Incumbents vs Insurgents: Counter Insurgency's Normative Reliance on Brute Force

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A Critical Terrorism Study (CTS) lens argues normative terrorism studies often "suffers from state bias" (Gunning, 2007: 368), as state force is depicted as 'necessary' and Western states are so often labelled the "victims and never the perpetrators" (Poynting and Whyte, 2012: 1). This results in a situation where universally, state 'brute force' is considered one of the most effective if not the only methods to end insurgency (Crenshaw, 1991). As a result, throughout history states have adopted hard-line positions and used excessive force to quash political uprisings; Byman (2017), Dixon (2009) and Kocher et al (2011) discuss examples of this in Malaya, the War on Terror and the Vietnam War, three scenarios where Western forces utilised brute force in an effort to end insurgency. Brute force is often wielded by incumbent states in an effort to suppress insurgents; this paper defines brute force as encompassing indiscriminate violence as "the killing of civilians in times of war is often part of a deliberate policy of mass killing against non-combatant populations" (Valentino et al, 2004: 376). The common use of brute force and, arguably, gratuitous violence in counter insurgency is symptomatic of states wielding their power, manifesting it through military might as they reinforce the status quo; "inequalities and injustices thus generated is implicated in the 'problem' of terrorism and other forms of subaltern violence" (Jackson, 2007: 245). This essay will utilise a CTS lens to analyse and challenge state power and how the concept of state supremacy is intrinsically linked to the idea that wielding brute force reinforces power and thus ends insurgency (Gunning, 2007). As a result, this essay aims to discredit the idea that brute force alone can end insurgency. It will argue this through a focus on coercion theory, good governance theory and the outcomes and implications of indiscriminate vs select violence as methods of counter insurgency efforts.

Theoretical Background

Contemporary terrorist studies knowledge, particularly within an international relations context, touts the idea that states are justified and understandably employ brute force as a sole factor in counter insurgency efforts and thus lack a nuanced, intersectional perspective on the "nature, causes and responses to terrorism" (Jackson, 2007: 245). Instead they "reproduce a limited set of assumptions and narratives" (Jackson, 2007: 245) surrounding this topic. Critical terrorism studies challenges this knowledge, and argues "knowledge is always intimately connected to power… and that 'regimes of truth' function to entrench certain hierarchies of power and exclude alternative, counter-hegemonic forms of knowledge and practice" (Jackson, 2007: 246). Thus, it would seem CTS is moving beyond and challenging the state as "the sole legitimate referent" (Gunning, 2007: 376) and is looking at how the hierarchies of power and inequality may have produced insurgency and may be reinforcing the motives behind counter insurgency with the use of indiscriminate violence and brute force. Smyth et al argues CTS is "transparent about its own values and political standpoints, adheres to a set of responsible research ethics, and is committed to a broadly defined notion of emancipation" (2008: 2). From this perspective CTS argues the entrenched idea that state brute force is the sole way of ending insurgency is an archaic concept centred around Western State narratives which label the state as the victim, justifying its use of brute force (Jackson et al, 2009; Mcgowan, 2016). CTS criticises the narratives that accept brute force as the sole method of ending insurgency, which also demonise the often oppressed insurgents, labelling them "pathological and inhuman" (Poynting and Whyte, 2012: 3). It has often been justified that brute force is the only way to end insurgency by labelling that brute force "flawed or abnormal politics" (Poynting and Whyte, 2012: 3). This absolves states from the true horrors of 'brute force' and allows the justification that it is a means to an

Incumbents vs Insurgents: Counter Insurgency's Normative Reliance on Brute Force
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end, and only utilised as a result of being the 'sole' counter insurgency strategy. Poynting and Whyte argue that this process of labelling brutal force as an outlying, extraordinary political counter insurgent requirement depoliticises state violence "under the guise of 'counter terrorism'" (2012: 6). The depoliticisation of state violence inherently feeds into the idea that brute force is the only method of counter insurgency and reinforces state-centric hierarchies of power and thus knowledge within the terrorism studies discipline (Gunning, 2007; Jackson, 2007; Poynting and Whyte, 2012). In the same vein, CTS analyses the use of language surrounding insurgents and incumbents, as insurgent violence is often demonised while state political violence is almost never labelled 'state terrorism,' in an effort to absolve the state from condemnation (Poynting and Whyte, 2012). The combination of depoliticisation and state-centric labelling in counter insurgency effort seems to provide evidence of the state centred, hierarchical knowledge produced in terrorism studies. Valentino argues that this knowledge allows states to "hide their own crimes, silence opponents, and convince the public that other ethnic groups pose threats that justify extreme, violent measures" (2014:98). This all feeds into the normative rhetoric that creates the universal belief that brute force alone can end an insurgency. Despite contemporary sources holding this notion in disrepute, this is still a universally expressed idea, especially within military counter insurgency contexts. Valentino in Dixon expresses that "the intentional slaughter of civilians in the effort to defeat guerrilla insurgencies was the most common impetus for mass killing in the twentieth century" (2009: 356). Therefore, it seems evident that CTS is an important lens and tool to dismantle the idea that brute force alone can end insurgency and reproduces knowledge-challenging justifications of brute force in insurgency. This theoretical lens invites the critique of normative narratives in terrorism studies and invites the potential to debunk the myth of the success of brute force.

Good Governance vs Coercion Theory

Good governance is widely regarded as key political initiative in contemporary rhetoric that aids ending insurgency; Hazelton simplistically argues "good governance is necessary to defeat insurgencies because it is bad governance that causes them in the first place" (2017: 83). Hazelton defines the good governance approach as "the belief that the government must provide political, economic, and social reforms that meet the needs of the population; reduce the number and kinds of grievances fuelling the insurgency" (2017: 83). Thus, the good governance approach is based on the theory "insurgencies stem from root-cause discontent and lasting victory necessitates the government address the root causes of the insurgency" (Connable and Libicki, 2010: 144). This idea stems from a longstanding body of research that has illustrated "repression is an important cause of the onset of insurgency" (Wilson and Akhtar, 2019: 710). It would seem, literature surrounding the good governance approach is contemporary as the idea of conflating progressive politics and ending insurgency only came into academic discourse in the last twenty years. The good governance approach is dichotomous to the idea of brute force; good governance argues against state violence stating it only "aggravates pre-existing anger over economic and political marginalisation" (Wilson and Akhtar, 2019: 710). Good governance outlines the 'hearts and mind strategy' that was expressed but then ignored in the Vietnam War and Malay insurgencies (Gentile, 2013; Dixon, 2009). This is a counter insurgency effort that expresses the need for "Greater representative government and more public goods" (Hazelton, 2017: 83) supposedly in an effort to win over civilians and "marginalise the insurgents" (Hazelton, 2017: 83). Good governance theory is one of the only non-violent forms of counter insurgency and adheres to the idea that brute force and "victimizing civilians is futile" (Kocher et al, 2011). Gilmore confirms the success of good governance theory in stating "higher levels of engagement with local populations and limitations on the use of force do compare favourably to the high impact war-fighting" (2011: 22). Good governance is celebrated as a "humane alternative to counter insurgency" (Valentino et al, 2004: 403). Gilmore goes further to argue the negative spiral of indiscriminate violence and brute force can be overturned by good governance "Restraint in the use of force has the potential to vastly reduce the human cost of military operations and the consequent cycle of reprisal and counter-violence" (Gilmore, 2011: 34). In the same vein, it has been argued that this form of counter insurgency has the potential to challenge the "underlying drivers of conflict by addressing the connections between underdevelopment, insecurity and violence that may have previously been ignored in the War on Terror discourse" (Gilmore, 2011: 34). With this wealth of support and evidence backing the good governance theory, it could be argued that this is alone the strategy to end insurgency, rather than brute force. Albeit, Hazelton (2017) outlines that this theory has come under criticism for lacking theoretical rigour in the supporting research and thus it has been accused of being based on unexplored assumptions. In the same vein, terrorism study seems to champion the unwavering support of brute force due to its alignment with state-centric ideologies, power and normative politics. Thus, good governance theory remains in the

Incumbents vs Insurgents: Counter Insurgency's Normative Reliance on Brute Force
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CTS section of the discourse surrounding insurgency and historically has only really been touted in an effort to pursue good 'public relations' (Dixon, 2009). The proposition has then promptly been ignored in counter insurgent strategy – as seen in British counter insurgency particularly towards the Viet Cong (Tan, 2014). It seems good governance is a key form of counter insurgency that refutes the idea brute force is alone able to end insurgency. Yet, it may be unlikely that good governance revokes and replaces brute force, as it is not yet associated with the political and military dominance that is exerted by brute force. This is one of the key reasons brute force is still utilised and considered a sole method in ending insurgency; it is so intertwined with state hegemonic dominance, which reinforces structural violence (Gunning, 2007; Jackson, 2007).

"According to the coercion theory, counter insurgent governments must use force to control civilians, and thus cut the flow of resources to insurgents" (Hazelton, 2017: 112). Coercion theory is a political stance that supports the idea "indiscriminate violence can actually suppress an insurgency" (Lyall, 2009: 332) and thus pursues the use of brute force and coercion of civilians as methods of counter insurgency. It exercises political power on the basis that local populations will eventually blame the insurgents rather than the incumbent "for the state's repressive acts, then an insurgency may be forced to curb, if not abandon, its current tactics and strategy" (Lyall, 2009: 337). This is a normative stance that is championed by a number of scholars in terrorism studies and supports the idea and effectiveness of brute force as being able to end insurgency (Stoll 1993; Downes 2008; Merom 2003; Kalyvas 2006). Coercion theory is based upon the manipulation of civilians, political and military strategy to remove power from insurgents by curtailing their capacity to continue their rebellions. This is conducted through the use of massacres of insurgent support bases to "deter the population from providing aid and comfort to the enemy" (Downes, 2007: 424) or indiscriminate attacks on non-combatants (Condra and Shapiro, 2012: 167). Lyall argues this is an effective method of counter insurgency as it "reshapes the relationship between insurgents and populace" (2009: 337) and invites the perception that the insurgents are the weaker side, removing their power and thus the incentive to join. It would seem coercion theory promotes the idea brute force is the sole factor in ending insurgency. Albeit, it has been criticised, as Daxecker argues "the use of coercive counter terrorism could thus backfire and increase terrorist activity" (2017: 1262). This is due to an escalation of violence as insurgents provoke governments to overact, which may sway civilian support away from the incumbents. Asal et al reinforces this point and argues "state coercive actions—sticks—are robustly associated with later rebel use of terrorism." (2019: 1729). Despite being criticised for possible ineffective outcomes of state coercion, the dominant discourse continues to express that "the use of indiscriminate insurgent terror correlates with insurgent defeat" (Connable and Libicki, 2010: 142).

Coercive and good governance theory centre around political power and how it is wielded. Good governance supports progressive politics, usually associated with left-wing liberal rhetoric, that suggests to 'really' end insurgency the roots of political, socio-economic discontent must be addressed (Hazelton, 2017; Valentino et al, 2004). As such, good governance utterly opposes the idea that brute force is alone the championed method for ending insurgency. Coercive theory in juxtaposition argues that brute force and violence wield power and military might, which in turn end insurgency. Albeit, it can be argued good governance has merit in that it argues ending insurgency requires addressing the root causes which inspired insurgency. It posits that, in the long run, addressing civilian grievances will ultimately end insurgency and this results in a scenario where civilians do not feel the need to pursue insurgency. Whereas, it can be argued coercive strategy may be more instantaneously effective, yet will likely encourage future civilian discontent and thus inspire warfare and uprisings. Therefore, it can be proposed through a CTS lens that good governance is a move away from hegemonic state dominance and inspires long-term civil satisfaction and thus truly ends insurgency, whereas, coercion theory supports the use of indiscriminate violence and pursues state-centric ideology which may result in an immediate violent 'win' which later again spirals into insurgency. Coercive theory is overarching and only considers normative state supremacy, whereas good governance theory pursues a nuanced collaborative relationship between state and civilian which fosters positive relations and ends insurgency.

Select vs Indiscriminate Violence

Indiscriminate violence has been categorised by this paper as a fundamental component of brute force and is one of the most commonly used methods of counter insurgency by Western incumbents; indiscriminate violence can be defined as "violence in which people are targeted, based not on what they have done, but rather because of their

Incumbents vs Insurgents: Counter Insurgency's Normative Reliance on Brute Force
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appearance, race, religion, where they live, or their proximity to a rebel attack" (Downes, 2007: 425). Indiscriminate violence or brute force have been widely proven "ineffective and often counterproductive" (Downes, 2007: 425). Downes argues that in fact "insurgents often try to provoke governments into committing indiscriminate reprisals in the hope that wanton displays of cruelty will galvanize support for the rebel cause" (2007: 427). Krcmaric agrees with this and states "scholars of political violence often argue that the state's use of indiscriminate violence is counterproductive because it helps solve the collective action problems associated with insurgent recruitment" (2018: 22). Krcmaric argues this occurs through two mechanisms, the first of which is that it is "survival-maximising" (2018: 22) meaning civilians are incentivised to join insurgent operations in an effort to simply survive the conflict. Secondly "mass killing alienates the local population and produces grievances, which then induce individuals to strike back against the hated government" (2018: 22). In the same vein Downes argues that indiscriminate violence "typically backfires politically in the long run and eventually undercuts the perpetrator's political goals" (2007: 421); this may undermine future political campaigns. It has been argued evidence of this occurred surrounding the War on Terror launched by President Bush post 9/11 (Tan, 2014). Therefore, it would seem indiscriminate violence and brute force, despite being a common counter insurgency strategy, is a method that may not end insurgency and can actually inspire it, as well as resulting in political backlash for the incumbent.

Lyall poses the question "if indiscriminate violence were so consistently counterproductive, it is puzzling why militaries have wielded such a blunt instrument against non-combatants with alarming regularity." (2009: 332). It can be argued using a CTS lens, that reproduced structural hierarchies peddle the idea that "violence and repression "work" to generate compliance" (Kocher et al, 2011: 201) and that brute force will "break the insurgency's will and capability to fight on" (Hazelton, 2017: 81). Valentino et al reinforces this rhetoric stating "intentional killing of civilians during war is often a calculated military strategy designed to combat powerful guerrilla insurgencies" (2004: 376). It can be argued this narrative is a motivation in pursuing indiscriminate violence and brute force as a sole strategy in ending insurgency, despite the evidence to suggest this is arguably not the case. The dominate discourse surrounding the "BIG WAR" (Tan, 2014) approach prevails and thus informs policy and incumbent military strategy.

Within all violent political struggles, violence is a key feature of warfare. Thus it can be argued there is some merit in using selective rather than indiscriminate violence in counter insurgent strategies. This paper does not define selective violence as brute force. Wilner argues that there is literature suggesting targeted violence has the capacity to decrease the "coercive and operational capability of violent, non-state groups" (2010:312). Wilner (2010) argues this occurs because targeted violence can result in the removal of leadership, leaving the insurgents in disarray which weakens their ability to plan, command and control rebuttal attacks. An example of this success of targeted violence can be seen in regards to the leaders of Al Qaeda, who were targeted by a number of successful attacks from the US incumbents and this led to "despair among surviving leaders" (Wilner, 2010: 315). In the same vein, Wilner (2010) argues targeted attacks can reinforce state power and remind insurgents of state military might without wielding brute force. Thus, it would seem it can be argued, targeted violence may have some capabilities and success in ending insurgency. Downes reinforces this point and suggests "The literature, however, is nearly unanimous in its contention that violence is more effective when selective" (2007: 424).

Conclusion

In summation, Arreguin-Toft states "If power implies victory in war, then weak actors should almost never win against stronger opponents... Yet history suggests otherwise: Weak actors sometimes do win." (2001: 94). Hegemonic state power dominates terrorism studies discourse and supports the idea brutish, indiscriminate violence and state coercion are the only methods to ending insurgency. This is due to a state-centric rhetoric that governs academic scholarship and public opinion in this discipline; power is often rooted in archaic ideologies and 'regimes of truth' that are reinforced by stagnant politics (Jackson, 2007). Critical terrorism study is pursuing progressive discourses and politics which are overturning this idea and challenging the structures of power that reinforce this 'truth'. Instead, CTS is generating a new rhetoric introducing nuance and long-term, politically salient counter insurgency methods such as good governance and targeted violence that pertain to relevant contemporary political power. CTS is thus overturning the anachronistic idea that brute force epitomises a display of successful state power and is the only method that can end insurgency.

Incumbents vs Insurgents: Counter Insurgency's Normative Reliance on Brute Force
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Incumbents vs Insurgents: Counter Insurgency's Normative Reliance on Brute Force
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