Towards Deeper Engagement in Conflict Studies: A Critical Realist Approach to the Study of Civil Conflict

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Abstract

The conflict studies literature encompasses a diverse array of epistemologies and methodologies and there has been a growing emphasis within the field on bridging the gaps between qualitative and quantitative research, and more interestingly between 'positivist' or 'scientific' research and the interpretivist schools of though. However to date, attempts to bring together different approaches to the study of conflict have been mainly concentrated around methodology, generally using nested analysis and mixed-methods strategies. This position does little to address the fundamental issues of epistemology that have been core in debates within IR as a whole and within conflict studies more specifically. Taking on a 'critical realist' philosophical position, this paper questions the incommensurability of competing paradigms within conflict studies, in particular the casual/constitutive divide. In particular, drawing and building upon Milja Kurki's critique of causal discourse in IR[1], this paper examines the potential of critical realism to foster greater inter-paradigmatic communication and cooperation within conflict studies, outlining how different approaches to research within the field can be reconciled. The paper then concludes by proposing a research design that is hoped will show that not only is communication between competing approaches possible, but that it is also practical and desirable

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[1]   Milja Kurki: Causation in International Relations - Reclaiming Causal Analysis, 2008.

Introduction

The conflict studies literature encompasses a diverse array of epistemologies and methodologies. Researchers in the area draw on large-n quantitative analysis, historical narratives, process tracing, detailed case studies, discourse analysis, deconstruction, ethnographic studies, game theory and political economy (to name but a few) in the analysis of conflict. From a general perspective the quantitative approach has been within the field, spurred on by the growth of ever more complex and sophisticated datasets. Although other approaches have been prominent within more specific areas of research, for example the study of peacekeeping has been dominated by historical narratives and detailed single case studies. Generally there has been little interaction between quantitative and qualitative approaches within the field, and speaking on broader terms, much qualitative research has tended towards the 'positivist' or KKV (DSI)-styled approach, remaining separate from the interpretivist approaches that have been slowly gaining ground elsewhere within International Relations. It is important to note however that there has been a growing emphasis within the field on bridging the gaps between qualitative and quantitative research, and more interestingly between 'positivist' or 'scientific' research and the interpretivist schools of thought within conflict studies.

Attempts to bring together different approaches to the study of conflict have thus far been mainly concentrated around methodology; bridging the gap between quantitative and qualitative methods. Nicholas Sambanis[2] argues for the use of qualitative studies after model estimation to identify measurement error, explore exogeneity, endogeneity, omitted variable bias and causal mechanisms to allow revision and improvement of the model. Others argue for using the large-n quantitative study as a stepping stone to more in-depth case studies, identifying most and least likely cases, highlighting variables that provide direction when conducting the study and allowing the researcher to enter a case study with some degree of general knowledge about the causes of conflict[3]. Others still focus on using qualitative methods, in particular case studies, for the purpose of theory-building and then the application of quantitative methods for the purpose of theory testing[4].

These attempts at marrying qualitative and quantitative research have been embedded within Lieberman's concept of nested analysis[5]. However, nested analysis is rather shallow in terms of what it brings to the table. It is presented by Lieberman as a

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[2]   Nicholas Sambanis: Using Case Studies to Expand Economic Models of Civil War, in: Perspectives on Politics 2.2 (2004), pp. 259–279, here pages 261-261.

[3]   Symposium: Bridging the Gap? Connecting Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in the Study of Civil War, in: Qualitative Methods - Newsletter of the APSA Organized Section for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research 6.1 (2008), pages 15-17.

[4]   Stathis Kalyvas: The Logic of Violence in Civil War, 2006.

[5]   Evan S. Lieberman: Nested Analysis as a Mixed-Method Strategy for Comparative Research, in: The American Political Science Review 99.3 (2005), pp. 435–452.

mixed-method strategy[6]. Being identified at the methodological level, nested analysis skips over core issues of ontology and epistemology and focuses instead on how different research methods can be complementary. The methodological focus of nested analysis provides a solid framework within which different methods (qualitative and quantitative broadly conceived) may be brought together. However locating the approach at the methodological level, nested analysis privileges one particular type of 'science', the traditional positivist discourse, over other perspectives. In the process assuming away challenges to the orthodoxy from other epistemological and ontological perspectives. From this perspective it does little to address the sticky issues that have appeared so incommensurable within the discipline, in particular the ontological and epistemological divides that have separated the 'positivists' and the 'post-positivists'.

This paper examines the potential for using critical realism as a foundation for conflict research. It argues that critical realist philosophy offers a potential way out of the issues that have tended to divide researchers both within the study of civil conflict and in International Relations as a discipline more generally. This paper proceeds by examining the current state of the literature on civil conflict and the barriers to greater pluralism within the field, outlining how the critical realist argument is being articulated elsewhere in the study of international politics/relations. It finishes by analysing how critical realism may potentially be applied to the field and outlines a draft research design to put this into practice.

The Current State of Conflict Studies

In recent years there has been a steady push towards the use of multi- and mixed-methods research techniques in the study of civil conflict[7]. However, this push has remained completely within a traditional political science background and little has been done to attempt bridging the gap between 'reflectivist' and 'rationalist' approaches' to research. This body of emerging research is still quite at home in the research designs of King, Keohane and Verba[8] or more recently John Gerring and his analysis of case study research[9]. Conversely, from the other side of the debate, the reflectivists have done little in the way of providing concrete analysis of conflicts, despite the major role played by

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[6]   Lieberman: Nested Analysis as a Mixed-Method Strategy for Comparative Research (see n. 5), page 435.

[7]   Kalyvas: The Logic of Violence in Civil War (see n. 4); Stathis N. Kalyvas: Ethnic Defection in Civil War, in: Comparative Political Studies 41.8 (2008), pp. 1043–1068; Elisabeth Jean Wood: Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador, 2003; Sambanis: Using Case Studies to Expand Economic Models of Civil War (see n. 2); Paul Collier/Nicholas Sambanis: Understanding Civil War: Evidence and Analysis, 2005.

[8]   Gary King/Robert O. Keohane/Sidney Verba: Desiging Social Enquiry - Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research, 1994.

[9]   John Gerring: Case Study Research - Principles and Practices, 2007.

conflict in post-structuralist and discourse theoretical work. The focus has instead, and somewhat understandably, almost entirely on the analysis and critique of western policy and intervention in conflict[10].

Currently within peace and conflict research, quantitative methods form the core of much of the recent literature and dominate the two major journals in the area, the *Journal of Peace Research (JPR)* and the *Journal of Conflict Resolution(JCR)*[11]. The recent push towards mixed methods and the inclusion or supplementation of qualitative studies alongside quantitative models has ameliorated this somewhat, as has the recent trend in the disaggregation of actors, geographical regions and various other important aspects of these quantitative models. However, quantitative modelling is quite restrictive in terms of quantifying and analysing complex issues such as identities, beliefs and social/cultural norms. For example, attempts at measuring the effect of ethnicity have had varied results[12] and analyses of the relationship between ethnicity and conflict onset using these measures have tended to display widely conflicting results, some dismissing the importance of ethnic heterogeneity whilst others highlight its importance and yet others remain on the middle ground between these two extremes[13]. The varying results and the large lack of agreement[14] between these analyses prompts a questioning of the suitability of quantitative models for measuring the effects of various forms of identity on civil conflict.

That said, a redeeming feature of the quantitative work on civil conflict has been the recent focus on the constraints felt by actors engaged in civil conflicts. With the growing focus on disaggregation within the study of civil war there has been a growing focus on the constraints and limitations (or inversely the endowments) of actors involved in conflict[15]. This research has moved the study away from broad and highly generalising

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[10] Lene Hansen: Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War, 2006; David Campbell: Writing security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity, 1998; Roxanne Lynn Doty: Foreign Policy as Social Construction - A Post-Positivst Analysis of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy in the Philippines, in: International Studies Quarterly 37.3 (1993); Severine Autesserre: Hobbes and the Congo: Frames, Local Violence, and International Intervention, in: International Organization 63.02 (2009), p. 249; A. B. Fetherston: Peacekeeping, conflict resolution and peace-building: A reconsideration of theoretical frameworks, in: International Peacekeeping 7.1 (2000), p. 190.

[11] Matti Jutila/Samu Pehkonen/Tarja Väyrynen: Resuscitating a Discipline: An Agenda for Critical Peace Research, in: Millennium - Journal of International Studies 36.3 (2008), pp. 623–640.

[12] see James Fearon: Ethnic and Cultural Diversity by Country, in: Journal of Economic Growth 8.2 (2003), pp. 195–222, here for a discussion of the differences.

[13] Ravi Bhavnani/Dan Miodownik: Ethnic Polarization, Ethnic Salience, and Civil War, in: Journal of Conflict Resolution 53.1 (2009), pp. 30–49.

[14] Jeffrey Dixon: What Causes Civil Wars? Integrating Quantitative Research Findings, in: International Studies Review 11.4 (2009), pp. 707–735.

[15] Lars-Erik Cederman/Luc Girardin/Kristian Skrede Gleditsch: Ethnonationalist Triads: Assessing the Influence of Kin Groups on Civil Wars, in: World Politics 61.03 (2009), p. 403; Halvard Buhaug/ Jan Ketil Rod: Local determinants of African civil wars, 1970-2001, in: Political Geography 25.3 (Mar. 2006), pp. 315–335; Kristian S. Gleditsch/Michael D. Ward: Measuring Space: A Minimum-Distance Database and Applications to International Studies, in: Journal of Peace Research 38.6 (2001), pp. 739–758; Paivi Lujala: Deadly Combat over Natural Resources, in: Journal of Conflict

models to more specific and contextualised analyses. Much of this research tends to step back from the difficult concepts of belief and identity and focus primarily on relatively easy to measure (material) aspects of conflict (notwithstanding the contestable nature of some of the measurements used). This focus has, as a result, tended towards analysing the factors that contribute to or constrain the emergence of conflict and different types of violence within states. The emphasis on disaggregation in the study of civil conflict has allowed a more 'mechanics' focused approach to be taken, perhaps speaking to, although certainly not embedded within, the attempts to bring a scientific realist position to bear within the field[16]. Certainly the disaggregation of variables within the study of civil conflict, allows for better integration of these findings within qualitative studies in the field.

Moving from the state-level of analysis to the sub-state level has also been a prominent feature in much of the mixed methods research that has emerged within the study of civil war. Recent works by Stathis Kalyvas[17] and Elisabeth Wood[18] combine both in-depth field research and qualitative methodologies with quantitative and formal modelling, bridging the gap between qualitative and quantitative methods with the field. That said however, these studies still remain embedded within the traditional political science model, and their mixed-methods approaches fall in line with Lieberman's nested analysis design. In many ways this has resulted in the methods appearing somewhat independent of each other within the studies, which is disappointing in may ways. Wood's use of her in-depth field work and incredibly rich case studies provides an excellent background for the construction of her formal model, however this model seems more like a footnote to the book than integrated into the whole (the models inclusion in the appendix rather than the main text despite repeated references to the model also add to this)[19]. Kalyvas suffers from a similar problem in his book on the logic of violence. He collects and analyses a vast amount of qualitative data on the Greek civil war[20] and outlines an extremely rich theoretical model[21]and yet, despite an exemplary quantitative analysis in one sense, the quantitative model seems divorced from the rest of the paper when it is presented, even the chapter that it appears in seems more qualitative than quantitative[22]. This highlights one of the issues with the nested analysis approach

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Resolution 53.1 (2009), pp. 50–71; Clionadh Raleigh/John O'Loughlin: Spatial Analysis of Civil War Violence, in: ed. by Murray Low Kevin Cox/Jennifer Robinson (Handbook of Political Geography), 2008; Kristian Skrede Gleditsch: Transnational Dimensions of Civil War, in: Journal of Peace Research 44.3 (2007), pp. 293–309; Idean Salehyan/Kristian Skrede Gleditsch: Refugees and the Spread of Civil War, in: International Organization 60.02 (2006), pp. 335–366.

[16] David Dessler: Beyond Correlations: Toward a Causal Theory of War, in: International Studies Quarterly 35.3 (1991), pp. 337–355; Jeffrey T. Checkel: Transnational Dynamics of Civil War, in: 2009, URL: http://www.prio.no/sptrans/1655230173/10.09-Workshop-JCEssay.pdf.

[17] Kalyvas: The Logic of Violence in Civil War (see n. 4).

[18] Wood: Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador (see n. 7).

[19] Ibid., p. 267.

[20] Kalyvas: The Logic of Violence in Civil War (see n. 4), Chapter 8.

[21] Ibid., Chapters 4-7.

[22] Ibid., Chapter 9.

to mixed-methods, in that its hard to strike a balance between the quantitative and the qualitative. The end result of this approach seems to be triangulation or clarification rather than a true attempt at fusing the results of these different methods under one banner. This has been a general criticism of bridge-building attempts within the discipline, the privileging of one approach and the relegation of another to a secondary position in the overall analysis[23].

Another interesting development in recent conflict literature is the inter-disciplinary approach being taken by researchers. Elisabeth Wood's book on the civil war in El-Salvador is one example of this as she draws on literature from other disciplines in her work, most notably in her ethnographic approach, but also within the psychological theory that she uses in building her argument. Another interesting inter-disciplinary project was the recently concluded *Survey of War Affected Youth (SWAY)* project[24], conducted by Chris Blattman (background in economics and political science) Jeannie Annan (background in psychology), Khristopher Carlsen (background in Human right and humanitarian law) and Dyan Mazurana (a background in Women's Studies). The interdisciplinary project has generated a wealth of reports and papers and the varied expertise of the project researchers allowed the project to overcome the knowledge boundaries and trade-offs that are often cited as one of the dangers of mixed-methods research[25].

Despite the growing number of contributions to and discussion surrounding the mixed-methods project within the study of civil conflict and the ever increasing sophistication of these arguments, there still remains a number of important conceptual and practical barriers to the migration to a more pluralistic field of research. The next section will examine these issues in brief and later sections will address these concerns in greater depth.

Barriers to Pluralist Research in Conflict Studies

Within conflict studies, and despite strong engagement with the push towards multi-method research, attempts to bridge the gaps and encourage dialogue between the competing positions of the 'positivists' and the 'post-positivists' have been virtually non-existent. Constructivism and the view that positions it as the middle ground[26] between these two competing groups provides one possible route, however recent criticisms

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[23] Milja Kurki et al.: Roundtable: The Limits of Bridge-Building, in: International Relations 23.1 (2009), p. 115.

[24] Project homepage at http://chrisblattman.com/projects/sway/

[25] Symposium: Cautionary Perspectives on Multi-Method Research, in: Qualitative Methods - Newsletter of the APSA Organized Section for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research 7.2 (2009), p. 5.

[26] Emanuel Adler: Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics, in: European Journal of International Relations 3.3 (1997).

of 'middle-groundism' challenge this assumption[27]. In their words *A synthesis based on two problematic metaphysical systems produces only a synthesis of two problematic metaphysical positions - not an improved metaphysical position.'*[28]. This is echoed in a number of other criticisms of the mixed-methods project more generally[29], which argue that even methods that come from a shared epistemological position (largely empiricist in the literature) still study fundamentally different aspects of the world and are irredeemable. Although this position clashes with the critical realist position of Patomäki and Wight, it articulates an important caution against the careless fusing of methods, in particular with regards approaches that are frequently articulated in opposition to each other. This cautionary note should not be taken as a reason to abandon the mixed-methods project. Indeed, too much reliance on one perspective can result in the dismissal of alternative explanations for a phenomenon that are equally valid. This caution should rather be taken as an incentive to critically engage with these issues in research and neither blindly dismiss, or accept, different ontologies or epistemologies.

Generally speaking the differences between the two sides can be brought back to the type of questions they ask regarding the world. Traditional research within International Relations and conflict studies has focused on 'why?' questions, generally with the aim of solving problems. Interpretivist approaches to research however, ask 'how-possible?' questions that focus on how events and actions were 'made possible' as opposed to directly 'caused'[30]. This is the focus of 'constitutive' theorising, examining the properties of an event or action that made it possible; discourses, ideas, identities are generally the objects of analysis within constitutive work. This has its mirror in Hollis and Smith's seminal work 'Explaining and Understanding' where they argue that both 'explaining' (asking 'why' questions) and 'understanding' (similar to asking 'how-possible') tell us something important about the world[31] . However, they argue that these two approaches are fundamentally divided, in essence there are two stories to tell but they are told independently and cannot be easily brought together[32].

But is this a necessary or even desirable distinction between two separate ways of learning about the world? Is it necessary to separate the ideational from the material and the 'how-possible' question from the 'why' question? I would argue that in attempting to learn about and understand the world, the 'why' question need not be separated from the 'how-possible'. On a basic level it could even be argued that the distinction is nonsensical as both approaches seek to learn the reasons for an event occurring, although

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[27] Heikki Patomäki/Colin Wight: After Postpositivism? The Promises of Critical Realism, in: International Studies Quarterly 44.2 (2000), pp. 213–237.

[28] Ibid., Page 214-215.

[29] Symposium: Cautionary Perspectives on Multi-Method Research (see n. 25).

[30] Alexander Wendt: On Constitution and Causation in International Relations, in: Review of International Studies 24 (1998), Page 105.

[31] Martin Hollis/Steve Smith: Explaining and Understanding International Relations, 1991, Pages 1-7.

[32] Ibid., Page 214.

by tackling distinct (as opposed to different) areas of the same question. Similarly I argue that separating the ideational and material spheres as has been done in the debates between rationalism and reflectivism and positivism and post-positivism is counter-productive.

That said, there are real barriers particularly with regards the way in which the academic debate between the 'positivists' and 'post-positivists' has been structured and the various discourses as to the role of 'scientific method' within International Relations[33]. Bearing this in mind, rather than attempting a synthesis of these competing approaches to research in International Relations and conflict studies more specifically, this paper attempts to present a pluralist epistemological position drawing on recent work by the so-called 'critical realists', in particular Milja Kurki, Colin Wight and Heikki Patomäki.

The next section examines the philosophical position outlined in the work of Patomäki, Wight and Kurki, examining their critique of the causal/constitutive divide and their attempts to move beyond the deterministic and mechanistic properties that the concept of cause has been attributed[34]. Building upon this position, in an admittedly instrumentalist fashion, this paper applies the ontological and epistemological pluralist position that 'critical realist' philosophy opens and applies this framework to the study of civil conflict. The following section of the paper does this by showing that past work within conflict studies can be viewed as falling under the various categories of causality outlined in the work of Patomäki, Wight and Kurki. Locating conflict research within this framework potentially allows for these diverse approaches (positivist and post-positivist alike) to engage and communicate with each other. The final section of this paper then outlines a draft research design that takes advantage of the pluralist potential of the 'critical realist' perspective for the analysis of civil conflict.

The Critical Realist Argument in International Relations

The 'critical realist' critique of the philosophical divide between the positivist and post-positivist positions within International Relations can be considered to superficially straddle of the walls between scientific and interpretivist methods. Its critique attacks the core fundamental assumptions of both the positivist and the post-positivist positions (explicit and 'inadvertent' Humeanism[35] respectively). It questions the ontolog-

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[33] see for example the arguments made in Symposium: Cautionary Perspectives on Multi-Method Research (see n. 25).

[34] Kurki: Causation in International Relations - Reclaiming Causal Analysis (see n. 1); Milja Kurki: Critical Realism and Causal Analysis in International Relations, in: Millennium - Journal of International Studies 35.2 (2007), pp. 361–378; Heikki Patomäki: After International Relations, 2002; Patomäki/Wight: After Postpositivism? The Promises of Critical Realism (see n. 27).

[35] Kurki: Causation in International Relations - Reclaiming Causal Analysis (see n. 1), p. 136.

ical and epistemological assumptions behind both approaches to research, challenging the fundamental incommensurability of both positions and the way in which the debate between the two positions has been structured. Core to this questioning of the incommensurability of the positions is the critique of the conceptualisation of cause that has been dominant within the discipline (and in many other areas of the social sciences as well)[36]. This conceptualisation that both the positivist and the post-positivist camp share; the positivist acceptance of Humean causal philosophy and the rejection by the post-positivists of causal theorising as a result of the presumption of Humeanism as the account of causation. This section of the paper examines the 'critical realist' perspective in a broad (and necessarily brief) fashion, outlining the core elements of the critical realist position and its critique of the positivist/post-positivist divide within IR.

Critical Realist philosophy in general makes commitments to three core principles; ontological realism, epistemological relativism and judgemental rationalism[37][38] . Ontological realism denotes the belief that the objects of scientific discourse exist independently of that discourse. Within the social world, although these objects do not exist wholly independent of discourse and may very well be affected by the articulation of scientific theory, social objects exist prior to their specification in social scientific theory. Thus when we observe the social world, be it though discourse analysis or statistics, what we observe, social constructs or otherwise, are real objects of analysis that existed prior to their observation. Indeed if we seek to analyse a discourse (or deconstruct one even), that discourse and the discourses that constitute that discourse existed prior to us observing them[39].

The acceptance of epistemological relativism by critical realism, involves the acceptance that claims to knowledge are always temporally and spatially bounded as are the epistemological discourses that they are grounded in. There is no way to judge knowledge claims in an a priori fashion, rather claims to knowledge must be judged depending on the nature of the claim and the objects under study[40]. This approach to validating (or choosing between competing knowledge claims) forms the third core assumption of the critical realist philosophical position, that of judgemental rationalism[41]. This epistemological pluralism is particularly interesting with regards the space that it opens for communication between competing 'paradigms' within IR and conflict research and the potential for a broad and less reductive (as opposed to the use of non- in Patomäki and Wight's paper[42]) perspective capable of capturing the strengths of the different

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[36] Patomäki/Wight: After Postpositivism? The Promises of Critical Realism (see n. 27), Pages 225-227.
[37] Colin Wight: Reading Derrida as a Critical Realist, in: ed. by Jonathon Joseph/John M. Roberts (Realism, Discourse and Deconstruction), 2004, p. 202.
[38] Patomäki/Wight: After Postpositivism? The Promises of Critical Realism (see n. 27), p. 224.
[39] Wight: Reading Derrida as a Critical Realist (see n. 37), p. 202.
[40] Ibid., p. 202.
[41] Ibid., p. 202.
[42] Patomäki/Wight: After Postpositivism? The Promises of Critical Realism (see n. 27), p. 227.

approaches to knowledge within the discipline.

Kurki, in further advancing this argument, turns to the critical realist conceptualisation of social structures in order to critique constructivism within IR. She argues that the broad constructivist concept of structure, that of being comprised of rules, norms and intersubjectively negotiated beliefs is narrow in scope, simply viewing structure as the nexus of these concepts rather than an ontological entity in its own right[43]. She argues that the critical realist concept of structure is one that is not simply constituted by the concepts mentioned above but one that both materially and ideationally constrains the actors positioned within it. They are not just systems of rules that define beliefs that in turn inform what is or is not legitimate action, but rather they position social agents in relation to each other, the resources around them and the forms of power between them[44]. This concept of social structure does not present structures as intersubjectively negotiated sets of rules that govern action but as hierarchical social relations that tie agents to each other. For example, from this perspective capitalism is not simply a set of intersubjectively negotiated rules that legitimate action. Social structures in this manner consist of both hierarchical material as well as ideational factors that position agents in asymmetrical power relations. Thus power relations are not simply the product of elites with the power to enforce the cultural beliefs that legitimate unequal power relations but they are also the product of material constraints and capabilities that help to determine these positions of power simultaneously alongside these ideational factors[45]. I argue further down that this conceptualisation of social structure has potential far-reaching consequences for the way in which we study and come to understand civil conflict.

Overlapping with these attempts to deepen the ontological position of the constructivist/constitutive research positions are the attempts being made to broaden out the ontological positions as well. These attempts to broaden out what we conceive as real in the world are most visible in the recent work of Patomäki and Kurki[46], where the attempt is made to move from the epistemologically defined concept of cause that is prevalent within the discipline and relocate 'causation' ontologically. This 'critical realist' argument criticises the reliance of both 'positivist' and 'post-positivist' reliance on dominant Humean discourse of causation. This critique focuses on both its unproblematised acceptance within quantitative social science and KKV-style qualitative analysis and the outright rejection of causal language by many of the post-positivist research programs, which indicates an inadvertent acceptance of Humean causation as the sole

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[43] Milja Kurki/Andrea Sinclair: Hidden in Plain Sight: Constructivist Treatment of Social Context and its Limitations, in: International Politics 47.1 (2010), pp. 1–25, here pp. 4-10.

[44] Ibid., p. 7.

[45] Ibid., p. 7.

[46] Patomäki/Wight: After Postpositivism? The Promises of Critical Realism (see n. 27); Patomäki: After International Relations (see n. 34); Heikki Patomäki: After Critical Realism? The Relevance of Contemporary Science, in: Journal of Critical Realism 9.1 (2010); Kurki: Causation in International Relations - Reclaiming Causal Analysis (see n. 1); Kurki: Critical Realism and Causal Analysis in International Relations (see n. 34).

form of causal theory[47].

Kurki's 2008 book, *Causation in International Relations* carries this argument forward, critiquing the dominant discourse of causation and its use within IR and examining alternative conceptualisations of cause as potential competition for the dominant Humean form generally present within the discipline. She argues that critical realism offers a potential way forward out of this problem and examines the use of Aristotelian concepts of causes as a potential other way within the discipline[48]. She argues that this would allow for a multi-faceted conceptualisation of cause that takes into account not just the material or the ideational, but rather allows us to use them in concert[49]. Under this causal framework, ideational factors such as beliefs, norms, ideas and discourse, play a role alongside the material factors such as resources, geography or access to arms. This perspective also allows for agents to play a role in causation alongside structural factors, giving actors' reasons for acting causal effect. This has also emerged to a lesser extent in Wendt's scientific realist argument[50] where he draws on the work of Donald Davidson[51].

However, the critical realist project in IR has yet to put forward a a strong research strategy in terms of designing and implementing research along the lines discussed within the growing number of conceptual works interested in the issues raised by this debate[52]. The rest of this paper will attempt to add to this in terms of putting forward a research design for conducting conflict research under a critical realist philosophical framework. The next section will contextualise current conflict research in terms of the critical realist argument and the following section will then propose a research design to implement this in practice.

The Case for Critical Realism in Conflict Studies

Drawing on Milja Kurki's 2008 analysis of causation[53], this section examines the potential for underpinning conflict research with critical realist philosophy. This section argues that by adopting this position, we open up not only the opportunity for more pluralistic studies and analyses of conflict, but also the opportunity to incorporate currently existing research into this framework. In this section I argue that existing research, both 'rationalist' and 'reflectivist', can potentially be incorporated into this framework and

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[47] Kurki: Causation in International Relations - Reclaiming Causal Analysis (see n. 1), p. 136.

[48] Ibid., pp. 218-222.

[49] Ibid., pp. 223-230.

[50] Steve Smith: Wendt's World, in: Review of International Studies 26.1 (2000), pp. 151–163, here pp. 158-159.

[51] Wendt: On Constitution and Causation in International Relations (see n. 30), p. 107.

[52] Patomäki: After Critical Realism? The Relevance of Contemporary Science (see n. 46).

[53] Kurki: Causation in International Relations - Reclaiming Causal Analysis (see n. 1).

used in concert to provide a richer analysis of civil conflict. By building this framework on the base of critical realism, it is argued that many of the issues that emerge when attempting to conduct a straight synthesis of these usually separate bodies of knowledge can be overcome. The outcome of this discussion is then used to build a research design in the final section of this paper to put this into practice.

In her book, Kurki proposes that the critical realist argument opens doors for the introduction of broader and deeper conceptualisations of causation into IR, replacing the dominant Humean causal philosophy. In particular she examines the potential of Aristotelian categories of causation[54] as a possible replacement for the hollowed out concept that has emerged within the discipline. Moving in this way we can challenge the causal/constitutive divide that has for so long been a feature of the landscape of International Relations and related fields of study. By urging for a deeper understanding of causes, we can come to the conclusion that constitution itself can be viewed as causal[55] or that indeed we don't have to narrow down the scope of what we conceive of as 'causing'. Kurki draws on Aristotle's 'four causes' account of causation to demonstrate that causes don't always have to be causes in the same manner[56]. In this manner, causes can be conceived as material[57], formal[58], efficient[59] and final[60]. This paper proceeds from Kurki's interpretation of these categories of causation in the context of the social sciences and IR more specifically for the purposes of this paper within the context of conflict studies and the study of civil conflict.

Taking Kurki's arguments at face-value, it is possible to recognise within the civil conflict literature aspects of these causal categories entering into research in one form or another, or at least in forms that are compatible with these categories. The recent move within

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[54] Ibid., Chapter 6.

[55] Richard Ned Lebow: Constitutive Causality: Imagined Spaces and Political Practices, in: Millennium - Journal of International Studies 38.2 (2009), pp. 211–239.

[56] Kurki: Causation in International Relations - Reclaiming Causal Analysis (see n. 1), pp. 189-190.

[57] 'out of which' something arises or the passive potentiality of matter ibid., pp. 220-221. For example the destructive potential of nuclear weapons or the presence of constructed concepts such as ethnicity or race within a society

[58] 'according to which' or referring to the form of a substance ibid., p. 221, formal causes are constitutive in that they constitute things by defining meanings and relations. Kurki argues that formal causes can be understood as a way in which we can incorporate the roles of ideas, rules, norms and discourses into a causal framework ibid., pp. 223-225

[59] 'by which' efficient causes actualise or set in motion and activate interactions between 'form and matter' ibid., p. 222, for example the US bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 or the Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait in 1991 both events provoked a reaction and set in motion specific interactions between the actors

[60] 'for the sake of' or intentionality is the focus of this category, although Kurki recognises the reluctance of many scholars to engage with this type of causality, she argues that the idea of intentionality is very important in the social world and is needed to analyse the intentions and motivations that drive actor's actions in the social world ibid., pp. 225-226. Similarly the arguments made by Donald Davidson for reasons as causes; Donald Davidson: Actions, Reasons, and Causes, in: The Journal of Philosophy 60.23, American Philosophical Association, Eastern Division, Sixtieth Annual Meeting (1963), pp. 685–700 has been taken up elsewhere in IR scholarship by Alexander Wendt; Smith: Wendt's World (see n. 50), pp. 158-159

the quantitative studies literature to disaggregated analysis, andthe focus on enablers and constraints on action[61] and in particular the focus in these studies on materially visible and measurable aspects of the conflict[62] has created room in which it is possible to view these analyses as approaching a materially casual argument rather than an efficient one (most often associated with quantitative methodologies). Thus for example the potentiality of a states geography is favourable for guerilla or insurgent warfare (rocky mountainous terrain)[63] or remoteness (distance from centres of state power)[64], the availability of arms or capital (diaspora remittances)[65], these make an insurgency more viable, even if in themselves they do not actively 'cause' the conflict.

Secondly, the work by Kalyvas[66], Wood[67] and Weinstein[68] into the logic behind rebel group violence or participation attempts to explain the actions of individuals and groups within a conflict situation by reference to the formation of preferences and the different motivations that are experienced by this actors as a result of social or structural factors. This research, read in light of Kurki's attempt at reconstructing causation within the discipline, tends to suggest that this work might potentially find a fit within the category of final causation. Especially in light of its attempt to explain why people rebel and commit violence in certain places and ways.

With regard to formal causation, I pick up on Kurki's argument that this potentially opens a space for greater engagement with discourses, ideas, norms and beliefs[69]. As mentioned above, despite the growing strength of discourse analysis and discourse theoretical approaches within IR more broadly, within the study of civil conflict the focus has remained on the role of the west and western intervention in conflict. As a result, there has been a lack of literature focusing on the internal discursive dynamics of conflicts. This is understandable, western academics engaged in discourse analysis/theory might point to the lack of being embedded within the societies in question (or being embedded

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[61] or in the words of Collier and Hoeffler 'feasibility' Paul Collier/Anke Hoeffler/Dominic Rohner: Beyond greed and grievance: feasibility and civil war, in: Oxford Economic Papers 61.1 (2009), pp. 1–27.

[62] Cederman/Girardin/Gleditsch: Ethnonationalist Triads: Assessing the Influence of Kin Groups on Civil Wars (see n. 15); Buhaug/Rod: Local determinants of African civil wars, 1970-2001 (see n. 15); Gleditsch/Ward: Measuring Space: A Minimum-Distance Database and Applications to International Studies (see n. 15); Lujala: Deadly Combat over Natural Resources (see n. 15); Raleigh/O'Loughlin: Spatial Analysis of Civil War Violence (see n. 15); Gleditsch: Transnational Dimensions of Civil War (see n. 15); Salehyan/Gleditsch: Refugees and the Spread of Civil War (see n. 15).

[63] James D. Fearon/David D. Laitin: Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War, in: The American Political Science Review 97.1 (2003), pp. 75–90.

[64] Raleigh/O'Loughlin: Spatial Analysis of Civil War Violence (see n. 15); Clionadh Raleigh et al.: Introducing ACLED: An Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset, in: Journal of Peace Research 47.5 (2010), pp. 651–660; Gleditsch/Ward: Measuring Space: A Minimum-Distance Database and Applications to International Studies (see n. 15).

[65] Cederman/Girardin/Gleditsch: Ethnonationalist Triads: Assessing the Influence of Kin Groups on Civil Wars (see n. 15).

[66] Kalyvas: The Logic of Violence in Civil War (see n. 4).

[67] Wood: Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador (see n. 7).

[68] Jeremy M. Weinstein: Inside Rebellion - The Politics of Insurgent Violence, 2007.

[69] Kurki: Causation in International Relations - Reclaiming Causal Analysis (see n. 1), pp. 223-225.

within their own societal discourses) as a hindrance to interpretation and understanding. It could also be argued that discourse theory and other forms of discourse analysis, post-structuralism, post-modernism emerged with a critical perspective, which in turn has influenced the direction of research. I argue with regards the first (and the second) point that although critiquing our own assumptions and understandings with regards intervention is an important aspect of critical scholarship, without a questioning of the nature of the conflict in question, questioning our own role is reduced to a minor part in attempts to revise how the western world intervenes in civil conflict situations.

It must also be asked in this context if post-structuralist/discourse theoretical[70] approaches are compatible with a realist philosophy. Certainly in some of the literature in IR, both critics[71] and supporters of these approaches[72], would suggest a negative answer to this question. However within both post-structural and discourse theoretical[73] and even some critical realist readings of[74], realism is an important part of social reality, and is not in fact divorced from the analysis of texts and discourses. Indeed in Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse, discourses can also be viewed as including actions as well as texts[75]. Readings of discourse theory and post-structuralism that remove the importance of reality for textual/discourse analysis must be questioned. I would argue that the critical realist notion of structure is well placed to question such assumptions, especially in light of an acceptance of material causation.

Efficient cause as it is presented in Kurki's book, is an interesting concept in that, unlike the traditionally accepted role of efficient cause as the primary causal story in IR, efficient causes under the critical realist perspective become inextricably tied to the other categories of causation that she presents[76]. Efficient causation is viewed in context with both the underlying conditioning causes, formal and material, and is also tied to the intentions of the actors involved. In these terms, efficient causation is not linked to any one approach to research as the other categories, to different extents, can be, but rather is an integral part of all three other categories of causation. As mentioned in the previous example of efficient causation above, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait can be considered an efficient cause of the western intervention and the Gulf War in 1990-1991, but this efficiency can only be understood in the context of western foreign policy discourse, material capabilities and the motivations of the western actors that arose from

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[70] This is the author's proposed approach to the issue of norms, ideas, beliefs and discourse, although this certainly does not preclude other approaches that would allow for the analysis of these concepts

[71] Øyvind Østerud: Antinomies of Postmodernism in International Studies, in: Journal of Peace Research 33.4 (1996), pp. 385–390.

[72] Campbell: Writing security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity (see n. 10).

[73] Jacob Torfing: New theories of Discourse - Laclau, Mouffe and Zizek, 1999, pp. 45-47.

[74] Wight: Reading Derrida as a Critical Realist (see n. 37); Heikki Patomäki: The Rhetorical Strategies and the Misleading Nature of Attacks on 'Postmodernism': A Reply to Østerud, in: Journal of Peace Research 34.3 (1997), pp. 325–329.

[75] Torfing: New theories of Discourse - Laclau, Mouffe and Zizek (see n. 73), pp. 94-96.

[76] Kurki: Causation in International Relations - Reclaiming Causal Analysis (see n. 1), p. 222.

these (not to mention these factors on the Iraqi side of the equation). Efficient causes in this way can be considered necessary, but not sufficient in that they alone cannot 'cause' something, but at the same time, they are an integral part of how the event under scrutiny emerged.

This section has presented one potential variant of a critical realist approach to studying civil conflict. Critical realism, with its epistemologically pluralist position, certainly allows for other approaches to be taken and the much varied nature of research within the conflict studies literature also bears this out from a practical standpoint. The proposed framework presented here is not exhaustive of possible ways around the mixed methods problem but is embedded within a single research project. The aim of this section was to contextualise conflict research within the causal framework explored by Kurki, and provide a background for designing a pluralist research project within the civil conflict literature. The next section of this paper formalises this approach by proposing a draft research design to incorporate this framework into a research project and move past methodological and philosophical debate, of which from a critical realist perspective, there is far more of than practical analysis conducted from this philosophical base.

A Critical Realist Research Design for the Study of Civil Conflict

This concluding section outlines a draft research design for conducting a critical realist based research project for the study of civil conflict. The section begins by outlining the different methods that will be used and discusses how these methods will be used together in a pluralistic analysis. This is followed by a brief discussion of potential problems and issues. The design presented in this section is still a draft insofar as discussion of specific variables and models is limited, as well as the particulars of the rational choice/decision-making model that will be utilised in the study. Work on the more specific aspects of these sections is road mapped but as of this time is still undeveloped within the research project and as such is unavailable. However, the exact specifics of these sections are not necessary to engage with designing the research approach, at least within the confines of this paper and as such should not hinder the arguments being made.

The draft research design presented here is based on the author's current doctoral research. The broad research question is why did serious civil conflict emerge in the case study states? and Why did violence emerge as it did despite a history of strong inter-ethnic relations in these states? The two cases in question are the civil war in Rwanda and the subsequent genocide and the conflict in Darfur, Sudan that hit world headlines in late-2003. Rwanda has been chosen to help evaluate the potential usefulness of the pluralist design presented below as there is a large literature covering many different research methods while Darfur has been chosen as there is a relatively small academic

literature on the subject. The overall aim of the research is to examine the roots of the conflict and the widespread 'inter-ethnic' violence that ensued.

One of the first issues encountered was the relative newness of the arguments being made especially with regards to Kurki's work and the multi-dimensional causal framework she builds upon. In particular how to structure the analysis, how to integrate the methods and how to ensure a balanced analysis? From the discussion in the previous section, three aspects of contemporary research on civil conflict were aligned with three of the causal categories outlined and suggested by Kurki whereas efficient causation was left as a floating category, embedded within the context of the other three categories. This makes sense when efficient causes are viewed as activators or actualisers, they overlap with the other three categories within the context of the event being examined. Thus, discussion of efficient causes can be conducted throughout the analysis where the context emerges.

Material causes (or the strong quantitative section) are relatively easy to place as well, to many extents they are 'prior' in terms of they are present prior to the event being analysed[77], these include, with reference to the literature on civil conflict, geographical and economic factors amongst others. Material causes thus provide a basis for incorporating material reality into the analysis social structures. This is useful especially if utilising the critical realist concept of structure as outlined by Kurki[78], or in establishing a material base for power structures and relationships in a discourse theoretical analysis. The quantitative analysis will focus on analysing the impact of different factors across different regions within the states in question, alongside a broader analysis of the impact of regional and international events and factors. Starting the study with the quantitative analysis thus makes sense as it gives us a material basis for the discourse theory and rational choice analysis. That said there is still an iterative cycle, especially when one considers the formation of interest groups, for example ethnic/identity based groups or geographical divisions between these group. Thus we relate the discourse theoretical analysis back to the quantitative analysis as well as the quantitative to the discursive.

The line between the discourse theoretical analysis of identity, social antagonisms and discursive structures and the rational choice methodology is more blurred. With regards discourse theory, the analysis will be based on Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's discourse theory[79] and is similar to the methodology employed by Lene Hansen in her examination of western foreign policy and the Bosnian war[80]. The analysis will attempt to identify how groups within society became juxtaposed through processes of the linking

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[77]   Kurki: Causation in International Relations - Reclaiming Causal Analysis (see n. 1), p. 221.
[78]   Kurki/Sinclair: Hidden in Plain Sight: Constructivist Treatment of Social Context and its Limitations (see n. 43).
[79]   see Torfing: New theories of Discourse - Laclau, Mouffe and Zizek (see n. 73), for an overview.
[80]   Hansen: Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War (see n. 10), Chapters 1-5.

and differentiation of signs and signifiers, the emergence of social antagonisms and the blockage of identity that the constructed 'other' poses. The goal of this post-structuralist based analysis is then to deconstruct and examine how these identities emerged within the context of the society. The quantitative analysis in this respect allows us to examine how capabilities and material power affected the abilities of the groups within the society to articulate their position, this relationship is made possible by the application of a critical realist conceptualisation of social structure as discussed above.

The logical progression of the analysis would then seem to be to the rational choice perspective. From our discourse/post-structural analysis we can examine how cultural norms, beliefs and identities became rationalised through discursive processes within the state and examine how these processed made (im)possible the choices, decisions and actions that were taken in the construction of conflict and how this had a bearing on how the conflict was fought. Here we can also see the material factors coming into play, in particular if we draw on the work of Kalyvas and Weinstein[81] and their analysis of violence or Wood[82] and her examination of participation in rebel/insurgency movements. Exactly how the rational choice approach will be tackled in the research is still undecided at this stage, but approaches that stress economic rationality as key will likely be excluded, or at least have the economic rationality aspect augmented or removed in some way.

What appears to be key in terms of designing this research is attempting to keep an open ended approach that allows for changes to be made in the analysis as other sections of the research are carried out. Differentiating this from a nested analysis approach is that the iterability is not about triangulation in terms of perfecting a model or pointing a direction for research but rather examining how different aspects of 'causation' impact upon each other. To borrow some of Patomäki's terminology[83], it is more about telling a better 'story', building on the results of each method to create a more comprehensive whole.

Potential Problems and Issues

Studying civil conflict, in particular gathering data when conflicts are ongoing, or have been for a long time can prove to be highly difficult[84]. That said however, currently there is a wealth of new datasets available from the conflict studies literature and these datasets contain immense amounts of disaggregated data that can make this task much easier (ACLED[85], and the immense collection of data available through the Peace Re-

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[81]   Kalyvas: The Logic of Violence in Civil War (see n. 4); Weinstein: Inside Rebellion - The Politics of Insurgent Violence (see n. 68).

[82]   Wood: Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador (see n. 7).

[83]   Heikki Patomäki: How to Tell Better Stories about World Politics, in: European Journal of International Relations 2.1 (1996), pp. 105–133.

[84]   Wood: Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador (see n. 7), Chapter 2.

[85]   Raleigh et al.: Introducing ACLED: An Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset (see n. 64).

search Institue, Oslo's Centre for the Study of Civil War[86] that includes data on battledeaths, civil wars, conflict site data, onset and duration data and religious cleavage data). Outside of conflict studies, the international financial institutions (IMF, WTO, World Bank), the United Nations and various international organisations have compiled a vast amount of data on economies, living conditions, disease and international trade flows amongst many others. From a quantitative standpoint, this availability of data is highly useful and very promising, although there are still many holes in this data, in particular for underdeveloped states and these holes tend to increase in number as one goes back in time, limiting the scope of serious investigation temporally. This problem is not necessarily crippling, depending on the time frame being analysed in the research, but it does deserve special consideration if there is the possibility of a lack of data and potential expenses that may be incurred in tracking this data down.

From the discourse analysis perspective, such a wide range of resources and texts may be utilised that availability of data is potentially less of a problem. However, access to important government policy documents or reports, especially when attempting to analyse government policy in the lead up to or during a civil war may pose problems, particularly if the regime in question is still in power. That said, such problems must be evaluated on a case to case basis as requirements and circumstances can greatly vary between cases.

Also it must be recognised that the data collection required by the research design outlined above is very large in scope and is potentially quite time consuming. This may be ameliorated by the availability of data both quantitative and qualitative in cases, however, and this has been a recurring criticism of many quantitative analyses within conflict studies, there are many holes in data for states, in particular those that have experienced heavy civil conflict[87]. From a textual analysis perspective, the workload may vary significantly depending on the focus of the analysis and the types of documents being used.

Another potential issue is the wide range of training necessary to work under the proposed research design. Many scholars have cautioned that the broad methodological scope of mixed and multi-method research can lead to a drop in quality in the application of different methods[88]. That said, there are excellent examples of mixed methods research within conflict studies; in particular the work of Kalyvas and Wood gives much hope. Certainly however, extra care must be taken in procuring relevant training and skills, checking and re-checking models and analyses and ensuring that the work is to a

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[86]   http://www.prio.no/CSCW/Datasets/Armed-Conflict/

[87]   see for example the removal of a large number of conflicts from Paul Collier/Anke Hoeffler: Greed and grievance in civil war, in: Oxford Economic Papers 56.4 (2004), pp. 563–595, here due to lack of available data, although this number was revised up in a later paper, see Paul Collier/Anke Hoeffler/Dominic Rohner: Beyond greed and grievance: feasibility and civil war, in: Oxford Economic Papers 61.1 (2009), pp, 1-27.

[88]   Symposium: Cautionary Perspectives on Multi-Method Research (see n. 25), p. 5.

high standard.

Also, it is difficult to fit or analyse a pluralist research design, in particular one which crosses the so-called boundaries of 'boredom' and 'negativity'[89] as many of the traditional research design and methodology texts do not concern themselves with reflectivist approaches to research[90] whereas at the same time, scholars from the 'reflectivist' side of the argument, in particular to the post-structuralists have shied away from producing such texts as they reject the standardising of approaches to research. Thus when constructing a research design there is no pre-existing basis from which to draw on. This urges for extra care to be taken in collecting and analysing data and ensuring that data has been examined rigorously to ensure its quality, something that the 'reflectivists' have been criticised for ignoring[91], although there is also proof to the contrary[92].

The aim of this problem assessment has not been to paint a bleak picture of the prospects of epistemologically pluralist research in conflict and this paper argues that such approaches to research have great potential. In moving forward however it is necessary to recognise the problems and difficulties that can present themselves when attempting to undertake research that attempts to utilise a number of different methods, in particular in the manner proposed in this paper.

Overall this paper has attempted to present a viable way for applying critical realism and the arguments that it makes for pluralism to a substantive research project. It has argued that adopting a critical realist perspective can allow us to overcome many of the barriers that have emerged in the recent calls for mixed-methods research designs within the study of civil conflict. It has proposed a research design based off Kurki's examination a multidimensional concept of causation that allows for research generally considered incommensurable to utilised under a larger framework for analysis that could potentially allow for a greater understanding of the origins and causes of violence within societies.

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[89] George Sørensen: IR theory after the Cold War, in: Review of International Studies 24.05 (1998), pp. 83–100; Patomäki/Wight: After Postpositivism? The Promises of Critical Realism (see n. 27).

[90] King/Keohane/Verba: Desiging Social Enquiry - Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research (see n. 8); Gerring: Case Study Research - Principles and Practices (see n. 9); Alexander L. George/ Andrew Bennett: Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences, 2005.

[91] Østerud: Antinomies of Postmodernism in International Studies (see n. 71).

[92] Patomäki: The Rhetorical Strategies and the Misleading Nature of Attacks on 'Postmodernism': A Reply to Østerud (see n. 74); Steve Smith: Epistemology, Postmodernism and International Relations Theory: A Reply to Østerud, in: Journal of Peace Research 34.3 (1997), pp. 330–336.

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