A BUNCH OF CRIMINALS? ANALYZING POLITICAL ARMED VIOLENCE AS A SOCIAL PRODUCTION PROCESS

Simon Sottsas

Introduction

‘Freedom Fighters’, ‘Terrorists’, ‘Rebels’—the list of labels for people struggling against political regimes in power is long, including different assumptions about the legitimacy of armed violent resistance. However, after the end of the East-West-conflict, peace and conflict studies seemed to have surpassed the discussion; the term freedom fighter is history, and since 9/11 the label ‘terrorists’ has become a broadly used term. One could guess several reasons for this stronger academic uniformity to accept governments’ legitimacy, so for example a liberal hegemony without global competition between political systems, or an improved knowledge on the brutal violence of revolutionary experiments.

Further arguments can be gained from the dimension conflict scientists have been concentrating on during the last years, the economical aspect of insurgency violence. Two debates structured the field: 1. the ‘greed debate’, focusing on motivation and possibilities of individuals to participate in violence; and 2. the ‘New Wars debate’, accounting for self-centric, corrupt war actors in the globalized 21st century. Both accounts base their explanations of rebels’ behavior on neo-classical economic assumptions. What is the consequence? Rebel groups are either analyzed as Malthusian greedy poor who use their little value of life to enter the market of violence, or as scrupulous elites who misuse the grievances of people for their own agenda. Both accounts have seemingly unmasked the (pretending) idealistic fighters, representative for their social constituency, as a bunch of criminals—supporting the argument of the administrations crushing insurgencies in Afghanistan, Chechnya, Colombia, Palestine, Tibet, and elsewhere (Ballentine/Nitzschke 2003).

Thereby peace and conflict studies has been detached from broader studies on structural violence (Senghaas 1977), focusing strongly on direct violence (Egbert et al. 2005). This has let to a step-by-step
militarization of ‘problem-solving’ (Cox 1981) peace and conflict studies. In consequence humanitarian interventions, for example, have become a quite unquestioned mean to stabilize conflicts. Critical positions remain voiceless in light of the astonishing brutality of war crimes conducted by rebel groups. Pictures on CNN of massacred children undermine critique on the mentioned ‘humanitarian interventions’ against the ‘criminals’ completely.1

My overall research objective is to contribute to a re-amalgamation of segregated research strands into a comprehensive socioeconomic analysis. The attempt of this paper is to sketch a research framework, which could function as a first bridge between the insights into dynamics of direct and structural violence. It is based on a historical-materialist approach, elaborated by Antonio Gramsci for the analysis of the post-World-War-I situation in Italy and adapted by international political economists for analyzing the dynamics of global orders during the last centuries.

The paper will start with two short accounts on the state-of-the art in peace and conflict studies as well as in structural violence studies and then proceed by introducing some older progressive accounts of revolutionary violence, which can inform the debate further. The next section will outline the assumptions and the basic concepts of the historical-materialist approach. In the fourth section specific aspects of the overall framework will be reworked to adapt to the needs of an analysis of violent conflicts in post/neo-colonial areas. A summary and an outlook will conclude the paper.

**The Political Economy of Resistance**

The end of the Soviet Union led to the expectation of a final end of challenges to a liberal world order (Fukuyama 1992). However, soon shocking massacres in the civil wars of Rwanda, Yugoslavia, and Somalia crushed the vision of a near global peace to pieces; not to forget the continuing struggles in Colombia, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and elsewhere. Conflict research has been deprived of its theory of

1 Even though one should not fail to notice that these crimes are often not far from the brutality of their internationally recognized adversaries. And indeed, in terms of human suffering, there is no difference between physical violence conducted by one or the other actor.