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Two violent trajectories on the micro-macro continuum: emotional tipping-point conflicts, and dispersed attrition conflicts

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Micro-sociology analyzes very short expanses of time and space, macro-sociology long expanses. There is no historical trend from micro to macro techniques of violence or vice versa; but changes result from stalemates of older technique, shifting to either a faster or a longer sequence of violent moves; advantage goes to the side which catches their opponent emotionally off balance. Prolonged stalemated struggles are destructive wars of attrition. Successful revolutions concentrate masses of people on a dramatic showdown in a central place, and can result in a rapid, low-casualty transfer of power. Comparing failed and successful revolutions, the more micro-concentration in time and place, the more likely a rapid tipping point will occur through a shift in emotional domination. But where revolutionary struggle becomes spread out, it turns into civil war, which become especially destructive when outside allies supply weapons to keep it going. Moving along the continuum towards the macro end de-emphasizes emotional turning points and motivates opponents to win by attrition. Moving towards the micro end allows the possibility of a quick and less destructive resolution.

Keywords: violence, civil war, revolution, emotion, turning point

Micro-sociology refers to human action in very short periods of time and small expanses of space. Macro-sociology deals with human action over long periods of time and covering large spaces. This is a continuum; at the micro end, analysis of conversation or emotion that involve rhythms in fractions of seconds; at the macro end, the entire world-system in the *longue durée*; with meso-level phenomena in between. (i.e. the spectrum between Emanuel Schegloff and Immanuel Wallerstein, with room for Norbert Elias and Charles Tilly in-between.) Micro and macro are not ontologically different. We are more likely to use nouns for dealing with macro processes, and to see process when we look at anything in micro detail. Micro is always nested within macro, since surrounding any few moments

in time there are more actions stretching out in time and space. And macro is always composed of micro; it is not different, it is more.

How does this perspective help us to analyze causes and consequences of violence? Macro nouns – state, class, culture, war, revolution – always can be viewed up-close in their micro-processes; but one can argue that it is the connectedness that makes a difference. The unique excitement of a revolutionary moment is the feeling that what is happening *here* is happening among other people gathered *elsewhere*, and that in this far-reaching collective attention the noun-like solidity of the state is up for redefinition. But this can also turn out to be an illusion, as the post-revolutionary period may

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show. Instead of treating this as a philosophical or meta-theoretical issue, let us see what we learn substantively about violent processes at different scales.

1. Micro-situational Violence

Micro-interaction is what is seen in photos and videos, which necessarily capture a small amount of time and space. At the micro-level, the patterns of violence can be summarized as follows (Collins 2008).

When persons are close together, face-to-face, locked into the intersubjectivity of seeing each other's eyes and responding to each other's emotional expressions, anger may be expressed in the build-up of a conflict; but at the moment someone actually becomes violent their expression changes to tension and fear. This is confrontational tension: phenomenologically it produces perceptual distortions; physiologically it generates a racing heart beat, an adrenaline rush that at high levels results in loss of bodily control. For this reason, most close-range violence is incompetent; either the antagonists are unable to get through the barrier of confrontational tension/fear and the fight aborts or stalemates; or if violence happens, it is generally wild and inaccurate, missing its target, hitting the wrong person, sometimes hitting one's own side.

There are five main pathways to circumvent the barrier of confrontational tension. The first and most fundamental is attacking the weak, especially someone who is emotionally dominated. Persons who are successfully violent find a target who is debilitated by high levels of confrontational tension, while keeping their own tension down to a moderate level where they can still operate. Emotional domination does not come primarily from weapons, because weapons are often used incompetently; emotional domination is the intersubjective feature of the interaction, and it precedes most of the physical damage. In riots the most common pattern of successful violence is when a small group of five or six attacks an isolated individual who has fallen to the ground and has their back turned, so that face confrontation no longer exists. A very destructive version at a larger scale is what I have called a forward panic, where an entire group (sometimes a military unit) becomes tangled

up in a human traffic jam or bogged down in passivity, whereupon the other side goes into a frenzied attack and massacres the unresisting enemy.

First pathway can be summarized as: emotional domination, attacking the emotionally weak. *Second pathway*: social support from a coordinated group of fighters, who concentrate more on the intersubjectivity of their mutual action than on confrontation in the face of the opponent. *Third pathway*: fighting in front of an audience tends to make the fighters a social elite, more concerned with what the audience thinks of them, making their opponent a collaborator in the performance. *Fourth pathway*: violence without face confrontation, including striking at a distance, especially with military weapons. Another variant – *fifth pathway* – is a clandestine attack, where the attacker pretends there is no confrontation until the very last minute; this is the technique of suicide bombers, and more traditionally mafia assassins who lure their victim into an unguarded moment and attack at close range and from behind.

These five patterns hold at the micro-level. Micro is what we see in photos. When sociologists turn towards the macro-level, the detail of the situation disappears; what remains are statistics, usually selected on the dependent variable: taking the cases when killing or wounding happens, and matching them with non-situational background markers like race or class. But race does not kill anybody; it is a static factor, persisting across situations (Black 2011). Even when racial antagonism becomes a motive it still has to pass through the eye of the needle, the barrier of confrontational tension. Is it possible to bridge the gap between the operative causes – what happens in the micro-situation – and the aggregate statistical results?

2. Aggregating Techniques of Micro-violence into Macro Statistics

In most confrontational situations, a small number of those present account for virtually all of the violence. What does this imply? On closer investigation, we find the most persistently violent persons have developed distinctive techniques of being violent. Armed robbers learn how to choose situations where they are emotionally dominant, and how to intimidate their vic-

tims by dramatic performances. If they do not learn these techniques, they are unsuccessful in pursuing a career of crime. Highly skilled professionals in violence, such as mafia hit-men, have specialized techniques of surveillance and assassination that they pass along among their members. Mafia techniques are very different than those of street gangs, who are in fact quite incompetent in violence and rely on bluster to intimidate others, and the random chance of occasionally hitting someone. Street gangs avoid going into mafia neighborhoods, since the gangs are mystified by the secrecy with which the mafia operates.

My argument is that aggregate statistics of violence increase when techniques for overcoming confrontational tension are learned and spread by imitation. One recent example is suicide bombing. It was invented in Sri Lanka by the Tamil Tigers, spread to Lebanon, and then more widely throughout the Muslim Middle East and into Africa (Hopgood 2005; Ricolfi 2005). Suicide bombing is the perfect weapon for the low-tech side in asymmetrical war; it is the most cost-effective way of causing damage to the enemy; it is cheap in equipment, yet extremely accurate because the carrier delivers the bomb all the way to the target (Pape 2005). Its main cost is willing bomb-carriers; this helps explain why suicide bombing is popular mainly in regions where human capital is low.

A very different style of violence was invented with the rise of the youth gang, beginning in New York after World War II (Schneider 1999). Before that time, criminal gangs were adults mostly concerned with profit, but as secondary education spread and working-class youth were no longer entering the labor force in their mid-teen years, gangs formed as lower-class social clubs that built their reputation by fighting with each other. Michael Eisner's data on the crime surge from the 1950s to the 1990s suggests that its main cause was the rise of alienated youth culture – that is, a great deal of casual, diffuse violence was popularized along with the prestige of the gang style (Eisner 2008). I mentioned that gangs are not very competent at their violence, and most of it happens so to speak by accident; but that is part of the dramatic appeal of the gang life; and their incompetence at violence makes gang life more survivable for most of its members.

The dissemination of techniques of violence, then, is a mechanism that aggregates micro-techniques into macro-level trends. But what about declining trends? Here the hypothesis is that particular kinds of violence decline when they are countered by techniques on the opposing side. For instance, in the late 1990s the New York Police Department started using a computer system named COMSTAT that immediately updated where crimes were happening in the city, enabling the police department to flood those streets with extra patrols (this system replaced older crime statistics that were gathered on a yearly basis, and were useless for tactical action). COMSTAT effectively moved policing more into the meso-level of the micro-macro continuum. Not all cities have the same resources as New York (35,000 police), but these are the kinds of counter-tactics that have shifted crime rates, in some places more than others. At the same time, police adopted a very strict line on minor violations, which has given rise to more defiance of the police especially by racial minorities (here the shift is to increase pressure in more micro-situations). It is hard to get accurate data on the correlates of police use of violence, but a reasonable hypothesis is that police shootings increase where these tactics of constant petty harassment are used. In this perspective, the crime rate – and the police violence rate – are both products of the back-and-forth escalation and counter-escalation of techniques of violence.

We see a similar pattern of imitating successful forms of violence in the mass school shootings that began in the United States in 1982, and spread as they were more widely publicized. There have always been isolated and alienated youths in schools, but what they learned were the techniques of collecting a hidden arsenal, wearing gear than avoids facial confrontation, and clandestinely springing their attack upon easily dominated victims (Collins 2014). These tactics, widely publicized in the news media when used in schools, have since around 2015 become adopted for attacks in other public places such as sporting events and shopping malls.

3. Meso-level Techniques for Overcoming Confrontational Tension

Coming now to more organized violence, one can read the entire history of military violence as a succession of techniques

for overcoming confrontational tension. Tribal war was largely carried out in face-to-face skirmishes in which both sides did a great deal of shouting but only a few warriors attacked briefly with spears and arrows before running away; in this respect, quite a lot like gang fights. The phalanx, marching together in a tight line, was an invention that created group solidarity; it was most effective when fighting disorganized tribal warriors (as in the case of Caesar's legions in Gaul). When a phalanx fought another phalanx, the result was usually a stalemate unless more complicated tactics were developed; the most important innovation was keeping some troops in reserve to be put into action when the situation was most chaotic. Instead of a single melee, the army was reorganized into segments that could be sent into action at different times. The tendency for confrontational tension to make fighting incompetent in the melee was turned into a strategic advantage by generals like Caesar, who waited until all the engaged troops were disorganized, then launched still-organized formations held in reserve against them. It was a matter of seizing the moment when organization could beat disorganization, by moving up the time continuum from the micro to the meso level.

In the early firearms era, marching into combat was the crucial technique. It kept troops from running away; and since muskets were very inaccurate at more than forty meters, their main effect came from firing simultaneously from a fixed formation as the enemy came near; thus, the outcome of battle depended heavily on trying to terrify the enemy into breaking up their formation. But by World War I, machine guns had become so deadly that marching into battle became suicidal. In 1918, the German army invented a new form of attack; the Germans called it *Stoßtruppen* or *storm troopers*, who were trained to disperse in small groups, hiding in the rough terrain of the battlefield, until they got close inside the enemy lines (Biddle 2004). This style of fighting was quickly imitated by the Western allies; the old technique had ceased to function, while the new one was capable of breaking through static front lines.

Here the innovation was to descend the macro-micro continuum; meso-size masses of troops with heavy weapons produced a stalemate of bloody attrition; this was circumvented by going downward to the level of small, flexible groups of elite troops, relying on high interpersonal morale and local initiative.¹

I will not mention all the kinds of military innovations since World War I, but only stress that all techniques depend upon their *social* effectiveness: that means, reducing confrontational tension on one's own side, while establishing emotional dominance over the enemy, especially by breaking down enemy organization and hence breaking down their morale. In World War II, the blitzkrieg of May 1940 was not so much a technical innovation in using tanks but a way of forcing a huge, unwieldy organization to change its position rapidly. The French army had as many tanks as the Germans, but dispersed among infantry units so that their speed of movement was slowed to that of the foot soldiers they accompanied. The German all-mechanized units achieved a deep breakthrough which turned into a race in which the Allies were constantly trying to reorganize along a new front, but instead collapsed as the effort to shift troops, weapons, and supplies became chaotic. The Battle of France caused relatively few casualties for the numbers involved because the war of momentum was so decisive, and most of the massive French forces were demoralized into surrender as they recognized their own hopeless disorganization. The French army was not demoralized at the time of the initial breakthrough; but during three weeks of failure to get into a defensible position, it felt itself defeated emotionally. Morale is organization; when organizational coordination is lost, morale falls; and vice versa.

There is a lesson here about the speed of movement on the micro-macro continuum: The French army of 1940 was one enormous macro-structure, which limited its speed. The German army split off some semi-autonomous units designed for high speed, a move down the continuum towards the meso level. It is differences in speed that determine the success or

¹ These meso-level techniques can be seen as larger-scale counterparts to the micro-pathways for overcoming confrontational tension. Caesar's tactic of launching reserve troops against disorganized enemies is an upscaled version of micro pathway

no. 1, attacking the weak; the fixed formations of the musket era are the upscaled version of micro pathway no. 2 where the strongest group alignment wins; *Stoßtruppen* are an upscaled version of no.

5, the clandestine stealth attack. I owe these suggestions to an anonymous reviewer.

failure of organized violence, at whichever points along the continuum the difference occurs. In this case, meso-level speed broke down the enemy's organization and morale, into a macro-chaos that can be seen as chains of cascading connected micro-situations.²

4. Micro-concentration or Macro-attrition

The last part of my analysis will weave together two themes that are highly visible in today's large-scale political and military conflicts. One is the combination of guerrilla war and terrorism, which we can understand as a series of innovations in social techniques for fighting on the weaker side in an asymmetrical war. But this also leads to wars becoming drawn out in time and space. The other theme is the difference between tipping-point conflicts, which are sudden shifts in power based on emotional domination, and long, drawn-out attrition wars. Rapid tipping points can happen in military battles, but they are also the mechanism of revolutions, including some fairly peaceful ones; and thus the contrast here encompasses two points along the micro-macro continuum. My point is that the more micro a conflict is (the more concentrated in time and space), the better its chances of being resolved without much damage; the more macro the conflict (the more spread out it is), the more physical damage it produces.

4.1. The Dispersed Battlefield Breeds Terrorism

Let us briefly sketch the history of guerrilla war. The tactic of hit-and-run ambushes against a surprised and undefended enemy is very old, and existed in tribal war before state organization. What distinguishes modern guerrilla warfare is that it is used in resistance against a large-scale, state-organized army, and it combines hit-and-run ambushes with hiding among the civilian population. The term was invented in the 1808–1814 Peninsula War in Spain, where Spanish guerrillas succeeded in tying down very large French forces and thus drained Napoleon's resources. This was also one of the first modern political wars, since efforts to ferret out the guerrillas from among their civilian collaborators resulted in well-publicized massacres,

which stirred up yet further resistance. The pattern was set: both sides mobilizing against each other morally, as a war of competing atrocities. The key point is that the guerrilla war is decentralized, and whenever the advantage to one side is very great – in organization and equipment – the weaker side can continue to fight only by matching, not strength against strength, but temporary and local strength against local weakness.

I have already mentioned that after 1918, the firepower of machine gun became so great that tightly organized frontal assault became suicidal. The result was that all modern armies decentralized into dispersed combat teams, even in large-scale battles (Biddle 2004). As firepower has become even more devastating, and modern transport and delivery systems developed into rockets, jet planes, and helicopters, the battlefield has become increasingly dispersed: rarely are there front lines to conquer or defend, but instead a checkerboard of advanced bases that are supplied either by air – which is very expensive – or by trucks, which are vulnerable to guerrilla attacks. Bits of high-tech can be cheaply adopted by the weaker side, such as improvised explosive devices (IEDs) detonated by mobile phones. This produces the current pattern where guerrillas hide in nearby civilian houses, which become vulnerable to counter-attack by American or other Western troops, setting up atrocities that become part of the recruiting effort and political appeal of the insurgents.

It is only one more step to terrorism, which is guerrilla-style clandestine attacks on weak targets, in this case not hitting military targets, which are capable of fighting back, but attacking civilians. *We* see terrorist attacks on unarmed civilians as atrocities; but the terrorists see exactly the same justification in what *they* do, as a response to what we have done.

Now to come back to the micro/macro perspective. Terrorist tactics and counter-tactics are the result of protracted war fought out over large amounts of time and space. A large amount of space means that the stronger force must spread out, but this creates logistics problems and uncertainty over where an attack will happen. Long amounts of time create

² Of course, new technologies play a role on the material level, and have different material requisites as well as uses to which they can be put. The

key point is how they affect the socio-emotional micro mechanisms of violent antagonism. This is true even when weapons operate on the macro level to produce long-term attrition; but combat rarely ends

with total annihilation of the fighting forces of the conquered side; the breaking point is almost always a shared emotion of futility.

boredom – lots of dead time in which nothing is happening (Ender 2009), which is also an emotional vacuum that guerrillas and terrorists can exploit in order to benefit from surprise. To complete the circle, being surprised also leads to emotional responses that create atrocities, or what are perceived as atrocities; and so both sides continue to feel the moral incentive and justification for continuing the cycle of attack and revenge, precluding any political solution to bring peace. This is a very pessimistic picture, but I will add another aspect that at least gives some favorable moments.

4.2. Concentrated Tipping Points in Revolution and in Battle

Revolutions are spectacular and dramatic events, when they succeed, above all because they are quickly decisive. Their central dynamic is a tipping point. The ingredients are these: a large number of people assemble at a central place: Tahrir Square in Cairo in 2011, Petrograd in 1917, Versailles and then Paris in 1789; Paris again in 1830 and 1848. All the major political actors are concentrated there, and the attention of the rest of the society is focused there as well. The existing regime commands organized force, the army and police, but revolution begins to be possible when troops become emotionally affected by the immediate atmosphere, refuse to use force against the political insurgents, and eventually some go over to their side. This creates a crisis inside the small network of top officials of government and the army. Sometimes the official leader – the Czar in February 1917, King Louis Philippe in 1848 – loses their nerve and abdicates in favor of a royal relative, but the mood of political-emotional low energy spreads so that no one wants to step into the post (Tocqueville 1987). That is an easy tipping point, the top government collapsing and allowing the most prominent insurgents to step into the apparatus of control. Sometimes there are more protracted splits between elite factions; efforts at repression are attempted, but these continue to be resisted as long as the insurgents keep up their focus of attention and emotional resonance, such as the Petrograd Soviet, or the continuing assemblies at Tahrir Square. The key to resistance is in the emotional atmosphere, the sense that the government elite is

split, and that some will eventually decide to shift to the revolutionary side. When this happens, the tipping point is passed; as they shouted in Tahrir Square, “the army and the people are one hand!” (Ketchley 2014).

5. Conclusion

What happens after the tipping point is another important chapter in our analysis of revolutions; as Trotsky said, making a revolution is easy, consolidating it is harder. But I will leave aside the question of who ends up in control after the period of consolidation, and what kind of regime emerges, in order to emphasize a larger analytical contrast: the distinction between concentrated tipping-point conflicts, and dispersed attrition conflicts.

When there is a concentrated focus of attention in one place, there is a possibility that emotional domination will occur; one side becomes an emotional magnet and attracts everyone into its orbit; the other side becomes an emotional drain whose members flee. This tipping-point mechanism happens in small-scale fights, but also in revolutions and in battles. To summarize very briefly the sociology of battle victory and defeat: Wars have both a material side and a morale side; high morale is most effective when it enables an organization to execute rapid maneuvers that break down the enemy organization, hence one-sided battles where one side takes few casualties and the other side has huge losses. But when neither side achieves emotional domination, and both organizations remain at the same level of solidarity or indeed the same rate of decline, war is decided by material factors. It becomes a war of attrition; victory goes to the side with the deepest pockets, the strongest industry, or the most manpower to use up. This is the most costly way to win a war, and in the long run the most demoralizing.

The same set of alternatives applies to revolutions. Revolutions at the outset are much nearer the micro end of the continuum; they contain the potential for establishing emotional domination – either by the insurgents or by the regime – and the conflict will end. But revolutions also can become stalemated, where both sides mobilize equally. In that case, revolution turns into civil war. What determines which way it will go? Rapid-turning-point revolutions happen only where they

are concentrated at a central place; this was the case in Egypt and Tunisia (and Bahrain, where the regime won) (Bramsen 2017). But where the revolution is dispersed, it is impossible to have a rapid resolution; a tipping point in Benghazi is not a tipping point in Tripoli. Once it becomes a dispersed civil war, it also opens the possibility of becoming even more dispersed, as external states and political movements send aid or troops to different factions, guaranteeing that the conflict will go on even longer and more destructively. This is the Syrian scenario, where an attempt to imitate the Egyptian revolution met strong resistance from a regime that was not at all emotionally dominated, leading to the end of peaceful methods and dispersion into a civil war dividing the territory into multiple enclaves. And multi-sided wars are even more destructive and protracted than two-sided civil wars. Add to this the pattern of dispersed combat and asymmetrical weapons that fosters terrorism: the result is the humanitarian nightmare that has shattered Syria and created a huge refugee crisis spreading across Europe.

The main theoretical point is this: Micro is a small amount of time and space; it is not necessarily a small number of people, as huge numbers can be concentrated in a revolutionary moment or a battle. Concentrated conflicts have a chance for rapid and decisive resolution, if emotional domination ensues. But if conflict remains stalemated, it disperses into a macro-conflict; and these are inherently much more destructive, both physically and morally. Humaneness depends on pressing for solutions on the micro end of the continuum.

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