Armed Conflict in the Former Colonial Regions: From Classification to Explanation

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INTRODUCTION

As we contemplate the winding down of the Soviet-American armed rivalry and the declining probability of global nuclear war, our attention is increasingly drawn to the frequency and severity of armed conflict in what used to be called the ‘Third World’. And while the conventional wisdom sees this level of regional and communal war as something new – permitted, if not catalysed, by the end of superpower confrontation – the evidence suggests otherwise. That is, since the Second World War there has been a dramatic movement in the location of both international war and civil war from the northern part of the globe to the southern regions, to approximately below the 40 degrees north latitude. To put it another way, the only international war in the north between 1945 and 1990 was the three-week Russo-Hungarian war of 1956, killing about 10,000 combatants (three-quarters of them on the Soviet side), whereas there were 45 in the rest of the world; similarly, the only civil war during that period in the northern region was that which raged in Greece from 1944 to 1949, killing 160,000 combatants, while the rest of the world saw 69 such wars, with combat fatalities of approximately six and a half million (Singer, 1991). These figures are cited to help us appreciate that this trend has been with us for nearly half a century, and in no way can be understood as a consequence of the end of the Cold War. It is just that most of us living in the ‘First’ and ‘Second’ worlds were too preoccupied with the senselessness of our own confrontation to notice the death and destruction going on elsewhere. Had we stopped and looked, we might have become aware of these tragedies, and furthermore might even have observed that these were largely wars over land, resources, populations, and self-determination, whereas we hovered at the brink of a global

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holocaust over the matter of some dubious dominance, couched in terms normative and ideological.

Be that as it may, conflict and combat have been part of the former colonial world for a long time, not only causing human grief beyond imagination, but virtually assuring that economic, social, and political development would not occur. But now that there seems to be fast-growing concern over this dreadful state of affairs, it is appropriate that the policy and scholarly communities begin to seek a reversal of these trends. To do so, a major requisite is that we learn more about the factors that lead to communal and regional conflict in the 'peripheral' areas, building on the fact that our knowledge regarding inter-state war in the European regions has gradually begun to accumulate (for example, Vasquez, 1993; Cashman, 1993; Houweling and Siccama, 1988; Midlarsky, 1989), but that the applicability of that knowledge to the rest of the world remains open to question.

TRUTH IN PACKAGING AND SEMANTIC OBFUSCATION

Nothing is as central to the explanation of any phenomenon as the kind of typology we use to identify and discuss it and the factors that allegedly lead to it. Typology and classification make it possible to generalize, to speculate, and ultimately to test alternative explanations. And given the ubiquity of armed combat, not to mention its human costs and the difficulty of studying it, one might expect that students of conflict would be especially careful of the language, concepts, and categories currently used. This, unhappily, is far from the case. Although it would not be easy to demonstrate, the strong impression is that social scientists are more careless than biological or physical scientists in their vocabularies, and that within the social sciences, those who specialize in conflict among political entities are even less attentive to semantic precision.

To illustrate, going from the general to the particular, we note the frequency with which 'theory' – which should be a word used only to describe a body of codified knowledge – is applied to all sorts of ideas, idle speculations, casual hunches, plausible arguments, familiar assumptions, and so forth. If the same concept is used to describe our ideas before the research is done, how shall we differentiate what we know after a major piece of work has been completed? One might even suggest that if the objective of scientific research is to produce a substantiated theory, we need not bother; the theory is there without the research! Another embarrassing example is that of the currently popular 'hegemon'. A moment's thought suggests that this is a dichotomous term: a state is either a hegemon or it is not, and there