The Political Economy of Counterinsurgency Violence*

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Abstract

Classical counterinsurgency theory explains why discriminate counterinsurgency violence is effective, but does not convincingly explain why many counterinsurgents resort to indiscriminate violence and why it sometimes appears effective. Political scientists explain the motivation for indiscriminate counterinsurgency violence, but do not convincingly explain when it should be inefficient relative to discriminate violence. I formalize the model of insurgency found in the classical counterinsurgency literature to derive predictions over the discrimination of violence that the counterinsurgent uses. The theory explains when discriminate violence is more/less efficient from the counterinsurgent’s perspective and how enforcement behavior on the part of the rebels and population affects the counterinsurgent’s strategy. The counterinsurgent defeats the insurgency by deterring cooperation between the rebels and population. It targets the actor—be it the rebel group or the population—with the greater short term temptation to defect from its accomplice, regardless of the consequences. Thus, the counterinsurgent targets the actor who *profits* most from war, where profit is the temptation for wartime opportunism minus the costs. I discuss two examples of this pattern occurring during insurgencies in Guatemala and Turkey.

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1 Introduction

Why are counterinsurgents often so brutal toward civilians if classical counterinsurgency theory is correct in suggesting that successful counterinsurgents must win—not destroy—the hearts and minds of the population? The classic statements of American, British and French counterinsurgency theory concern the problem of subverting cooperation between a rebel organization and a population—a group of people whose support the rebels rely upon and often gain by coercion (Galula, 1964; Trinquier, 1964; Kitson, 1971; Thompson, 1966; Nagl, 2002; Nagl, Petraeus and Amos, 2007). This theory states that counterinsurgents should discriminate between rebels and the population; hurt the rebels, not the population. The discriminate approach is typically part of a plan to win and sustain the trust of the population. Indiscriminate violence is believed to rally support for the rebels.¹

There are two problems with the classical counterinsurgency theory. The first problem is theoretical. If the rebels and the population need to cooperate in order to sustain an insurgency against a parallel counterinsurgency campaign, then the unstated assumption that in wartime the population has less to gain and more to lose than the rebels do—and therefore is more expensive to coerce into the costly act of disloyalty to the rebels—underpins the claim that discriminate violence always wins the support of the population. I formalize the classical counterinsurgency’s model of insurgency in order to identify the consequences of relaxing this assumption. This modification helps to explain when and why discriminate violence should be more effective than indiscriminate violence, and when and why the reverse should be true. The explanation relies upon beggar-thy-neighbor incentives that both rebels and civilians encounter. These incentives, which arise from the temptation for wartime

¹See especially Nagl, Petraeus and Amos (2007) and the literature review in Lyall (2009).
gains and an invulnerability to the costs of pursuing them, create inefficiencies in
the insurgency and make peace more attractive.

The second problem is empirical. Classical counterinsurgency theory fails to
help us understand the large scale violence that governments commit in many in-
surgencies. In some insurgencies the government focuses on destroying the rebel
organization. Yet in other insurgencies the government kills masses of civilians and
leaves its principal opponent—the rebel organization—relatively unscathed (Eck
and Hultman, 2007; Valentino, Huth and Balch-Lindsay, 2004; Downes, 2008;
Lyall, 2009).

Counterinsurgency theorists might explain indiscriminate violence as mistaken
or irrational if counterinsurgents tended to be ineffective when they practiced it.
However, empirical study of counterinsurgency strategy effectiveness across a large
sample of insurgencies is almost entirely anecdotal or small-N.2 These studies may
help to identify causal mechanisms and rule out alternative theories as explanations
of cases, but cannot be the basis for general descriptive or causal inference. Among
the anecdotal and small-N evidence, effective uses of discriminate violence and
ineffective uses of indiscriminate violence are indeed apparent (Krepinevich, 1986;
Kalyvas, 2006; Kocher, Pepinski and Kalyvas, 2008). Yet discriminate violence
sometimes appears to fail and indiscriminate violence sometimes appears to work
(Linn, 1989; Schirmer, 1998; Downes, 2007; Lyall, 2009).

The theory I sketch in this paper identifies a causal mechanism that accounts for
variation in the discrimination of counterinsurgency violence. In many cases the
government uses violence to tempt one side into abusive and self-defeating behav-
ior at the expense of its long-run objectives, then offers to make concessions that

2Important exceptions are Downes (2008), who finds that indiscriminate violence sometimes is
effective, but studies all wars rather than just insurgencies, and Lyall and Wilson (2007), who study
guerrilla insurgencies and do not identify the effects of different types of violence.
would benefit both actors under a peace settlement. The initial actor’s defection causes its accomplice to engage in opportunistic behavior. As the rebel group loses support and the population suffers under the dual strain of the rebels’ predation and the government’s counterinsurgency, the core members of the rebel organization dissipate back into the general population and the insurgency ends.

When does the government target the rebels? When does it massacre civilians? I argue that a counterinsurgent anticipates that the rebels and population have incentives to engage in opportunistic behavior—looting, abuse, evasion from fighting the government, evasion from contributing goods to the rebel organization, and other forms of disloyalty to the rebels. The counterinsurgent responds to the relative profit that these two actors derive from insurgency. Profit has a specific meaning in this paper, which I formally define below. Loosely speaking, an actor’s profit during insurgency is the intensity of its temptation to opportunistically betray its accomplice. The counterinsurgent targets the actor who profits most, because it betrays its accomplice for the sake of short term gain at a cheaper price—and cheaper still when under pressure of pain.

The theory implies that counterinsurgents have an incentive to practice discriminate violence when rebels can expropriate large sources of windfall revenue from external aid and natural resources, black market revenue, remittances, lootable property and labor, and/or they are weakly reliant on the population’s loyalty and weakly accountable to its efforts to enforce disciplined behavior. On the other hand, counterinsurgents have an incentive to practice indiscriminate violence when members of the rebel organization’s popular support are motivated to seize property or settle scores during war and/or are weakly vulnerable to the rebel group’s predatory behavior and weakly accountable to its efforts to enforce loyalty.

Two cases illustrate the theory’s causal logic. In Guatemala, the state indis-
criminally massacred, tortured and harassed the population in designated “killing zones” in a bid to defeat four rebel groups comprising elements of the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (UNRG). In the process it exploited conditions of extreme inequality and land scarcity under which the population was living. The unpredictable violence and the prospect of taking property from refugees in the early 1980s tempted the population in zones of rebel control to defect from the rebellion, regardless of the consequences the various rebel armies threatened. In response, the four rebel groups comprising the insurgency lost support from 1982 onward and all but capitulated in 1996.

In Turkey, the state implemented a discrimately violent counterinsurgency campaign in the mid-1990s against the Partia Karkaren Kurdistan (PKK). The PKK shied away from fighting the larger and stronger security forces, turned to suicide terror, and exploited its ability to seek sanctuary abroad, profit from contraband trade, and loot the population for labor. As Kurds tired of the PKK, the group asked for peace in 1999 and renounced violence in 2003. In both cases the opportunity for one actor—the population of the northern and western departments of Guatemala and the PKK in Turkey—to make unilateral wartime gains from indiscipline or disloyalty at relatively little cost motivated the counterinsurgent to target that actor due to the actor’s temptation to exploit those gains rather than endure the repression.

2 Related literature

Scholars and counterinsurgency practitioners point out a host of reasons why violence, if it is to be used at all during counterinsurgency, ought to discriminate be-

3Indeed, in this case the army has been accused of genocidal motivations in its counterinsurgency campaign, since much of this population comprised a distinct ethnicity (Guatemalan Commission for Historical Clarification, 1999).
between the more and less actively rebellious members of the population and that an economy of force is crucial to success.\(^4\) This classical perspective on counterinsurgency has not explained why (i) counterinsurgents sometimes are brutal toward the populations whose hearts and minds they must win, and (ii) some indiscriminately violent counterinsurgency strategies appear to work. On the other hand, political scientists have made some productive efforts to explain this paradox. The literature on this topic is large, so I selectively review works falling under two prevalent categories of explanation: those based on a logic of annihilation and those based on a logic of coercion.

The logic of annihilation is simple. Indiscriminate anti-civilian violence is the wholesale annihilation of a population for the sake of disrupting a rebel group’s base of logistics. For example, Valentino, Huth and Balch-Lindsay (2004) argue that when rebels adopt a guerilla strategy and enjoy high levels of support from the population, governments decide to target the population *en masse* due to the difficulty of fixing and fighting the rebels. Downes (2007, 2008) argues that counterinsurgents—and democracies in particular due to their electorates’ casualty-phobia—are tempted into this behavior when it promises a quick victory. Kalyvas (2006) argues that indiscriminate massacres by either the rebel army or the counterinsurgent become more likely when information about the identity of the rival’s supporters is unavailable, but that massacres are ineffective and ought to decline over time as actors become capable of selective killings. His review of many cases of insurgency verify these claims. However, as Downes (2007) notes, one does not observe the counterfactual case in which the counterinsurgent employs discriminate

\(^4\)For example, see Paret and Shy (1962); Galula (1964); Trinquier (1964); Kitson (1971); Thompson (1966); Krepinevich (1986); Nagl, Petraeus and Amos (2007). Lyall (2009) reviews a larger literature by political scientists that offers various reasons why indiscriminately violent counterinsurgency might be ineffective.
violence. These authors do not attempt to explain why discriminate violence should not work. They assume that it is not possible, although this is a difficult assumption to justify.

The logic of coercion is more subtle. Anti-civilian violence, which may seem (but is not necessarily) indiscriminate, is meant to stop the population from helping, and potentially to turn them against, the rebels. For example, Lyall (2009) argues that indiscriminate violence exacerbates the collective action problem that rebel groups face when they attempt to mobilize the population to help rebel. State violence raises the costs for contributing to the rebellion and may even prompt the formation of militias to provide counterinsurgency. This in turn disrupts the resource base, logistical lines and war fighting capacity of the rebels. In what is arguably a natural experiment, Lyall finds evidence of lower levels of insurgent mobilization in Chechen towns that Russian soldiers indiscriminately shelled, although he cannot rule out some threats to internal validity.

Kalyvas (2006) points out that private politics can explain much of the violence that appears indiscriminate, because private citizens opportunistically denounce one another to whichever actor is dominant in the vicinity. By killing off adversarial supporters, rebels and the government maximize their own support in any area through the combination of attrition and deterrence. When an army has dominant but incomplete territorial control, private citizens believe the risk of counter-denunciation is small enough to justify the gains to be had by denouncing others, and everyone is aware that individuals loyal to the weaker actor inhabit the region. As a result, high levels of denunciation-driven anti-civilian violence result when territorial control is incomplete. Although this “selective” violence is conceptually distinct from indiscriminate violence, Kalyvas argues that much of the latter is really an example of the former.
Both the logic of annihilation and the logic of coercion help us to understand some cases in which counterinsurgents appear to indiscriminately abuse civilians. However, neither category of explanation explains: (i) in any given war why discriminate violence—violence directed at armed rebels and not at their supporters—would be less efficient from the counterinsurgent’s perspective; (ii) why the rebels and population, who both have a stake in the gains from fighting, would not take countermeasures against the effects of indiscriminate violence in order to enforce cooperation; or (iii) how this enforcement, if adopted, would affect the counterinsurgent’s strategy. In the next section I present a model that I believe addresses these lacunae.

3 The argument

Counterinsurgency practitioners and insurgents observe that an insurgency is a coalition of two groups—a rebel organization and a its popular support—and it can end rather abruptly when that coalition falls apart. This division of labor naturally arises among rebellious individuals, who sort themselves into the classes. Individuals within the organization plan strategy and fight. Sympathetic civilians within the population at large carry out logistical and intelligence tasks for the insurgents. Rebel leaders command that their soldiers respect the integrity of civilians to stay on their good side and attribute the success of their effort to a loyal population (Tse-Tung, 1961 [1937]). Given such cooperation an insurgency may not succeed, but it will almost certainly fail without it (Wickham-Crowley, 1992). Counterinsurgents maintain that dismantling the cooperative relationship between the rebels and the population—typically through political concessions to address grievances and resettlement programs to cut off the rebels’ labor supply—is the key to resolving

How does the counterinsurgent do this? The counterinsurgent uses a mixture of violence and concessions to tempt one side into abusive and self-defeating behavior at the expense of its long-run objectives. As the fight against the government loses energy, that actor’s defection causes its accomplice to engage in opportunistic behavior, as well. Eventually, the core members of the rebel organization dissipate back into the general population and the insurgency ends. To find this answer I model the cooperation between the rebels and population in the shadow of the counterinsurgent and derive the counterinsurgent’s response to it.

Three interdependent problems motivate the behavior of rebel organization, its popular support, and the counterinsurgent. Organizing the population’s costly support of the rebel agenda rather than disloyally accepting the counterinsurgent’s offer to govern is the problem that a rebel organization must solve. Disciplining the rebel organization to diligently fight the counterinsurgent rather than hide, live off of its independent resource and loot the country is the problem that the population must solve. Finally, deterring the union of an offensive rebel organization with a loyal popular base of support is the problem the counterinsurgent must solve. The counterinsurgent has two tools at his disposal to deter cooperation: violence and public goods.\(^5\) The rebels and the population, on the other hand, can resort to threaten reciprocal, opportunistic behavior against one another in order to enforce cooperation.

These assumptions mirror key aspects of insurgency. Rebels may predate on the

\(^5\)In the model, the excludability of the good is endogenous, in that both the rebels and population choose whether or not to exclude themselves from consuming it. At any given time the good is nonrival. Either the rebels or the population may consume the good while the other excludes himself, but the good is always available for both to consume simultaneously.
production of the local economy and government. The population may take bribes to refuse help to the rebels and otherwise expose them to the counterinsurgent. Both may at any time give up the fight and submit to the counterinsurgent. And either actor may indirectly focus the counterinsurgent’s violence on the other actor, since opportunism diverts energy from the fight and generates greater costs of war (due to the counterinsurgency and due to opportunism) for the other actor. Although insurgents have incentives to defect against one another, it is costly and they cripple the insurgency if they do so.

Yet rebels and the population sometimes refuse to cooperate, and insurgencies do fail as a result. The key insight of my theory is that the counterinsurgent defeats an insurgency most efficiently by causing the actor with the largest profit from insurgency to cripple the insurgency.

Profit is the difference between actor $j$’s consumption during insurgency when actor $k \neq j$ does all the work (unilaterally cooperates) and the cost that $k$ can threaten to impose on $j$ in retaliation for $k$’s opportunistic behavior. Loosely speaking, an actor’s profit during insurgency is the intensity of its temptation to opportunistically betray its accomplice for the sake of wartime gain. Rebels and the population derive different wartime gains, and they live in the shadow of a future in which discipline varies in its costliness. These factors affect the balance of profit between the two accomplices, and a counterinsurgent responds to this balance to efficiently deter the cooperation between them that is necessary to sustain an insurgency. By paying just enough to compensate the actor who profits most from insurgency for the cost of its opportunism—and targeting it to increase the value of wartime opportunism relative to cooperative behavior—the counterinsurgent defeats the insurgency as efficiently as possible.

The rebels’ profit from insurgency increases due to windfall and black market
revenue, external aid, natural resources, taxation, remittances, looted property and labor, and the availability and attractiveness of the rebels’ sanctuaries. An increase in the rebels’ accountability to the population and a decrease rebel profit results from restrictive geography, vulnerability to the population’s disloyalty caused by the nature of the rebel group’s organization, and the presence and strength of quasi-judicial institutions with which to sanction rebels’ abusive behavior. The population’s profit from insurgency increases with land scarcity, extreme inequality in terms of seizable property, and the temptation to settle clan, ethnic and familial feuds. Rebel profit decreases when the economy is sensitive to rebel predation and when the intelligence the rebel organization can collect about individuals’ defections is more reliable.

Factors negatively and positively affecting the actors’ relative profit during insurgency ought to correlate with the government’s use of indiscriminate violence. If rebels do indeed profit more from war than the population does—as classical counterinsurgency theory implicitly assumes—then discriminate counterinsurgency violence is most effective and rational governments will practice it. When the population profits more from the insurgency than the rebels do, however, then indiscriminate counterinsurgency violence is most effective and rational governments will practice it. Relatedly, moderately discriminate or moderately indiscriminate violence is never most effective. It is always efficient to focus as much energy as possible on one actor or the other.

It is important to mention that this is only one modeling approach. Alternatively, one can view the challenge of motivating individuals to provide aid to insurgents or fight against the state as a collective action problem. A large literature conceptualizes rebellion as some stripe of \( N \)-person collective action in the sense that Olson
Insurgent collective action remains an important area of research, yet once collective acts have been taken and organizations and cadres formed, other dilemmas arise. I abstract away from the problem of motivating people to provide rebellion and focus my attention instead on the problem of cooperation between subclasses of the insurgents that the insurgents face once they have mobilized.

3.1 Actors, sequence of moves and payoffs

The game is a repeated, two-person Prisoner’s Dilemma (Taylor, 1976), where the counterinsurgent is the “jailer,” a strategic third actor who bargains over a flow payoff with one prisoner in the shadow of the second prisoner’s veto and has the option of hurting either prisoner to a varying degree. Each structurally identical time period of the game contains three subgames: (i) a supergame consisting of (ii) a subgame of unilateral bargaining, which is followed in sequence by (iii) a subgame of wartime enforcement. A government $G$ (she), rebel leadership $R$ (he) and population $P$ (it) bargain over a flow payoff, $\pi \in \mathbb{R}^+$ in each period, $t \in \mathbb{Z}^+$. A period begins when $G$ offers $x_t \in [0, \pi]$ as non-excludable public goods to $R$ and $P$, leaving $\pi - x_t$ for itself. $G$ also chooses the discrimination of its counterinsurgency strategy, $\alpha \in [0, 1]$, where $\alpha = 0$ implies fully discriminate violence and $\alpha = 1$ implies fully indiscriminate violence.

If $R$ accepts $x_t$, the actors peacefully consume their public and private payoffs, and the next period begins. If $R$ rejects the proposal, then players enter the enforcement subgame where they move simultaneously. During the enforcement subgame $R$ chooses either to maintain discipline and fight the government ($f$) or loot and abuse ($\sim f$), while $P$ chooses either to be loyal ($l$) or disloyal ($\sim l$) to the rebels.

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Payoffs are consumed after either an accepted offer or the enforcement subgame, and then a new period follows.

I summarize the four possible sets of utilities following the enforcement subgame in Figure 3.1. Let \( j = R, P \) and \( i = r, p \). Denote the wartime consumption of \( j \) as \( i \in \mathbb{R}^+ \) and the cost to \( j \) caused by the other’s defection as \( c_j \in \mathbb{R}^+ \). If actions \( f \) and \( l \) occur, then players fight and an insurgency occurs. If actions \( f \) and \(~ l \) occur, then \( R \) suffers the full brunt of counterinsurgency plus the additional cost, \( c_r \), but \( P \) avoids becoming the target of the government’s counterinsurgency campaign and consumes the proposed public good \( x_t \). If actions \(~ f \) and \( l \) occur, then \( P \) suffers the full brunt of counterinsurgency plus the additional cost, \( c_p \), but \( R \) avoids becoming the target of the government’s counterinsurgency campaign and consumes the proposed public good \( x_t \). If actions \(~ f \) and \(~ l \) occur, then both \( R \) and \( P \) consume the proposed public good, \( x_t \) and each suffer the costs of the other’s defection.

In any period of insurgency, \( G \) consumes \( \pi \), less its proposal \( x_t \) in the event that at least one of \( j \) defects and discounts future payoffs at the rate \( \delta_g \in (0, 1) \). To ensure that insurgency is ex post costly for the government, assume that in each period of insurgency the rebels overthrow the government with probability \( 1 - \beta \), in which case \( G \) receives a payoff of zero thereafter. Actor, \( j \) discounts future payoffs at rate \( \delta_j \in (0, 1) \). Finally, assume that \( j \) is sufficiently long-lived (patient) and that war is sufficiently costly to it, such that \( c_j \delta_j \geq i \).\(^7\)

This game has complete information, meaning that there is common knowledge of all parameters. The appropriate equilibrium concept is a subgame perfect Nash equilibrium (SPNE). A SPNE is a strategy profile in which each actor adopts a

\(^7\)Relaxing this assumption alters the government’s equilibrium behavior for some values of the parameters, but does not change the central insight of the paper.
Figure 1: Utilities resulting from the enforcement subgame

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<th>loyal (l)</th>
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<td>fight</td>
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<td>( u(R) = -c_r )</td>
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<td></td>
<td>( u(P) = p(1 - \alpha) )</td>
<td>( u(P) = x_t + p )</td>
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<td></td>
<td>( u(G) = \pi )</td>
<td>( u(G) = \pi - x_t )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>abuse</td>
<td>( u(R) = x_t + r )</td>
<td>( u(R) = x_t - c_r )</td>
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<td></td>
<td>( u(P) = -c_p )</td>
<td>( u(P) = x_t - c_p )</td>
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<td>( u(G) = \pi - x_t )</td>
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profile of best responses to the other two players’ best responses in every proper subgame.

### 3.2 A world without enforcement during insurgency

**Proposition 1** In a single iteration of the game no cooperation between \( R \) and the \( P \) occurs. Instead, \( R \) immediately accepts a zero offer from \( G \), who arbitrarily chooses the discrimination of violence in counterinsurgency. This characterizes a stationary SPNE.

**Proof**

- Lemma 1: If \( R \) and \( P \) defect, then \( R \) prefers to accept any offer, \( x \) when \( c_r \geq 0 \). This condition is true by assumption.
- If \( x \leq r(\alpha - 1) \) and \( x \leq -p\alpha \), then \( R \) and \( P \) cooperate. These conditions are false by assumption. Thus, \( R \) and \( P \) defect.
- \( R \) accepts any \( x \geq 0 \).
- If \( \pi - x \geq \beta(\pi - x) \), then \( G \) prefers peace to insurgency. This condition yields the constraint \( \beta \leq 1 \), which is true by assumption. Thus, \( G \) prefers to make
an acceptable offer to $R$. Let $x^*$ be the smallest acceptable offer and $\alpha^*$ the discrimination of violence chosen by $G$. Then $x^* = \arg\max_x \{\pi - x\} = 0$.

- If an offer is accepted, then $G$ is indifferent over $\alpha$. Because $R$ accepts the offer and the players never reach the enforcement subgame, $G$ chooses $\alpha^*$ arbitrarily.

**Corollary 1** If the game above is iterated infinitely with discounting each period and the symmetric punishment strategies are either not available or are not in equilibrium, then the SPNE stated in Proposition 1 generalizes as a stationary SPNE in the infinitely iterated game.

### 3.3 A world with enforcement during insurgency

Without cooperation between rebels and population, the model is unhelpful for understanding the discrimination of counterinsurgency violence. The minor addition of punishment strategies to enforce cooperation generates the central insight of the paper, however. Here $R$ and $P$ form reputations and use unforgiving “trigger” strategies against one another based on their histories of remaining on or off the equilibrium path.\(^8\) Behavior is conditioned on the history of play, and thus the SPNE are non-stationary.

Let $\Theta_j$ be the strategy for $j$. Let $v_j(\cdot)$ be the discounted utility of the game to $j$. Let $\underline{x}$ denote the smallest offer that $R$ would accept rather than reject and let $\overline{x}$ denote the largest offer that $G$ would make rather than fight.

\(^8\)It is possible to solve the game in which the actors use optimal $t$-period punishment strategies. This reformulation reduces both mathematical tractability and interpretability due to the two additional choice variables. The central insights of the model are preserved, however.
\( \Theta_G \): \( G \) offers \( x_t \leq \pi_t \) and chooses \( \tilde{\alpha} = \arg \max_{\alpha} \{ v_G(\alpha \mid \Theta_R, \Theta_P) \} \).

\( \Theta_R \): \( R \) accepts \( x_t \geq \pi_t \) and rejects otherwise. Given a rejection, on path \( R \) plays \( f \) if \( P \) is also on path, and \( \sim f \) forever otherwise.

\( \Theta_P \): On the path \( P \) plays \( l \) if \( R \) is also on path, and plays \( \sim l \) forever otherwise.

To minimize notation, I use the word, \textit{cooperate} to signify that both \( R \) and \( P \) choose \( f \) and \( l \). The word, \textit{defect} means that the players choose \( \sim f \) and \( \sim l \), respectively.

**Proposition 2** Let \( \text{profit} \) be \( i - c_j \delta_j \). If \( R \) has larger profit than \( P \), then the lowest offer that \( R \) accepts is \( x_t = r \left( \frac{\alpha + \delta_j - 1}{1 - \delta_R} \right) + c_r \delta_r \). If \( P \) has larger profit than \( R \), then the lowest offer that \( R \) accepts is \( x_t = p \left( \frac{\delta_p - \alpha}{1 - \delta_p} \right) + c_p \delta_p \). The largest offer that \( G \) makes is \( \pi_t = \pi \left(1 + \frac{\delta_p}{1 - \delta_p} \right) \). If \( x_t \geq \pi_t \), then \( G \) chooses \( x_t \leq \pi_t \) and \( \tilde{\alpha} \) arbitrarily; \( R \) rejects the offer; and \( R \) and \( P \) cooperate. If \( x_t \leq \pi_t \), then \( G \) chooses \( \tilde{\alpha} \) to target the actor, \( j \) with largest profit and offers \( x_1 = \pi_t \) and \( x_{t>1} = 0 \); \( R \) accepts the offer; and \( R \) and \( P \) defect. This characterizes the non-stationary SPNE.

**Proof**

- When \( R \) and \( P \) enter the punishment path, in any period, \( t \), such that indefinite defection is sustainable, then \( G \) offers \( x_t = 0 \) and \( R \) accepts the zero offer. \( G \) prefers making an acceptable offer if the utility of a zero offer and peace is preferable to the utility of a zero offer consumed by the actors during war. This means \( \frac{\pi - \pi_0}{1 - \delta_j} \geq \frac{\pi - \pi_0}{1 - \beta \delta_j} \), or \( \beta \leq 1 \), which is true by assumption. This is established by Corollary 1. Call the zero offer \( x_0 \).

- Actor \( j \) always prefers the punishment path to reverting to cooperative behavior. If indefinitely accepting the zero offer is preferable to a single period
deviation, or \( \frac{0}{1-\delta_j} \geq -c_j + \delta_j \left( \frac{0}{1-\delta_j} \right) \), then \( R \) follows the punishment path. This condition simplifies to \( c_j > 0 \) and is true by assumption. \( R \)'s punishment path strategy is sustainable in equilibrium by assumption. Likewise, \( P \)'s punishment path strategy is sustainable in equilibrium, because \( P \)'s only action is at an off path node of the game after the actors have entered the punishment path. The discounted payoffs for \( P \) are 0 in both cases.

- When \( R \) and \( P \) are on path, \( G \) makes an acceptable offer if the lowest offer that \( R \) accepts is sufficiently low. \( G \) makes an acceptable offer if and only if the utility of the offer and subsequent reversion to the zero offer is preferable to indefinite war, or \( \pi - x_1 + \delta g \frac{\pi}{1-\delta} \geq \frac{\pi}{1-\beta} \). This condition yields the constraint, \( x_t \leq \pi \left( 1 + \frac{\delta g}{1-\delta} - \frac{1}{1-\beta} \right) \). Call the righthand side threshold \( x_t \).

- When \( R \) and \( P \) are on path, actor \( j \) must prefer cooperation to a single period defection if \( j \) is to cooperate. This means the following. If \( \frac{r_1}{1-\delta_r} \geq r + x_1 + \delta_r (-c_r) + \delta^2_r \left( \frac{x_0}{1-\delta_r} \right) \), then \( R \) cooperates on the path of play. If \( \frac{p(1-\alpha)}{1-\delta} \geq p + x_1 + \delta (-c_p) + \delta^2 p \left( \frac{x_0}{1-\delta_p} \right) \), then \( P \) cooperates on the path of play. Substituting \( x_0 = 0 \), we see that \( R \) and \( P \) cooperate if and only if \( x_t \leq r \left( \frac{\alpha+\delta-1}{1-\delta_r} \right) + c_r \delta_r \) and \( x_t \leq p \left( \frac{\delta(1-\alpha)}{1-\delta_p} \right) + c_p \delta_p \). Call the first function \( x_r \) and the second \( x_p \).

- Lemma 2: The functions \( x_r \) and \( x_p \) are monotonic lines whose \( x \)-intercept is non-negative in the region \( \alpha \in [0, 1] \). The assumption \( c_j \delta_j \geq i \) ensures that this is true.

- Lemma 3: Notice that \( \arg\min_{\alpha} \{ x_r \} = 0 \) and \( \arg\min_{\alpha} \{ x_p \} = 1 \). Call these offer-minimizing values of counterinsurgency violence \( \alpha_r \) and \( \alpha_p \).

- We established that \( R \) prefers to accept an offer rather than permanently enter the punishment path with Lemma 1. Corollary 1 generalizes this result to the
discounted, iterated game. Recall that $R$ accepts when $x_t \geq \bar{x}_t$. The smallest acceptable offer must unbind at least one condition for cooperation. Lemma 3 establishes that this offer is $\bar{x}_t = \min \{x_r(\alpha_r), x_p(\alpha_p)\}$.

- If $\bar{x}_t < x_t$, then $G$ and $R$ prefer to fight rather than reach a bargain acceptable to both, so $G$ offers some arbitrary $x_t \leq \bar{x}_t$ and arbitrarily chooses $\tilde{\alpha}$ while $R$ and $P$ cooperate.

- If $x_t < \bar{x}_t$, then $G$ prefers not to fight, so she offers $x_1 \in [x_t, \bar{x}_t]$ in the first period, while $R$ and $P$ defect and $R$ accepts the offer. Thereafter in periods $t > 1$, $G$ offers $x_0$. If $G$ is to maximize her discounted valuation of the game under these conditions, then she must solve $\arg\max_{x_1 \in [x_t, \bar{x}_t]} \{\pi - x_1 + \delta^t \left(\frac{x_1}{1 - \delta}\right)\} = \bar{x}_t$. In order to offer $\bar{x}_t$, she must choose $\tilde{\alpha} = \alpha_r$ when $x_r(\alpha_r) \leq x_p(\alpha_p)$, which implies that $r \left(\frac{\delta_r - 1}{1 - \delta_r}\right) + c_r \delta_r \geq p \left(\frac{\delta_p - 1}{1 - \delta_p}\right) + c_p \delta_p$. This inequality simplifies to $r - c_r \delta_r \geq p - c_p \delta_p$. Recall that profit means $i - c_j \delta_j$. If $R$’s profit is larger $G$, targets $R$ with $\tilde{\alpha} = \alpha_r$. If $P$’s profit is larger, then $G$ targets $P$ with $\tilde{\alpha} = \alpha_p$.

### 3.4 Comparative Statics

The key insight of the paper is the set of comparative equilibrium statics for the effects of $i$ and $c_j$ on $G$’s equilibrium strategy. Without taking derivatives, the following relationships are evident. $G$ targets $R$ as $r$ and $c_p$ increase and as $p$ and $c_r$ decrease. $G$ targets $P$ as $p$ and $c_r$ increase and as $r$ and $c_p$ decrease. In English, $G$ targets $j$ once $j$ stands to gain sufficiently enough from opportunistically diverting

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9The SPNE in Corollary 1 is stationary, while the SPNE is non-stationary here. However, if players defect, then their trigger strategies make these two equilibria indistinguishable.

10Other statics over the exogenous parameters’ effects on the willingness of $G$ and $R$ to negotiate a peaceful bargain (and therefore that $G$ will use its counterinsurgency strategy to reach an efficient bargain) are available, but are of secondary concern.
its effort from the fight toward the taking of spoils and stands to lose less from its accomplice’s retaliatory behavior.

4 Counterinsurgency in Guatemala and Turkey

In this section I briefly investigate two counterinsurgencies in Guatemala and Turkey. The two cases are different in many respects, but they share two important variables in common: the counterinsurgent targeted the actor who stood to profit most in the war, and the outcome was the defeat of the rebel group. I argue that the facts of these cases conforms to those expected by the causal logic of counterinsurgency violence I propose in this paper. These analyses are preliminary and thin. They are plausibility probes rather than attempt to falsify the theory and its alternatives as case explanations.

4.1 Guatemala v. the UNRG elements as an illustration of the causal logic of indiscriminate violence

The case of Guatemala v. elements of the UNRG illustrates how a counterinsurgent targeted a population with a significant opportunity to profit from land redistribution under the control of the state, causing much of the population to defect from the rebel groups while the war was ongoing. Massive defections by former supporters in the population weakened the rebels by focusing counterinsurgency violence on them and reducing their ability to fight the state. The rebels signed a ceasefire favoring the government soon afterward.

Guatemala fought a long counterinsurgency campaign from roughly 1961 to

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11John Stuart Mill called this method of investigation the “direct method of agreement.” It can aid the identification of causal relationships. See Przeworski and Teune (1970) and Collier (1993, 112).
1996 against five rebel organizations: the Movimiento Revolucionario 13 Noviembre (MR-13), Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo (PGT), Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes (FAR), Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres (EGP) and Organización del Pueblo en Armas (ORPA). The latter four later coalesced as the UNRG in the 1980s. The insurgency campaign from the mid-1970s until the end of the war demonstrates how the state used indiscriminate violence to take advantage of conditions of extreme inequality and land scarcity, tempting the population in zones of rebel control to defect from the rebel camp regardless of the consequences the various rebel armies might have been able to threaten.

In Guatemala land scarcity and rural inequality have generated significant social problems from the nineteenth century forward (Stoll, 1993). Land for subsistence farming was passed down via a hereditary system and ownership was concentrated in the hands of plantation owners. Rapid population growth diminished the per capita supply of land (Wickham-Crowley, 1992; Stoll, 1993). In 1954 a military junta replaced elected President Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán and revoked his land-tenure reforms under which the state redistributed property formerly concentrated in the hands of these plantation owners. These events contributed to the formation of MR-13. While the Guatemalan population could expect to regain lost land after the onset of the insurgency in 1961, the five rebel groups in the history of the conflict could generate little wartime revenue relative to rebel groups elsewhere. Guatemala produces no diamonds, no oil, and has few seizable and portable assets.

Guatemala’s counterinsurgency campaign was one of the most brutal in Central America. It probably resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians, many of them during the tenures of Guatemalan Presidents Fernando Romeo Lucas García (1978-1982) and José Efraín Ríos Montt (1982-1983) (Schirmer, 1998; Ball, KOBRAK AND SPIRER, 1999; Guatemalan Commission for Historical Clarifica-
tion, 1999). Forced disappearances and torture began in the 1960s, and indiscriminate massacres began in the mid-1970s. As the population gradually abandoned the rebels in the eastern departments, they moved in the northern and western rural areas (Ball, Kobbak and Spirer, 1999).

In 1982, Montt refined García’s scorched earth counterinsurgency by offering the population a temptation to defect from the rebellion. One army colonel summarized the plan’s appeal as, “If you join us, we will feed you. If not, we will kill you” (Schirmer, 1998, 58). There was more to it than just that. Montt recruited and armed displaced and homeless members of the local population and guerrilla irregulars to form civilian defense patrols and implicated them in the counterinsurgency through interrogation and forcing them to kill captured guerrillas. These defectors were permitted to take land abandoned by other refugees. Finally, Montt sweetened the deal by rewarded them with public goods under the banner of a program the state called “Shelter, Work and Food” (Schirmer, 1998, 57-59, 81-102). In 1982-1983, the government broke the back of the rebellion with this campaign (Stoll, 1993). A peace process beginning shortly thereafter led to a comprehensive peace treaty in 1996, and the UNRG has since pursued peaceful party politics.

4.2 Turkey v. PKK as an illustration of the causal logic of discriminate violence

The case of Turkey v. the PKK, on the other hand, illustrates how a rebel organization deriving great wartime profit relative to the misery of the local population was targeted discriminately and effectively. Discriminate violence led the PKK to abuse and extort from its popular Kurdish base and evade the military aspect of the war. This situation eroded domestic and foreign support networks, which defected from PKK, prompting the rebels to sign a ceasefire and renounce violence soon
Between 1993 and 1996 Turkey progressively abandoned an indiscriminately violent and abusive counterinsurgency strategy. Abuse failed to defeat the PKK in the 1980s and early 1990s, but had resulted in population displacement and is believed to have rallied support for the PKK. While the Kurdish population had little incentive other than to flee elsewhere or support the PKK in response to the government’s brutality, the PKK profited—making on the order of $200 million per year—from its transnational trade in heroin and other contraband, revenues from MED-TV (its satellite TV station), remittances from Europe, and sanctuary in Syria and Iraq (Radu, 2001; Bloom, 2005). The PKK also enjoyed a relatively low level of accountability to the Kurdish population in the southeast due to pre-existing clan rivalries, and it abused that population—especially uncooperative Kurdish clans (Radu, 2001; Bloom, 2005; Barkey, 2005).

Ankara could have continued its policy of indiscriminate violence and abuse against Kurdish supporters of the PKK and Kurds in the southeast. Instead, it chose to target the PKK as discriminately as possible in the mid-1990s. Turkey under Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit inundated the Kurdish southeast with 200,000 soldiers (Barkey and Fuller, 1998). Turkey made intelligence improvements that allowed it to pursue a strategy of leadership decapitation, attacked the PKK’s mountain strongholds with special forces, used helicopter raids on the exposed borderlands, and launched cross border attacks against Kurdish controlled Iraq with the aid of the Kurdish Democratic Party. The state introduced new sanctions for military indiscipline. It promised economic development packages, including free state land, tax breaks and cheap loans, although it did not deliver on some of these promises. It made cultural and linguistic concessions to the Kurdish population, and pursued regional diplomacy with Syria to eliminate the PKK’s main sanctuary (Radu, 2001;
Bloom, 2005).

These practices tended to disrupt PKK logistics and coincided with a switch in the PKK’s strategy of violence. The PKK began to resort to more brutal and extortive tactics (Radu, 2001; Barkey and Fuller, 1998; Barkey, 2005; Bloom, 2005). Although it had always relied on predation and black market activities at the expense of its Kurdish support network, it was now victimizing its base more than fighting the counterinsurgent forces.

In response to the PKK’s abuse Ankara exploited prior clan rivalries. The state co-opted an unprecedented number of local leaders, who in turn recruited a growing army of village guards whose job was to protect the population from the PKK’s abuse and extortion (Bloom, 2005, 101-119).\(^\text{12}\) As domestic and transnational support for the PKK waned, its leader, Abdullah Öcalan fled his sanctuary in Syria for Kenya. In 1999, Turkish forces captured him in Nairobi. His brother, Osman Öcalan led the PKK to sign a ceasefire with Ankara. A peace process led the PKK to renounce violence and pursue peaceful party politics, although its military wing has since resumed low level terrorism.

\section{Conclusion}

Indiscriminate violence perpetrated by governments against civilians is a shameful fact of political life. In this paper I attempted to explain why by identifying a causal mechanism it shares with counterinsurgency that uses an economy of force and discriminate violence. I believe this is an addition to the literature on insurgency, counterinsurgency, and the logic of political violence. Classical counterin-

\footnote{Radu (2001) argues, “The military . . . won support because a large portion of the Kurdish population found the protection of the Turkish government far more attractive than the terror of the PKK and its hostility to Kurds of rival clans or differing political views.”}
surgency theory explains why discriminate counterinsurgency violence is effective, but does not convincingly explain why many counterinsurgents resort to indiscriminate violence and why it sometimes appears effective. Political scientists explain the motivation for indiscriminate counterinsurgency violence, but do not convincingly explain when it should be inefficient relative to discriminate violence.

I formalized the model of insurgency found in the classical counterinsurgency literature to derive predictions over the discrimination of violence that the counterinsurgent uses. The theory explains when discriminate violence is more/less efficient from the counterinsurgent’s perspective and how enforcement behavior on the part of the rebels and population affects the counterinsurgent’s strategy. The counterinsurgent defeats the insurgency by deterring cooperation between the rebels and population. It targets the actor—be it the rebel group or the population—with the greater short term temptation to defect from its accomplice, regardless of the consequences. Thus, the counterinsurgent targets the actor who *profits* most from war, where profit is the temptation for wartime opportunism minus the costs.

The theory has verisimilitude. In many cases of insurgency, the government uses violence to tempt one side into abusive and self-defeating behavior at the expense of its long-run objectives, then offers to make concessions that would benefit both actors under a peace settlement. The initial actor’s defection causes its accomplice to engage in opportunistic behavior. As the rebel group loses support and the population suffers under the dual strain of the rebels’ predation and the government’s counterinsurgency, the core members of the rebel organization dissipate back into the general population and the insurgency ends. I discussed two examples of this pattern. In Guatemala and Turkey, the state targeted the actor who stood to profit most from wartime opportunism. Hundreds of thousands of poor and landless civilians in migratory labor regions were targeted in Guatemala. The corrupt,
extortive and un-accountable PKK was targeted in Turkey. As the rebel group and its popular support stopped cooperating in each country, the government was able to offer token concessions and declare victory.

References


