kosovar Albanians can all be regarded as principled nationalists. In the case of all these individuals, whatever their personal differences, they rose to power in essentially the same way: by mobilising popular support around the theme of national injustice. These competing perceptions of injustice made an explosive mix that blew Yugoslavia apart.

Equally, it does not really matter whether an outside observer would share the sense of injustice in any one (or more than one) of the component populations of former Yugoslavia. Nor is it important whether that observer would agree, as a matter of impartial judgement, that one (or more) of the leaders had a political programme that would redress the injustice to which his followers had been subjected. What is essential is only whether the people feel it, and whether a leader can and will exploit it.

What are commonly called ethnic conflicts, then, are in the end conflicts over power or for access to economic resources (including environmental resources in cases not discussed here), which come to wear an ethnic mask. Ethnic difference is of central importance not as a sole cause of armed conflict, but rather as an instrument of mobilisation for political leaders. Thus, ethnic difference has an important place in the explanation but should not dominate it.

Use of this metaphor of an ethnic mask to focus attention on this particular strategy of political mobilisation should not be misinterpreted as any attempt to downplay the reality or importance of a sense of identity, either in or out of violent conflict. There is little doubt, for example, that the Russo-Chechen wars of the 1990s are characterised by a deep, clear and bitter sense of ethnic identity on the Chechen side, as well as by an all too widespread Russian racism against the Chechens. For over 200 years, Chechen movements have resisted Russian control. Even so, the conflict between Russia and Chechnya cannot be properly understood if it is analysed as simply being about ethnicity.

There are interesting parallels between this conflict and the break-up of Yugoslavia. The struggle for power between new and old political elites was a significant part of the explanation of the build-up to the war between Chechnya and Russia in 1994. It was a crucial factor in the seizure of power in Chechnya by General Dzhokhar Dudayev and his allies in August and September 1991 (Tishkov 1997, pp200-206). The leaders of both Chechnya and Russia seemed unable to avoid

escalation of their disputes into full-scale war during the second half of 1994, partly because of government deficiencies on both sides (Lieven 1998, pp80-84, 94-96), and partly due to rivals manoeuvring for power in both Chechnya (Tishkov 1997, pp216-218) and Moscow (Shapiro 1995).

The tragedy is that, once the ethnic mask has been donned, it is very difficult to remove. When a revived sense of group identity coheres around resentment and grievance, especially in time of crisis and war, it can produce apparently irreconcilable hatred in protracted and often cyclical conflicts.

The prime contemporary example of this can be seen in the Hutu/Tutsi rivalries of Burundi and Rwanda. These do not date from time immemorial. It was colonial administrators who defined the two groups as different and then proceeded to favour one at the expense of the other. This engendered resentment. From the moment of independence, political leaders systematically exploited this group grievance in order to maintain (or challenge) power, thereby bringing about forty years of wars and massacres (Copson 1994). The Singhalese/Tamil conflict in Sri Lanka unfolded in a similar way in the years after independence, as comparable feelings of grievance led to prolonged civil war (Uyangoda 1996).

In the processes of mobilisation that led up to these conflicts, one of the elements that can be observed over and over again is the fervent, popular support that is expressed for the cause on one side or on both. This belief in the cause is a belief in its rightness, in its justice. Both the Serbs and the Albanians in Kosovo before the war in 1998 and 1999, strongly resented the injustices they felt that they faced. Both Hutus and Tutsis in both Burundi and Rwanda can speak stirringly of the injustices meted out to them by the other. Both Singhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka can recount the injustices they have suffered at the hands of the other. In many armed conflicts today, the tactics and strategy of one party or both involve direct attack on civilians – ethnic cleansing, massacre and systematic rape in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Rwanda, bombing civilian areas in Chechnya. The memory of these horrors perpetuates a bitter sense of group identity, serving as fertile ground for mobilisation for the next time around.

8. Conclusion

There is now a significant, useful and growing body of literature on the causes of armed conflicts. While the theoretical conclusions in this literature so far are necessarily limited, they are also important, because they direct our attention towards the key issues of poor economic conditions, lack of political openings, and environmental damage, while at the same time warning us not to regard ethnic diversity as such as a cause of armed conflict.

This research has so far been primarily concerned with the long-term socio-economic and political conditions that generally lie behind armed conflict today. In order to use it as a contribution for the analysis of specific cases of armed conflict, we must also find a way to relate these long-term underlying conditions to the short-term considerations that any case study will also highlight.

In this article, we have looked at two related means of achieving such a link. The first is a methodology that helps organise both theoretical and empirical material, and can therefore guide the analysis. The second is a conceptual pairing that links long-term and short-term issues – the concepts of justice and of mobilisation. For as long as the world and the countries within it are socially and economically structured in unjust ways, there will always be people who feel that injustice, and leaders who can cement their power by exploiting it. Justice is thus the keynote for conflict analysis – and for peace.

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