Review - Civil Wars: A History in Ideas

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Civil Wars: A History in Ideas
by David Armitage,
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David Armitage's new book, *Civil Wars*, brings together several trains of thought pursued by Armitage himself and others in recent years. It is an exponent of the kind of*longue durée* history advocated by Armitage and Guldi in their *History Manifesto* (2014) – the present book begins in ancient Rome and ends in contemporary Syria. Armitage's new book is also, if we are to use a "fashionable term of art", a genealogy (15), but more on this in a moment. In reviewing this book, I will approach *Civil Wars* with two main questions in mind. First, how does civil war relate to our understanding of war more generally, insofar as we can argue that civil war is one subset of a broader activity or practice called "war"? Such a connection is particularly salient given debates within several fields, most notably in the IR subfields of critical war and security studies, regarding changing concepts and ontologies of war and peace. Second, how might we approach and understand the proliferation of the language of (civil) war, the use of the concept as a metaphor for disagreement, into wider political discourse, as noted by Armitage?

A genealogy of the kind presented by Armitage has its roots in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche and was practiced to great effect by Michel Foucault. Genealogy does not aim to offer a history of the *minutae* of the development of a particular concept. Rather, genealogy, in Armitage's words, "traces breaks or discontinuities and shows how our own arrangements are accidental, not inevitable, the outcome of choices, not the product of design, contingent and therefore temporary and changeable" (15). Accordingly, Armitage introduces the reader to three junctions in the history of the development of the concept of civil war. These reflect civil war's genesis in ancient Rome, its transformation in early modern Europe, and its contemporary form taking shape in the middle of the nineteenth century (22). Additionally, towards the end of the book, Armitage offers some thoughts on the metaphorical use of civil war in European and North American political discourses, the British Labour party for instance might've been said to have been embroiled in a civil war following the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader, and concludes that the way the contemporary concept of civil war is "refracted through language and memory" means "its multiple futures will be as controversial and as transformative as its contentious past" (238-239).

In exploring the genesis of the concept of civil war, Armitage takes the reader to ancient Rome. The Roman Republic named its wars, in the way we no longer do in Western Europe and North America, after those it was fighting. A full-scale war against other Roman citizens, *civites*, was therefore called a *civil* war. And, as we learn, the history of the deployment of the concept of civil war has been entangled, from the start, with questions of the legitimacy of rule and belonging in the polity. For instance, in Rome the usual honours of victory were not granted in the case of civil war, perhaps as a sign of respect and potential reconciliation to those defeated. And yet, both Pompey and Octavian (who later styled himself Augustus) portrayed some of their victories as won against both foreign and citizen enemies and therefore worthy of formal honours (66-67). Though some Romans argued that civil war had short term causes and therefore was unlikely to recur, others viewed it as a more fundamental feature of Roman society. A number of Rome's orators, poets, and historians argued that civil wars were, though destructive and dangerously recurrent, "the paradoxical mark of civility, even of civilization itself" (69). Augustine, on the other hand, later contended that the roots of civil war were present at the founding of Rome, being marked by the murder of one brother, Remus, by the other, Romulus (79-80). Powerful today, inherited from Rome, remains, Armitage notes in conclusion, "the

understanding of civil war as recurrent and sequential" (236).

Armitage's engagement with early modern European writers on the concept of civil war becomes quickly tied up with the modern idea of revolution. In the modern history of revolutions, Armitage writes, "civil war was the inconvenient ancestor that had to be suppressed but never quite seemed to go away" (125). Here, Armitage's analysis is close to Hannah Arendt's reading of the concept of revolution as a gateway, a transformative mechanism, between past and future; a past marked by strife and a future "ripe with utopian possibilities" (119). Modern revolutions, therefore, came to be characterised by gradual human emancipation. Civil war became partially consumed by this new revolutionary idea(l) and while civil wars were to be contained, revolutions were to be spread around the world in the name of often explicitly internationalist values. Yet there were also areas of confluence, one example being Lenin who considered himself a "professional revolutionary of global civil war", and argued that only through waging war against the oppressive capitalists could the proletariat liberate itself. Lenin's civil war, building on Marx, was inherent to the capitalist system and could therefore only ultimately be resolved beyond, rather than within, it (158).

Michel Foucault finally reappears in the final part of Armitage's account as responding to claims made about civil war by Thomas Hobbes. Foucault, Armitage writes, "confronted the assumption that civil war was the antithesis of power because it represented its dissolution and breakdown, arguing that civil war was in effect the very apotheosis of power; politics was *civil* war by other means" (215). These remarks, taken from Foucault's lectures at the Collège de France in 1972-73 and published under the title *The Punitive Society*, contrast markedly with Foucault's stance in *Society Must Be Defended*, a lecture course given a few years later. There, Foucault performed an explicit inversion of Clausewitz, simply stating that politics was *war* by other means (2003: 15). While this later turn of phrase, too, is fundamentally characterised as one of civil or *race* war by Foucault (see Hoffman 2007), it is worth pausing over. Much contemporary international relations theory on war relies on this exact moment in Foucault's work and, therefore, an opportunity to address a conceptual convergence of a kind central to contemporary understandings of conflict presents itself here. In addition, one might add, Foucault's play on Clausewitz also helped the language of war proliferate metaphorically within the domain of political discourse, a phenomenon explored by Armitage in the last part of the book. Armitage might've made more of this reliance on Clausewitz, who had little to say about civil war himself.

Most recently, Armitage notes, civil war has become globalised in the name of what used to be called the Global War on Terror, and has since been termed the Long War. This refashioning of Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilisations" pits al-Qaeda (originally, now including various affiliates and derivatives like Boko Haram and the Islamic State) against the United States and its allies (often collectively termed "the West"). Yet critical theorists, too, have drawn on such language. Most notably, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri claimed in 2004 that "our contemporary world is characterised by a generalised, permanent global civil war, by the constant threat of violence that effectively suspends democracy" (quoted in Armitage 2017: 230). In such a context, it is no wonder that Carl Schmitt, crown jurist of National Socialism, and his understanding of the "state of exception", in which an all-powerful sovereign may determine exceptions to the law, have experienced resurgent interest (230). It is perhaps Hannah Arendt, channeled through the work of Faisal Devji, whom Armitage draws on when he notes that the idea of global civil war requires an idea of a global, cosmopolitan community which must exist *before* it can be torn asunder by violent conflict. Arendt made a similar point when it came to nuclear weapons. Humanity must be imaginable as a collective object, she argued, before its destruction could become possible (Devji 2009: 213).

In conclusion, Armitage addresses the proliferation of the language of civil war. Foucault's influence is palpable when Armitage writes that "in speaking of wars, words themselves are wielded as weapons, whether the blood is hot or the battlefield has gone cold" (233). After all, when it came to genealogy, Foucault wrote, "one's point of reference should not be to the great model of language and signs, but to that of war and battle" (Foucault 1980: 114). What is revealed here is perhaps, despite an earlier dismissal of that term, just how much *Civil Wars* is a genealogy; a history of the present, of our use of certain concepts and figures of speech, which shape our political imaginations in fundamental ways. A set of bellicose metaphors for political contestation is now, as Armitage notes, mundane. One way to approach such metaphors has been in a way that echoes recent discussions on the concept of truth, to contend that a nearly monolithic postmodernism has diluted previously stable concepts. But, perhaps we might try and understand them differently, reflecting a more fundamental shift in political alignment. Undoubtedly, politics in

some European and North American countries has recently acquired a more antagonistic character. Yet this is not a new phenomenon, but rather may signal a (partial) turn to a post-neoliberal status quo. It might be read as an act of rebellion against a status quo which relentlessly applies economic analyses to all parts of an individual's social and private life. Sharp dividing lines may be dangerous, but they may also offer a whole new realm of possibilities for progressive and radical change.

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