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IN THE SHADOW OF VIOLENCE

The Politics of Armed Groups

campus

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The structure of this book

The aim of this book is not an all-encompassing theory of violence or war but to reintroduce political sociology into the debate on contemporary warfare. This shall allow us to go beyond an understanding that limits itself to utilitarian rationalism. The claim connected to this reintroduced perspective is that it is able to explain more features and varieties in the life of armed groups in a theoretically coherent manner. At the same time, I do not claim to explain every aspect of the politics of these figurations. The proclaimed task of this study is rather to reveal the most fundamental mechanisms of these politics.

In the second chapter, three mechanisms of how armed groups come into being will be distinguished. It is a thesis running through this book that the context from which armed groups evolve plays an important role for their trajectories. This can be seen first in the three mechanisms distinguished here. Insurgent groups are formed either as a result of violent repression, as ad-hoc groups formed by excluded members of the political class, or they spin off from authorized state violence. In any event, state agencies play an important role in the production of armed groups, as will also be shown by a statistical overview of biographies of leaders and staff members. In these biographies, the shadow of violence can already be observed in the sheer number of previous experiences of violence.

Doing interviews with veterans forces one to acknowledge that the experience of organized violence made enormous difference in their lives. The experience of violence, having both exerted it and been afflicted by it, becomes pivotal in the biography. As well, the organizational life of armed groups is heavily influenced by the practices of violence the group exerts. These practices, their explanation, and their outcomes are the subject of chapter three. The relation between violence and legitimacy is complex, but three elements seem to be essential. First, organized violence by armed groups needs to be legitimated. How this is done is dealt with in the first part of this chapter. Second, violence can legitimize outcomes as well as actions and it has the tendency to lead to further legitimizations of violence. And the third aspect is de-legitimization through violence. The wounds and the scars, the suffering and the traumata, both of perpetrators and victims have long lasting effects on social and political orders and their possible justification. The organization of armed groups is closely linked to these effects of violence. Already, the mode in which armed groups are formed has an impact on the types of violence they practice. Moreover, violence derails quite often, threatening the legitimacy of a group both within its ranks as well as in its environment. This chapter thus investigates the causes and effects of derailing use of force, based on a concept of violence that tries to explain its contradictory effect of being able to legitimize as well as de-legitimize actors and political structures.

The fourth chapter, on discourses and ideas, deals with the workings of legitimacy in a wider perspective. The de-legitimizing effects of violence threaten the success of insurgencies. But there are countervailing forces to this threat. First, armed groups can benefit from forms of basic legitimacy that can accrue to them if they achieve the ending of open violence. If they are also able to maintain an acceptable degree of order, the momentum of ordinary life may help to restore normalcy which in turn stabilizes their position. In order to bolster these crude forms of acceptance and turn them into legitimacy, armed groups deploy political programs and narratives that put their political project and their rule into a series of political necessities. Any of these programs, as I will show, is bound by the cycle of charismatic ideas.

It is through these policies that armed groups can also alter their sources of income. In an economic environment that is increasingly marked by the shadow of violence, capital stock will devalue, and armed groups must develop strategies to deal with that challenge too. These strategies, with their

limits as well as their consequences for the organization of armed groups, will be the subject of the fifth chapter. Armed groups can either stagnate or be disconnected from their social environment, or their economic strategy can lead to para-states in which insurgent groups act like governments. Many armed groups, however, discover new sources of funding, albeit not always by strategical decision but in an iterative manner. This chapter will show what the conditions of these strategies are and what factors limit or allow their use.

Conditions necessary to create legitimacy and limitations on developing means to fund their war are the main structuring elements in the organizational life of armed groups. Both in turn can be explained by contexts and structures in which armed groups move. However, there is room for maneuver, and as will be shown in the sixth chapter, some armed groups are more apt to deal with the endless challenges their violent politics create. As far as I can see there are two main pathways to institutionalization by which the power of arms can first turn the armed group into domination within the figuration and then within its social environment. One is the way of patrimonialization, marked by central redistribution and clientelist structures. The other one, formalization, is more difficult to achieve. But there are also armed groups that develop bureaucratic features. How this comes into being and is maintained, depending again on the structures, the composition of the group, and the habitus of leaders will be seen. The central argument includes centrifugal tendencies within the groups and their centripetal techniques that determine the outcome.

The last, conclusive chapter again assesses the theoretical concepts of this book and connects the politics of armed groups with larger debates on world politics and the formation of states. The shadow of violence, finally, is also cast on state policies that include violent means. Armed groups maintain dynamic interactions with these states. The last question addressed in that chapter is whether the politics of armed groups can be seen as processes of state formation.