

# INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS EMPLOYMENT OF THEORETICAL LENSES: ANALYZING PROBLEMS OF CIVIL WAR AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

## ABSTRACT

Much of the recent literature on civil wars and civil war peacemaking has been carried out by international relations (IR) scholars, and has applied theoretical lenses from IR. To what extent has this “cross pollination” of ideas worked, and to what extent do theoretical tools from IR require further adaptation to successfully deal with civil wars and civil war peacemaking? Major international environmental problems such as climate change or ozone depletion require collective action. Under what circumstances have we seen a degree of success in such cooperation, and what theoretical approaches are most useful in explaining what has been observed to date?

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Political Science is an eclectic discipline that uses theory to understand and predict specific phenomena that occur in this world. Borrowing from other disciplines can make theories more salient, but can subject to more scrutiny. Formulating theory comes from testing variables and causal patterns that provide guidelines for developing specific research programs (Katzenstein, Keohane, Krasner 1998). It is in this method that scholars of political science have been directing research towards civil war and civil war peacemaking. Many of the theories provided in the recent literature on these subjects have employed theoretical frameworks from the vast field of international relations (IR). A partial definition of civil war is determined by the amount of casualties incurred on both sides of the conflict, which makes it distinct from an armed conflict. Therefore, work in this field has focused around counting the casualties; which has created the common consensus that more lives have been lost in civil wars than in international wars.<sup>1</sup> This fact, among others, lends itself to study within the field of IR. The prominent literature by IR scholars on civil war and civil war peacemaking has taken on an agnostic approach, rather than taking into account what the particular war is about (i.e., ethnic or religious wars). The adoption of *realist*, *rational-choice institutionalists* and *constructivist* theories have all aided in explaining some causal factors of civil war and the implications of civil war settlement. This paper will explore how these particular IR theories have been generally successful in developing explanatory factors of civil war and civil war peacemaking; and how these theoretical tools have required some form of adaptation in order to explain these issues.

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<sup>1</sup> A conservative estimate of the total dead as a direct result of civil war conflicts is five times the interstate toll (Fearon, Latin 2003).

Understanding the causes of civil wars is necessary in order to come to a peaceful settlement and lasting peace in an afflicted state. Some IR scholars have focused research into the factors that explain why some countries have been at risk of civil war, rather than focusing on the concrete causes of civil war. After a rigorous study, Fearon and Laitin (2003) have found that the factors that explain which countries have been at risk for civil war are neither ethnic nor religious characteristics, but rather the conditions in which these countries favor insurgency. They found that the conditions that favor insurgency are high poverty, marked by a financially and bureaucratically weak state, which in turn, favors rebel recruitment and political instability. The theoretical interpretation of their findings follows a *realist* framework, a Hobbesian discourse, which explains that: “when states are relatively weak and capricious, both fears and opportunities encourage the rise of would-be rulers who supply a rough local justice while arrogating the power to “tax” for themselves and, often, for a larger cause” (Fearon, Laitin 2003, pg. 76). Along this *realist* conception, they explain that civil wars of the post-Cold War period all have structural roots in which the combination of simple military technology and decolonization, has created a international system disproportionately dominated by weak states that are unable to control their peripheries. This is a *realist* concept of a state of anarchy, which is characterized by: a constant state of war, the nature of humanity, structure of international order, and the specific character of the states (Doyle 1997). A *realist* inclusion to the study of civil war can then be found in the conditions that favor insurgency- state weakness marked by poverty, a large population, and instability; which are found to be the best predictors of which countries are at risk of civil war (Fearon, Laitin 2003). Although *realism* has been

adapted to explain phenomena at a subnational level, it maintains the implications of a weak state as it relates to the likelihood of civil war to occur. Adapting *realism* to explain all causes of civil war would be futile.

Besides researching the likelihood of civil wars occurring, some IR scholars have employed IR theoretical lenses toward the study of civil war resolution and peace building as well. These studies include understanding the importance of institutions and *rational-choice* in the development of peace building efforts and sustainable peace. IR scholars have found that institutions involved in peace keeping efforts after a civil war are vital for the long term success of any peace agreement (Walter 1997).

Peacekeeping by the United Nations is extremely important to the stability of peace and the likelihood that it will endure (Fortna 2004). Studying the influence of institutional arrangements in peace keeping has helped in developing methods to sustain peace in countries inflicted with civil war. The use of *rational-choice institutionalism* explains how actors can best achieve their goals of resolution through institutions. International peace building can improve the prospects of a civil war being resolved. Doyle and Sambanis (2000), point out that designing the appropriate peace building strategy should reside in a *rational-choice* framework. *Rational-choice* is relevant to the calculations parties make to support or reject peace after the fighting ends. This is contingent on the expected utility of war/peace and if the actors involved are rational (Doyle, Sambanis 2000). Employing the ideas of *rational-choice* logic, and understanding the importance of intuitions, has added a tremendous amount to the study of civil wars in general; but adapting them to do so is difficult when individuals are not rational.

Another successful use of IR theory in explaining civil war resolution comes from a *constructivist* argument. Peceny and Stanley (2001) have argued that constructivist approaches to international relations provide some insight into the process of conflict resolution through liberal social reconstruction. The termination of civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala, during the 1990s, occurred because the political adversaries in those countries adopted liberal norms. They adopted these norms because every international actor, including those with material influence and the greatest moral legitimacy, spread the same message and cooperated in socializing Central American political actors according to liberal principles (Peceny, Stanley 2001). Although findings from *constructivist* arguments are less salient compared to other explanations within IR -in terms of an inability to quantify and test the adoption of liberal norms- it is highly explanatory in this case. Liberal social reconstruction is most effective in countries that are deeply integrated into the global economy and exist in a regional neighborhood dominated by democratic regimes and liberal international institutions (2001).

This paper has explored the different ways in which *realism*, *rational-choice institutionalism* and *constructivism* have been used in explaining some causal factors of civil wars and the implications of civil war settlement. These particular IR theories have been used by different scholars, in varying levels of success, in order to develop a greater understanding of these phenomena. In order to do so however, some scholars have had to adjust these concepts to effectively explore the intricacies of civil wars. It should be concluded that certain phenomena are more efficiently explained by the implementation of certain theories or concepts in IR, and this is logic should remain the same in the study of civil war and civil war peacemaking.

**Question 4)** Major international environmental problems such as climate change or ozone depletion require collective action. **Under what circumstances have we seen a degree of success in such cooperation, and what theoretical approaches are most useful in explaining what has been observed to date?**

The collective action problems posed by climate change and ozone depletion are vast and far reaching. Due to the nature of these environmental problems, global cooperation seems to be the only way to combat them effectively. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has reached a broad consensus that the world faces grave environmental problems that require a cooperative effort, but a paradoxical divergence in various governments' policy outputs still continue (Grundman 2007). Recent literature also suggests that there is an increasing effort toward interstate and intergovernmental cooperation through the propagation of epistemic communities, composed of scientist and policy makers, sympathetic toward preserving the quality of the environment. Scientifically, an overall success in cooperation could be empirically evaluated in terms of climate change and ozone depletion that has either decreased or remained stagnant; But success in terms of a global movement toward adapting policies that combat these environmental problems is difficult to measure because of this paradoxical divergence in policy. What theoretical approaches are most useful in explaining the cooperation that has observed? A neorealist approach towards the idea of relative gains, aids in explaining why there is tendency toward cooperation on environmental policy. The cooperation that has been observed through the propagation of epistemic communities and international norms is better explained through a constructivist framework. An overall adherence and cooperation on this collective action problem is more saliently explained through

institutionalism. To varying degrees, it can be argued that all of these approaches are useful to explain what has been observed thus far in environmental cooperation.

Grundig (2006) has found that cooperation can be evaluated in terms of a relative gains argument in that when relative gains matter, cooperation is more likely. His models suggest that there should be a higher level of cooperation on ozone depletion than on global climate change. “Unfortunately the conclusions to be drawn from the relative gains argument suggest that the current impasse in reaching a high level of cooperation on reducing greenhouse gases is not just a stage in the bargaining process or a problem that can possibly be manipulated by policy makers; rather, it suggests that this issue is unlikely to be resolved effectively unless action can be achieved at costs that have no security implications” (798). This study demonstrates that neorealist reasoning clearly has a contribution to make toward the explanation of environmental cooperation, especially when environmental issues, with big costs and benefits, can have a real impact on the economy.

Another way that relative cooperation has been observed is through the propagation of epistemic communities and international norms, all explainable through a constructivist framework. One example of this is observed through the negotiations during the Mediterranean Action Plan (Med Plan). Hass (1989) uses this case to demonstrate that by empowering a group of experts that have contributed to the development of convergent state policies; the MED Plan was successful in altering the balance of power within Mediterranean governments. This in turn, strongly influenced other less developed countries (that aren't inclined to do so) to cooperate with these kinds of policies. The MED Plan spread knowledge through epistemic communities and

succeeded in transforming interests. Jeperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein (1996) argue that the configuration of specific state identities shape interstate normative structures (such as the MED Plan). When states seek to enact or institutionalize their identities they do so with normative structures. State policies then both reproduce and reconstruct cultural and institutional structures (1996). Employing a constructivist argument has been successful in explaining the cooperation that has been seen thus far in combating global climate change.

Institutionalists have also made great strides in explaining the varying success of regime formation, implementation, and effectiveness of cooperation in environmental problems. A study shows that there is a high level of environmental policy convergence namely caused by international harmonization (Holzinger, Krill and Sommerer 2008). This international harmonization is developed through international organizations which also play a massive role in making states comply with environmental policy. In 1998, the World Meteorological Organization and the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) jointly established the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), to provide scientific advice to policy-makers on the problem of global climate change. According to the political history of the KYOTO Protocol (Dessai, Suraje, Vincent 2003), the publication of IPCC's First Assessment Report led the United Nations General Assembly to initiate negotiations on a Framework Convention on Climate Change (FCCC). This eventually led to further negotiations, and later, the growth of the Kyoto Protocol. Although this agreement is disputed in its effectiveness in confronting global climate change, it is by far the best example of cooperation brought about by institutional factors in confronting a collective action problem. This can be seen as

rational-choice institutionalism, in which the formation of this institution was rationally chosen by those who view the rules of the organization as facilitating the pursuit of their goals. This environmental regime, like others, has “principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors expectation converge in a given issue-area” (Katzenstein, Keohane, and Krasner 1998). It is through institutionalism that an overall cooperation in environmental problems has been observed to date.

Literature of the politics of global climate change suggests that there is an increasing effort toward interstate and intergovernmental cooperation through the propagation of epistemic communities. Success in terms of a global movement toward adapting policies that combat these environmental problems is difficult to measure because of a paradoxical divergence in policy. The differing theoretical approaches of neorealism, constructivism, and institutionalism have all contributed to a broad understanding of the reasons for an observed cooperation on environmental issues that plague the globe.