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Comment on Randall Collins/2. Linking the Micro and the Macro in the Study of Violence

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Comment on Randall Collins/2

Linking the Micro and the Macro in the Study of Violence

by Stathis N. Kalyvas

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In his comments to Michel Wieviorka, Randall Collins reminds us of a central methodological issue that cuts across all social sciences: the linkage between micro-level and macro-level. Some scholars focus on understanding the fine-grained interactions between individuals that ultimately produce large-scale events; others work the other way around, trying to understand and explain large-scale structural movements that generate individual-level implications. The former typically do not draw the aggregate implications of their micro-findings, while the latter fail to reflect on, and research the microfoundations of their claims. In general, there is little scaling-up or scaling-down. This “macro-micro gap” is well known and has generated a venerable debate that I won’t replicate. But I will briefly discuss a way out of it, by focusing on the specific question of violence which preoccupies both Wieviorka and Collins – and which has been the focus of my own research [Kalyvas 2007]. More specifically, I am advocating one move in two related steps. The move is this: instead of looking to scale way up or way down, we can reach much more easily for an overlooked level: the “meso.” And we can best achieve this in two steps, namely conceptual disaggregation and more precise measurement. Indeed, this is a move that an increasing number of researchers are adopting, although they do so in a way that tends to be implicit and unself-conscious.

Although I am great admirer of the work of Charles Tilly, I feel that his book on collective violence did somewhat of a disservice to the study of violence. By over-aggregating all violence into a single category, he created more problems than he

solved. I have the nagging feeling that in spite of his wonderful attention to individual micro-details, Randall Collins is similarly attracted to overaggregation. Obviously, every instance of violence boils down to a human physically attacking another human, and the insights that Collins offers about the stress felt by the attacker as well as the process necessary to overcome it are both valid and extremely fruitful. However, this simplified interaction between two human beings is embedded into a potentially infinite situational variation, which ultimately undermines our interpretative effort by constituting an instance of what Giovanni Sartori correctly castigated as “conceptual stretching,” i.e. the use of vague and amorphous conceptualizations which supply us with broad extensional coverage at the cost of losses in connotative precision. Indeed, Sartori pointed out that conceptual stretching led to both indefiniteness and elusiveness, since the more we climbed toward high-flown universals, the more tenuous became the link with empirical evidence. He, therefore, argued that while we do need universals, these must be “empirical universals,” that is, categories which somehow are amenable to empirical testing. I believe that we should take his lesson at heart in the study of violence – and the first implication is that we should stop seeking to try to explain violence *tout court*.

Let me clarify. Consider the following four scenarios: in the first one, an individual in an American inner city attacks another individual whom he accuses of having challenged his honor; in the second one, an individual, member of a paramilitary unit in rural Colombia, murders an unarmed peasant; in the third one, an individual in the Indian city of Gujarat, surrounded by hundreds of other individuals, participates in an attack against the inhabitants of a Muslim neighborhood; lastly, in the fourth one, an individual in a remote CIA command post somewhere in Nevada, presses a button that sends a drone rocket against a group of armed and unarmed men, somewhere in Southern Afghanistan. Are all these equivalent situations, warranting the application of the same interpretive frame? Yes, insofar as they are all instances of violence. No, insofar as they are likely to be explained by different combinations of variables. To put it differently, we would be best served if we focused on categories such as honor crimes, violence in civil war, or violence in riots and pogroms. These are meso-level theoretical conceptualizations that allow precise measurements (e.g. homicides in US inner cities, paramilitary-related violence in Colombia, riot participation and victimization in India, or bombing victims in Afghanistan) and, therefore, the systematic testing of hypotheses.

Returning to Collins’s comments on Wieviorka: I think that Wieviorka’s analysis is easily amenable to a meso-level type of conceptualization, in spite of its lack of microfoundations. At the same time, Collins is correct to challenge him by suggesting that his is only a very plausible, very insightful conjecture. In other words,

Wieviorka engages in theory development rather than theory testing, although he sometimes uses language suggesting that he has in fact done the latter. The next step in a research program motivated by Wieviorka's insights would be to operationalize, measure, and test. Is it true that high levels of class encapsulation and mobilization limit violence? Perhaps it is, perhaps not. We need to specify the type of violence we have in mind and we need to measure so as to find if a correlation indeed exists. For his part, Collins cites examples that point to a possible absence of such a correlation. It may also be the case that even if a correlation does exist, it may capture a different mechanism from the one implied, perhaps one of a displacement process: violent crime may have been displaced into the space of intimate intra-class violence, drunken brawls or domestic violence. Such findings would suggest what the causal pathways may be and help elucidate the appropriate microfoundations. Lastly, instead of trying to test Wieviorka's hypothesis on a single, global, cross-national and cross-temporal basis, we may want to do so by either holding space constant and study a short period of time where important organizational changes took place or by holding time constant and study variation across geographic units.

To sum up: nothing of what I argued here is novel, and yet these points are often overlooked. By running a horserace between the macro and the micro, we tend to forget the meso, the level where both measurement and testing, especially when it comes to the study of violence, are often easier to achieve and more fruitful to undertake.

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Comment on Randall Collins/2

Linking the Micro and the Macro in the Study of Violence

Abstract: How explain macro trends in violence, such as historical shifts in rates of crime, while using a micro-theory of situational interaction? Wieviorka argues that the world-wide rise in crime rates since the 1960s resulted from the combination of a macro cause – the breakdown of regulated and limited class conflict – plus a micro process of individual meaninglessness, so that violence became the new means of constructing identities. Wieviorka's theory clashes with evidence that on the micro level, humans are not proficient at violence. Violence is largely shaped by an emotional barrier of confrontational tension/fear [ct/f], so that most conflict goes no further than blustering gestures and words. Violence is messy, imprecise, and atrocious, because it happens only when local conditions allow pathways to circumvent ct/f. But how can this theory explain rising or falling macro-trends in violence? Interactional techniques are invented: such as football hooligans style of overwhelming police by maneuvering to assemble where they have huge local superiority of numbers; or another kind of technique, the clandestine approach to delivering a close attack by a suicide bomber. These techniques can be charted as they spread from one place to another. To complete the picture, authorities' counter-techniques of violence control also evolve and spread; the balance between these two sides results in the historical macro-trends of violence.

Keywords: Violence; Tilly; concepts; meso-level analysis; empirical research.

Stathis N. Kalyvas is Arnold Wolfers Professor of Political Science at Yale University, where he also directs the Program on Order, Conflict, and Violence. He is the author of *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge University Press, 2006) and *The Rise of Christian Democracy in Europe* (Cornell University Press, 1996), the co-editor of *Order, Conflict, and Violence* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), and the author of over fifty scholarly articles in five languages. His current research focuses on global trends in political violence. In 2008 he was elected in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.