RIS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Civil wars as critical junctures: Conceptual grounding and empirical potential

Kai M. Thaler (iD)

Department of Global Studies, UC Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA, USA
Email: thaler@ucsb.edu

Abstract

Civil wars are not only destructive: they can also generate new, long-lasting social, political, and economic structures and processes. To account for this productive potential and analyse post-conflict outcomes, I argue that we should analyse civil wars as critical junctures. Civil wars can relax structural constraints, opening opportunities for wartime processes to generate changes or to reinforce, rather than transform, the status quo. Changes or stasis may then be locked in by conflict outcomes, creating path dependencies. Studying civil wars as critical junctures allows for a clearer understanding of what variables mattered and interacted at different points in the conflict process, and the varying roles of structure and agency in producing institutional change or reinforcing pre-existing conditions. I explore the potential benefits of a critical juncture approach in the civil wars literature on different aspects of post-conflict politics and illustrate them in analysing the literature on women's empowerment during and after civil wars. Applying the critical junctures framework to civil wars' effects on institutions and socio-behavioural patterns can provide analytical clarity about complex processes and contexts, can facilitate comparison across cases and studies, and draws critical attention both to what civil wars change and to potential pathways not taken.

Keywords: civil war; conflict; critical junctures; gender roles; rebellion; statebuilding

Introduction

Civil war 'has gradually become the most widespread, the most destructive, and now the most characteristic form of organised human violence.'[1] Despite the destruction inherent in civil wars, they may be productive and generative, leading to the creation of new orders and institutions.[2] Civil wars, however, may also durably reinforce the status quo in cases of successful counter-insurgency and incumbent victory, representing temporary breaches in pre-existing structures and hierarchies – breaches that failed to widen to create enduring change.[3] In this sense, I argue, civil wars are critical junctures: moments of possibility in which the long-term institutional trajectory

---

[1]David Armitage, 'Civil war and revolution', *Agora*, 44:2 (2009), pp. 18–22 (p. 18). For data and analysis, see Michael Mann, 'Have wars and violence declined?', *Theory and Society*, 47:1 (2018), pp. 37–60; Thérése Pettersson and Peter Wallensteen, 'Armed conflicts, 1946–2014', *Journal of Peace Research*, 52:4 (2015), pp. 536–50; Andreas Wimmer and Brian Min, 'From empire to nation-state: Explaining wars in the modern world, 1816–2001', *American Sociological Review*, 71:6 (2006), pp. 867–97; Andreas Wimmer and Brian Min, 'The location and purpose of wars around the world: A new global dataset, 1816–2001', *International Interactions*, 35:4 (2009), pp. 390–417.

[2]See Adrian Florea, 'Authority contestation during and after civil war', *Perspectives on Politics*, 16:1 (2018), pp. 149–55.

[3]Christopher Cramer states pithily, 'the conflicts and activities in which violence is involved are not always purely destructive. In destroying, violence can also keep things in place; it can even set in motion change and the construction

of a state and society *can* be rapidly shifted, depending on how the conflict unfolds and is resolved and how it shapes actors' post-conflict behaviour. If civil wars unravel a country's pre-war socio-political fabric, that fabric can be restored, adapted, or pulled apart completely and replaced.

Lower-level conflicts with at least 25 battle deaths per year are the most prevalent form of organised civil conflict,[4] and many rebellions never advance beyond a few initial anti-state attacks.[5] Such small conflicts may create societal changes on a localised scale. My focus, however, is on the potential for civil conflict to create institutional changes to the state and nation or across a large region. I therefore follow Sambanis's definition of civil war as entailing competition between the state and an effective, organised armed resistance group in a sustained violent conflict that causes at least 500 deaths over the course of its first year.[6] Different violence and battle death thresholds may conceptually and empirically affect the analysis of civil wars and their consequences,[7] but this definition means a civil war lasts long enough and involves significant enough violent contestation of state power[8] that wartime social processes and orders and their post-war effects can potentially diverge from the status quo ante.[9]

I first examine the analytical utility of critical juncture analysis and its applicability to the study of civil wars and their consequences. I then discuss how existing literatures touch on aspects of civil wars as critical junctures without explicitly embracing the critical juncture framework. To explore in greater detail how the critical juncture framework can be applied, I focus on the example of civil wars' effect on women's role in politics and society, comparing two major books and discussing how they do and do not align with the critical juncture framework, and what a more complete engagement with the framework would offer. In the conclusion, I discuss how the field may benefit from further research applying critical juncture analysis to the study of civil wars and post-conflict political, social, and economic relations and outcomes.

Critical junctures as concept and analytical tool

Critical junctures were fully conceptually developed by Collier and Collier,[10] building on Lipset and Rokkan.[11] Scholars have since conceptually refined critical junctures and developed methodological principles to study them.[12] Collier and Collier define a critical juncture as 'as a period of

---

of the new'. Christopher Cramer, *Civil War Is Not a Stupid Thing: Accounting for Violence in Developing Countries* (London: Hurst & Company, 2006), p. 279.

[4] Pettersson and Wallensteen, 'Armed conflicts, 1946–2014'.

[5] Janet I. Lewis, 'How does ethnic rebellion start?', *Comparative Political Studies*, 50:10 (2017), pp. 1420–50; Janet I. Lewis, *How Insurgency Begins: Rebel Group Formation in Uganda and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[6] Nicholas Sambanis, 'What is civil war? Conceptual and empirical complexities of an operational definition', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 48:6 (2004), pp. 814–58.

[7] Noel Anderson and Alec Worsnop, 'Fatality thresholds, causal heterogeneity, and civil war research: Reconsidering the link between narcotics and conflict', *Political Science Research and Methods*, 7:1 (2019), pp. 85–105; Sambanis, 'What is civil war?'.

[8] See Nicholas Sambanis and Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl, 'Sovereignty rupture as a central concept in quantitative measures of civil war', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 63:6 (2019), pp. 1542–78.

[9] Anastasia Shesterinina, 'Civil war as a social process: Actors and dynamics from pre- to post-war', *European Journal of International Relations*, 28:3 (2022), pp. 538–62; Paul Staniland, 'States, insurgents, and wartime political orders', *Perspectives on Politics*, 10:2 (2012), pp. 243–64; Elisabeth Jean Wood, 'The social processes of civil war: The wartime transformation of social networks', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 11:1 (2008), pp. 539–61.

[10] Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena: Critical Junctures, the Labor Movement, and Regime Dynamics in Latin America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

[11] Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan, 'Cleavage structures, party systems, and voter alignments: An introduction', in Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan (eds), *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives* (New York: Free Press, 1967), pp. 1–64.

[12] Giovanni Capoccia, 'Critical junctures', in Orfeo Fioretos, Tulia Falleti, and Adam Sheingate (eds), *Oxford Handbook of Historical Institutionalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 89–106; David Collier and Gerardo L. Munck (eds), *Critical Junctures and Historical Legacies: Insights and Methods for Comparative Social Science* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022).

significant change, which typically occurs in distinct ways in different countries (or in other units of analysis) and which is hypothesized to produce distinct legacies'[13] – though the framework can also be fruitfully applied to single case studies, with scholars focusing on cases in which a marked divergence from past patterns is noted.[14] Critical juncture analyses often focus on *change*, with Slater and Simmons arguing that critical junctures are 'periods in history when the presence or absence of a specified causal force pushes multiple cases onto divergent long-term pathways, or pushes a single case onto a new political trajectory that diverges significantly from the old'.[15]

Another school of thought, however, argues that change and divergent outcomes are less important than the *contingency* and *opportunities for agency* that emerge when a critical juncture opens.[16] Soifer's specification of critical junctures' causal logic focuses on the presence or absence of permissive and productive conditions.[17] Permissive conditions loosen structural constraints, enabling possible change, while productive conditions are those that, when permissive conditions are present, 'produce the outcome or range of outcomes that are then reproduced after the permissive conditions disappear and the juncture comes to a close'.[18] Capoccia and Kelemen likewise emphasise that critical junctures are 'relatively short periods of time during which there is a substantially heightened probability that agents' choices will affect the outcome of interest'.[19]

Soifer deems it a 'crisis without change or missed opportunity' when permissive conditions are present but major, divergent change does not occur.[20] I follow Capoccia and Kelemen, however, in still viewing as critical junctures cases where permissive conditions were present and change was possible but did not occur.[21] Rapid, major change is possible, but the contingency of a critical juncture means it may also revert to and reinforce the status quo ante: 'Hence, *change is not a necessary element of a critical juncture*.'[22] Even analyses focused on divergence should still consider counterfactuals or negative cases where change did not occur under similar conditions. Whether focused on change or the potential for it, critical junctures analyses examine the interaction of both exogenous and endogenous factors and processes and analyse both pre-existing and new structures and how actors interact with them.[23]

As Figure 1 shows, critical junctures have six elements identified by Collier and Collier and Soifer.[24] *Antecedent conditions* are the pre-existing state of affairs and the basis against which change must be assessed, with special attention to 'critical antecedents' that may exert causal influence independently of or in interaction with productive conditions during the critical juncture.[25] A cleavage or *crisis* developing from the antecedent conditions provides the permissive conditions to open the critical juncture and create possibilities for change. *Mechanisms of production* are the factors that shape the critical juncture and the change that might occur. The *outcome of the critical juncture* is the end-point at which the permissive conditions that opened the critical juncture are

---

[13]Collier and Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena*, p. 29.

[14]Paul Pierson, *Politics in Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Dan Slater and Erica Simmons, 'Informative regress: Critical antecedents in comparative politics', *Comparative Political Studies*, 43:7 (2010), pp. 886–917.

[15]Slater and Simmons, 'Informative regress', p. 888.

[16]See especially James Mahoney, *The Legacies of Liberalism: Path Dependence and Political Regimes in Central America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

[17]Hillel Soifer, 'The causal logic of critical junctures', *Comparative Political Studies*, 45:12 (2012), pp. 1572–97.

[18]Ibid., p. 1573.

[19]Giovanni Capoccia and R. Daniel Kelemen, 'The study of critical junctures: Theory, narrative, and counterfactuals in historical institutionalism', *World Politics*, 59:3 (2007), pp. 341–369 (p. 348).

[20]Soifer, 'Causal logic of critical junctures', pp. 1574–5, 1580.

[21]Capoccia and Kelemen, 'Study of critical junctures'.

[22]Ibid., p. 352, emphasis added.

[23]David Collier and Gerardo L. Munck, 'Introduction: Tradition and innovation in critical juncture research', in David Collier and Gerardo L. Munck (eds), *Critical Junctures and Historical Legacies: Insights and Methods for Comparative Social Science* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), pp. 1–29 (p. 9).

[24]Collier and Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena*, pp. 30–1; Soifer, 'Causal logic of critical junctures', p. 1579.

[25]Slater and Simmons, 'Informative regress'.

Figure 1. Elements in a critical juncture sequence.

no longer present and a new status quo solidifies, reducing contingency. *Mechanisms of reproduction* are processes reinforcing and perpetuating the critical juncture's legacy after the juncture is closed, helping lock in the outcome path and creating path dependency.[26] Finally, the *trajectory of the legacy* is the stability over time of the critical juncture's key outcome(s), continuing until the legacy ends and the critical juncture's outcome ceases to outweigh more proximate causes related to dependent variables of interest.

Other theoretical and methodological approaches have been used to study the causes and outcomes of institutional change or the historical legacies of major societal events. In recent decades, there has been an increase in studies of the historical legacies of major events and persistent effects. This is often within quantitative research frameworks focused on statistical causal inference, variously discussed as quantitative history,[27] historical persistence research,[28] or historical political economy.[29] Such research tends to focus heavily on longer-term effects and a particular hypothesised mechanism producing them, which can be quite valuable. A full critical junctures approach, however, gives greater, more equal attention to multiple points in a historical process, examining what created possibilities for change in the first place and mechanisms producing change or stasis—not only mechanisms of persistence and isolating causal effects[30]—and can be pursued either qualitatively or quantitatively.

The critical juncture framework has been applied to explain the outcomes of a range of potentially transformative processes and events, including state formation, interstate power relations, regime change and type, political parties' and party systems' formation, economic development, and cultural change.[31] Civil wars are therefore far from unique in being critical junctures, though I argue that they fit the framework well, and that by directly challenging both the existing state's legitimacy and monopoly on violence, they may be particularly well suited to generating the potential for durable changes to institutions and behaviour.[32]

Civil wars within a critical juncture framework

How do civil wars fit as critical junctures within the current literature's definitions and applications? The idea of critical junctures as crises or 'unsettled times'[33] easily fits civil wars. Revisiting Collier and Collier's definition of a critical juncture as 'a period of significant change, which typ-

---

[26]E.g. Mahoney, *Legacies of Liberalism*; Pierson, *Politics in Time*.

[27]See discussion in Gerardo L. Munck, 'Quantitative methods and critical junctures: Strengths and limits of quantitative history', in David Collier and Gerardo L. Munck (eds), *Critical Junctures and Historical Legacies* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), pp. 183–205.

[28]Alexandra Cirone and Thomas B. Pepinsky, 'Historical persistence', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 25:1 (2022), pp. 241–59.

[29]Volha Charnysh, Eugene Finkel, and Scott Gehlbach, 'Historical political economy: Past, present, and future', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 26:1 (2023), pp. 175–91.

[30]See also Munck, 'Quantitative methods and critical junctures'.

[31]Collier and Munck, 'Introduction'.

[32]Other critical junctures may in fact shape civil wars themselves, like economic crisis weakening the state and sparking rebellion; technological developments and variation in access to them shortening or lengthening civil wars; or the end of international power struggles like the Cold War cutting off sponsorship of rebels and governments and facilitating war resolutions.

[33]Capoccia, 'Critical junctures', p. 89.

ically occurs in distinct ways in different countries (or in other units of analysis) and which is hypothesized to produce distinct legacies',[34] civil wars clearly match these criteria, so long as we specify them as periods of significant *potential* change. As Skocpol highlights, even in civil wars resulting in social revolutions, many institutions may remain unchanged.[35] Civil wars do represent a significant change from 'peacetime' life and vary widely across and within countries in the salient cleavages and motivations between belligerent groups and governments, levels of violence, technologies and organisation of fighting forces, conflict outcomes, and other factors.[36] They can affect demography, economic capacity and structures, domestic and international political institutions and relations, political behaviour, cultural norms, and other political, social, and economic factors.

Civil wars are often branded as complex in the issues, actors, and behaviours involved in them,[37] and, in line with conceptualisations of critical junctures, civil wars are characterised by contingency and potentially heightened agency: single battles or strategic choices may mark clear turning points in the trajectory of the conflict and the country at large, and the qualities of individual or collective leaders loom large in decision-making, organisation, and the fate of belligerent groups.[38] The rationalist literature on civil wars highlights that, while constrained by structural factors, information asymmetries, and uncertainty, leaders' decisions still play a central role in determining moments of war onset, change, and resolution.[39] Within civil wars, leaders have choices of ideologies and methods for mobilisation and political planning, choices over strategy and tactics, decisions about what goals to pursue, and movements' fortunes may rise or fall based on leaders' choices or exogenous events.[40] Exogenous shocks like natural disasters can interact with processes and institutions endogenous to civil wars, reshaping outcomes in ways that would not have occurred if a civil war were not ongoing.[41] Civil wars and their processes also produce distinct social and institutional legacies across and between conflict-affected countries or regions and units that were not affected by conflict or in which wartime processes took a different form.[42] While Wood highlights how

---

[34]Collier and Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena*, p. 29.

[35]Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

[36]Stathis N. Kalyvas, 'Civil wars', in Carles Boix and Susan C. Stokes (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 416–34; Stathis N. Kalyvas and Laia Balcells, 'International system and technologies of rebellion: How the end of the Cold War shaped internal conflict', *American Political Science Review*, 104:3 (2010), pp. 415–29; Joakim Kreutz, 'How and when armed conflicts end: Introducing the UCDP Conflict Termination dataset', *Journal of Peace Research*, 47:2 (2010), pp. 243–50; Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson, 'Rage against the machines: Explaining outcomes in counterinsurgency wars', *International Organization*, 63:1 (2009), pp. 67–106; Sambanis, 'What is civil war?'; Jeremy M. Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). In some cases of limited state influence and capacity and pervasive violence, however, civil war may be more a continuation of prior patterns of violence, rather than a clear change, like in Chad. See Marielle Debos, *Living by the Gun in Chad: Combatants, Impunity and State Formation* (London: Zed Books, 2016).

[37]Johan Brosché, Desirée Nilsson, and Ralph Sundberg, 'Conceptualizing civil war complexity', *Security Studies*, 32:1 (2023), pp. 137–65.

[38]E.g. Kristin M. Bakke, Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, and Lee J. M. Seymour, 'A plague of initials: Fragmentation, cohesion, and infighting in civil wars', *Perspectives on Politics*, 10:2 (2012), pp. 265–83; Michael C. Horowitz, Allan C. Stam, and Cali M. Ellis, *Why Leaders Fight* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Jenna Jordan, 'When heads roll: Assessing the effectiveness of leadership decapitation', *Security Studies*, 18:4 (2009), pp. 719–55; Alyssa K. Prorok, 'Leader incentives and civil war outcomes', *American Journal of Political Science*, 60:1 (2016), pp. 70–84; Irena L. Sargsyan and Andrew Bennett, 'Discursive emotional appeals in sustaining violent social movements in Iraq, 2003–11', *Security Studies*, 25:4 (2016), pp. 608–45.
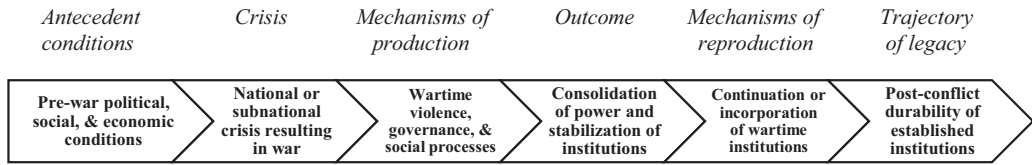
[39]E.g. James D. Fearon, 'Rationalist explanations for war', *International Organization*, 49:3 (1995), pp. 379–414; Barbara F. Walter, 'Bargaining failures and civil war', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 12:1 (2009), pp. 243–61.

[40]Peter Krause, *Rebel Power: Why National Movements Compete, Fight, and Win* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017).

[41]Kyle Beardsley and Brian McQuinn, 'Rebel groups as predatory organizations: The political effects of the 2004 tsunami in Indonesia and Sri Lanka', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 53:4 (2009), pp. 624–45.

[42]Christopher Blattman, 'From violence to voting: War and political participation in Uganda', *American Political Science Review*, 103:2 (2009), pp. 231–47; Scott Gates, Håvard Hegre, Håvard Mokleiv Nygård, and Håvard Strand, 'Development consequences of armed conflict', *World Development*, 40:9 (2012), pp. 1713–22; Håvard Hegre and Håvard Mokleiv Nygård, 'Governance and conflict relapse', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 59:6 (2015), pp. 984–1016; Shelley X. Liu, *Governing after War: Rebel Victories and Post-war Statebuilding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024); Eric Selbin, *Modern Latin American*

Antecedent conditions	Crisis	Mechanisms of production	Outcome	Mechanisms of reproduction	Trajectory of legacy
Pre-war political, social, & economic conditions	National or subnational crisis resulting in war	Wartime violence, governance, & social processes	Consolidation of power and stabilization of institutions	Continuation or incorporation of wartime institutions	Post-conflict durability of established institutions

Figure 2. Elements of civil wars in a critical juncture sequence.

civil wars transform social networks,[43] they can also affect formal and informal political and economic institutions and relations during and after the conflict, which may themselves reshape social networks.

The potential for civil wars to reinforce preexisting institutions or produce changes in them does not depend on the outcome of the war. Incumbent victory can foreclose change, but incumbents can also make lasting reforms in response to conflicts. Rebel victory can result in statebuilding and societal transformation but does not always produce it. Stalemates and negotiated settlements can institutionalise new domestic power balances or simply incorporate new elites into the existing system.

Civil wars may thus be critical junctures for countries or regions in the macro sense of opening possibilities for change, but at the more concrete level, only in some particularly intense civil wars are all aspects of society contested or affected. Most civil wars will constitute critical junctures for only some institutions or socio-behavioural patterns; which ones are subject to potential change is in part a product of the specific issues rebels seek to change and the populations each belligerent mobilises for their cause, but unintended changes may also take place. As discussed below, even when women's empowerment has not been a specific war aim of rebels or the government in a civil war, it has resulted through several mechanisms.[44] This means that in applying a critical juncture framework researchers must be clear about which aspects of politics and society they believe were or might have been changed by civil war processes.

Application of the critical juncture framework

Not all civil wars research is concerned with institutional processes and outcomes, but studies seeking to understand how civil wars affect social, political, or economic institutions and broad socio-behavioural patterns can productively apply a critical juncture framework by accounting for each of element of a critical juncture, from antecedents to end to legacies. Figure 2 shows how different aspects of civil wars (within the arrows) may match up to the elements of critical junctures (the labels above). One must also choose dependent variables of interest that may be produced by a specific wartime process to trace that process's potential impact and how it might create path dependencies shaping post-conflict political, social, or economic life.

Some research on a state and society's general pre-war background is always necessary, but the dependent variable(s) of interest will determine what antecedents are relevant to closely examine and trace through the critical juncture. The escalation from a pre-conflict status quo to violent contestation of state power marks a permissive condition that can also open the possibility for major, rapid, and durable change,[45] especially if rebels are seeking institutional change and not

---

Revolutions (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999); Kai M. Thaler, 'From insurgent to incumbent: State building and service provision after rebel victory in civil wars', PhD diss., Harvard University (2018); Barbara F. Walter, 'Why bad governance leads to repeat civil war', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 59:7 (2015), pp. 1242–72.

[43] Wood, 'Social processes of civil war'.

[44] Marie E. Berry, *War, Women, and Power: From Violence to Mobilization in Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Aili Mari Tripp, *Women and Power in Postconflict Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[45] See also Shesterinina, 'Civil war as a social process'.

only a change of political leadership. One overarching productive condition for change is sufficient rebel power to potentially (a) carve out significant areas of influence in which to exercise rebel governance;[46] (b) force the state into significant policy changes or concessions; or (c) topple the existing government and then pursue desired institutional changes. If rebels are weak from the beginning and never able to call the incumbent's control and legitimacy into question, there is little potential for any change, leaving antecedent conditions largely untroubled and failing to open a critical juncture.

The specific objects of institutional contestation or possible reform depend on rebel and incumbent goals and strength, with researchers then focusing on a particular outcome or outcomes of interest. The outcome of the critical juncture is the set of institutions that are produced or reinforced by wartime processes, while the critical juncture ends not necessarily with the termination of the civil war, but when the political power balance is consolidated sufficiently that institutions stabilise. The mechanisms of reproduction are those institutions or institutional changes that emerged or were reified during wartime and persist after the conflict has ended, continuing to shape further policy and practice. These institutions or changes generate continued downstream consequences until another crisis or civil war creates a critical juncture that once again opens the possibility for rapid and major institutional change, disrupting the first critical juncture's legacy.

Different types of civil war resolutions might reinforce and reproduce wartime processes or solidify new institutions, thereby inducing variation in downstream structural, policy, and behavioural effects. Institutions the government or rebels reinforce, build, or change may have lasting effects regardless of the ultimate war outcome, however. Incumbents defeat many rebel movements early on or reach peace agreements in which rebel leaders are co-opted, but incumbents' mobilisation efforts or the integration of former rebels into the state and society can still have lasting effects.[47] Rebel governance, meanwhile, may have lasting political and institutional effects on civilian life in regions of rebel influence, even if rebels are ultimately defeated.[48]

A definitive end to a civil war also is not necessary for the critical juncture to have closed, since the structural contingency and opportunities presented by conflict may close and stabilise while conflict persists at a low intensity or without any formal resolution.[49] Southern Sudan, for instance, experienced durable institutional changes due to its civil war against the government in Khartoum, which in the 1990s and early 2000s had settled into a stalemate and de facto southern independence before formal independence in 2011,[50] a situation that has applied in other de facto states.[51] The hurting stalemate that developed in eastern Ukraine's civil war after 2014 led to major institutional changes in the Ukrainian military and increased the proportion of the population with combat experience and strongly nationalist sentiments, offering major advantages when Russia launched a full-scale invasion in 2022.[52]

It should, therefore, be possible to undertake a critical juncture analysis tracing institutions through a civil war no matter the war's resolution. Doing so can make clearer how civil wars affected

---

[46]E.g. Ana Arjona, Nelson Kasfir, and Zachariah Cherian Mampilly (eds), *Rebel Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Zachariah Mampilly, *Rebel Rulers: Insurgent Governance and Civilian Life during Civil War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

[47]E.g. Lewis, *How Insurgency Begins*.

[48]Reyko Huang, *The Wartime Origins of Democratization: Civil War, Rebel Governance, and Political Regimes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Yuichi Kubota, 'Imagined statehood: Wartime rebel governance and post-war subnational identity in Sri Lanka', *World Development*, 90:2 (2017), pp. 199–212.

[49]E.g. Cyanne E. Loyle and Ilayda B. Onder, 'The legacies of rebel rule in Southeast Turkey', *Comparative Political Studies*, 57:11 (2024), pp. 1771–803.

[50]E.g. Øystein H. Rolandsen, *Guerrilla Government: Political Changes in the Southern Sudan during the 1990s* (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2005).

[51]Adrian Florea, 'Rebel governance in de facto states', *European Journal of International Relations*, 26:4 (2020), pp. 1004–31.

[52]Dominique Arel and Jesse Driscoll, *Ukraine's Unnamed War: Before the Russian Invasion of 2022* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023); Adrian Bonenberger, 'Ukraine's military pulled itself out of the ruins of 2014', *Foreign Policy* (9 May 2022), available at: {https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/05/09/ukraine-military-2014-russia-us-training/}.

different aspects of politics and society; which variables or mechanisms shaped these effects; and the timing, tempo, and duration[53] of these effects or interactions. And since civil war processes do not always unfold in a linear manner, applying the critical juncture framework helps specify when, exactly, institutional contestation or change was solidified and how it was reproduced over time.

Civil wars research, critical junctures, and post-war developments

The existing mainstream literature on civil wars – and security studies more broadly[54] – has tended not to apply the critical juncture framework,[55] despite many studies across issue areas alluding to institutional and social disruptions and change. Discrete moments may be discussed as critical junctures within a civil war, and rebel leaders themselves may use the term to refer to a particular battle or shift in operations. For example, Darfurian leader and Sudan Liberation Army adviser Sharif Harir described the opening of new operations in North Darfur to Roessler as 'a "critical juncture" as "there was no government of Sudan presence" in the region'. While this may have been a turning point in the conflict, it was not a critical juncture in the scholarly sense, but rather a strategic change without clear institutional consequences.

More accurately in academic terms, Ugandan scholar Joe Oloka-Onyango saw the country's civil war and National Resistance Army rebel victory as a critical juncture for national political development, stating:

> It is highly unlikely that the Ugandan people will ever again have the opportunity to revisit the historical experience of tragedy and crisis that we have lived through, and to attempt to make amends and reconstruct the constitutional framework of governance that we live under. In short, should the current exercise prove a failure, it is doubtful that another opportunity shall present itself with such varied meeting of the necessary social, political and economic factors to allow for as serious a consideration of the varied issues involved.[56]

I now survey existing literatures and how analyses of civil wars and their consequences align with the definition of critical junctures but usually do not apply a critical juncture framework, noting ways in which a critical juncture analysis might enrich existing works.

Civil wars and regime durability

Scholars of regime durability have recently focused on how wartime institutions and experiences may contribute to stronger, more cohesive single-party or competitive authoritarian regimes following rebel victory in a civil war.[57] Sustained and successful ideologically motivated violent struggle destroys alternative power centres in society, creates in-group cohesion within the rebel

---

[53] Anna Grzymala-Busse, 'Time will tell? Temporality and the analysis of causal mechanisms and processes', *Comparative Political Studies*, 44:9 (2010), pp. 1267–97.

[54] Etel Solingen and Wilfred Wan, 'Critical junctures, developmental pathways, and incremental change in security institutions', in Orfeo Fioretos, Tulia G. Falleti, and Adam Sheingate (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Historical Institutionalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 553–71.

[55] For exceptions, see Berry, *War, Women, and Power*; Filip Reyntjens, 'Path dependence and critical junctures: Three decades of interstate conflict in the African Great Lakes region', *Conflict, Security and Development*, 20:6 (2020), pp. 747–62.

[56] Joe Oloka-Onyango, 'Judicial power and constitutionalism in Uganda: A historical perspective', in Mahmood Mamdani and Joe Oloka-Onyango (eds), *Uganda: Studies in Living Conditions, Popular Movements, and Constitutionalism* (Vienna: JEP, 1993), pp. 463–517 (p. 513).

[57] Jean Lachapelle, Steven Levitsky, Lucan A. Way, and Adam E. Casey, 'Social revolution and authoritarian durability', *World Politics*, 72:4 (2020), pp. 557–600; Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Revolution and Dictatorship: The Violent Origins of Durable Authoritarianism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022); Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, 'Beyond patronage: Violent struggle, ruling party cohesion, and authoritarian durability', *Perspectives on Politics*, 10:4 (2012), pp. 869–89; Terrence Lyons, 'From victorious rebels to strong authoritarian parties: Prospects for post-war democratization', *Democratization*, 23:6 (2016), pp. 1026–41; Terrence Lyons, 'The importance of winning: Victorious insurgent groups and authoritarian politics', *Comparative Politics*, 48:2 (2016), pp. 167–84.

organisation-turned-ruling-party, generates strong ties between leaders and the security forces, and leaves powerful security apparatuses.[58] While not explicitly discussed as critical junctures, it is clear in these accounts that civil wars and the need to organise for violent struggle entail both the destruction of old socio-political institutions and the construction of new ones, potentially creating long-lasting legacies locked in and reproduced after rebel victory. Civil conflict, however, may also result in regime durability if incumbents win, since Slater argues that moments of crisis and threats of subaltern insurgency may forge new and durable counter-revolutionary alliances and institutions among the state and societal elites, creating new types of durable authoritarian regimes.[59] A critical juncture framework could help clarify which conditions are more likely to produce regime durability when rebels win versus those that apply when incumbents win.

García-Ponce and Wantchekon, meanwhile, explicitly argue that African political independence was a critical juncture in which the independence movement's form shaped long-term regime trajectories: countries with urban anti-colonial protest movements more likely to be democratic and countries with rural insurgencies more likely to become autocratic.[60] Their focus, however, is on quantitative causal identification rather than on elements of the hypothesised process and mechanisms, which could be foregrounded by applying the critical juncture framework and would help show how the process unfolded in specific cases.

Civil wars, statebuilding, and governance

Similarly, scholars of statebuilding have considered the potential role of civil wars in shaping longer-term statebuilding trajectories, though only sometimes adopting a critical junctures approach. Despite the large literature on the role of interstate war in state formation or long-term statebuilding, consideration of civil wars' effects has been more limited in this 'bellicist' literature, with mixed results.[61]

Modern statebuilding and institutional change have tended to follow a 'punctuated equilibrium' model of long periods of stasis and critical moments of rapid evolution,[62] yet Slater and Vu are rare in discussing statebuilding as a product of critical junctures.[63] Both argue that the post-1945 moment of rapid state formation, as Japanese and European colonialism were retreating from East and Southeast Asia, was a critical juncture. For Slater, the varying intensity of contention and threats from the masses led to divergent authoritarian statebuilding patterns in Southeast Asia, while for Vu, variation in intra-elite and elite–mass relations led Asian states down divergent developmental paths depending on accommodation or confrontation between these collective elite and

---

[58]Killian Clarke, 'Revolutionary violence and counterrevolution', *American Political Science Review*, 117:4 (2023), pp. 1344–60; Lachapelle et al., 'Social revolution'; Levitsky and Way, 'Beyond patronage'; Levitsky and Way, *Revolution and Dictatorship*.

[59]Dan Slater, *Ordering Power: Contentious Politics and Authoritarian Leviathans in Southeast Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Dan Slater, 'Violent origins of authoritarian variation: Rebellion type and regime type in cold war Southeast Asia', *Government and Opposition*, 55:1 (2020), pp. 21–40.

[60]Omar García-Ponce and Leonard Wantchekon, 'Critical junctures: Independence movements and democracy in Africa', *American Journal of Political Science*, 68:4 (2024), pp. 1266–85.

[61]Emizet F. Kisangani and Jeffrey Pickering, 'Rebels, rivals, and post-colonial state-building: Identifying bellicist influences on state extractive capability', *International Studies Quarterly*, 58:1 (2014), pp. 187–98; Bruce D. Porter, *War and the Rise of the State: The Military Foundations of Modern Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1994); Karen A. Rasler and William R. Thompson, *War and State Making: The Shaping of the Global Powers* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989); Slater, *Ordering Power*; Cameron G. Thies, 'War, rivalry, and state building in Latin America', *American Journal of Political Science*, 49:3 (2005), pp. 451–65; Cameron G. Thies, 'Public violence and state building in Central America', *Comparative Political Studies*, 39:10 (2006), pp. 1263–82; Tuong Vu, *Paths to Development in Asia: South Korea, Vietnam, China, and Indonesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[62]Stephen D. Krasner, 'Approaches to the state: Alternative conceptions and historical dynamics', *Comparative Politics*, 16:2 (1984), pp. 223–46.

[63]Slater, *Ordering Power*; Vu, *Paths to Development*.

mass actors.[64] Both authors focus on civil war or the threat of it as a potential occurrence within a broader regional critical juncture, but not on civil war itself as a critical juncture. This is despite the crucial role of civil war and insurgent threats in shaping subsequent domestic political and economic trajectories in their accounts. Threats led to the formation of strong counter-revolutionary alliances that built state power in some countries through and after incumbent victories and successful suppression of subaltern movements,[65] while rebel victories from below also stimulated statebuilding by installing governments focused on transforming their countries in line with left-wing ideologies.[66]

Using a historical political economy approach (without discussing critical junctures), Paglayan similarly finds that civil wars can result in statebuilding by leading elites to expand education systems to build obedience, producing lasting changes in primary school enrolment; Paglayan principally examines cases of incumbent victory, though includes a few cases of rebel victory, too.[67] As Paglayan acknowledges,[68] the focus on causal identification in her cross-national statistical analysis does little to illuminate mechanisms; but while her brief case study of educational expansion after civil war in Chile provides an excellent discussion of antecedent conditions related to education and examines subnational variation and alternative explanations, it offers less evidence on the process of elite preference change and how those beliefs were reinforced over time, which a critical junctures approach would bring to the fore.

Dorman more specifically examines the role of rebellion in shaping statebuilding trajectories, implicitly treating civil wars as critical junctures and the ideas, institutions, and experiences of rebel organisations during war as generating particular statebuilding strategies.[69] Her study has been followed by more recent scholarship combining the rebel governance, regime type, and statebuilding literatures to build a research agenda on rebel victory and its impacts. Most studies have thus far not adopted a critical junctures approach, even though they highlight divergences in security force organisation, governance, and repression of different regions and populations, comparing subnationally and across countries experiencing rebel victory.[70] Liu in particular highlights how rebels' wartime distribution of supporters and enemies shaped rebel governance institutions and post-victory patterns of repression and redistribution,[71] though a critical junctures approach could clarify the sequencing of elements in the causal processes she is examining, more easily facilitating application or testing by other scholars.

Thaler explicitly describes civil wars as critical junctures, comparing three victorious rebel organisations that emerged in similar structural circumstances in Liberia, Nicaragua, and Uganda,[72] but he fails to analyse each element of the critical junctures, which I denote in brackets below. Thaler argues that the breakdown of pre-existing state institutions [*antecedent conditions*] during the civil war [*crisis*] created the scope in each case for wide-ranging institutional change if leaders and movements were ideologically inclined to pursue it but that where leaders lacked the

---

[64]Slater, *Ordering Power*; Vu, *Paths to Development*.

[65]Slater, *Ordering Power*.

[66]Ibid.; Vu, *Paths to Development*.

[67]Agustina Paglayan, 'Education or indoctrination? The violent origins of public school systems in an era of state-building', *American Political Science Review*, 116:4 (2022), pp. 1242–57.

[68]Ibid., pp. 1250–4.

[69]Sara Rich Dorman, 'Post-liberation politics in Africa: Examining the political legacy of struggle', *Third World Quarterly*, 27:6 (2006), pp. 1085–101.

[70]Christopher Day and Michael Woldemariam, 'From rebelling to ruling: Insurgent victory and state capture in Africa', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 47:5 (2024), pp. 476–501; Shelley X. Liu, 'Control, coercion, and cooptation: How rebels govern after winning civil war', *World Politics*, 74:1 (2022), pp. 37–76; Liu, *Governing after War*; Philip A. Martin, 'Insurgent armies: Military obedience and state formation after rebel victory', *International Security*, 46:3 (2022), pp. 87–127; Enrique Wedgwood Young, 'Theorizing the influence of wartime legacies on political stability after rebel victories', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 46:5 (2023), pp. 703–27.

[71]Liu, *Governing after War*.

[72]Thaler, 'From insurgent to incumbent'.

ideational drive to exercise agency and try to implement it [*productive conditions*], there was less divergence from the status quo. He argues that rebel leaders' varying ideals and goals led them to create different internal institutions and relations with civilians during their rebellions; these generated self-reinforcing patterns [*mechanisms of production*], crystallising and carrying over after victorious rebels controlled the state [*outcome*] into statebuilding and service provision efforts [*mechanisms of reproduction*], resulting in either limited statebuilding and private accumulation of public resources or efforts to build infrastructural power and deliver public services, with varying durability over time [*trajectory of legacy*]. In Nicaragua, one interviewee highlighted how rebel victory opened 'the opportunity to construct a diversity and quantity of social organizations greater than the country had ever had', alongside new state institutions and development projects spread throughout the national territory.[73] By contrast, in Liberia, there were high hopes that rebel leader Charles Taylor and his forces would fulfil promises of development once in power, with an ex-rebel commander saying 'We were expecting that to happen, to build roads and schools and things, but it didn't happen that way. Charles Taylor only focused on war … his only plan was to rule the country as president.'[74] A more structured critical juncture analysis could potentially demonstrate more clearly and convincingly how, exactly, rebel ideology and leaders' agency interacted with antecedent conditions or mattered more than them in each case, and it could make it more feasible for other scholars to test or apply Thaler's theory in other settings and with different methods.

Rebel-to-party transitions

Though long a subject of scholarly interest,[75] rebel-to-party transitions have increasingly been analysed with sophisticated data gathering and new theories.[76] These works look at rebels' transitions into political parties when they win civil wars, but also how rebels adapt to electoral politics during and after negotiated settlements.[77] Zaks links decisions about wartime rebel organisational structure to post-conflict party building patterns,[78] while Sindre finds that wartime institutions continue exerting influence within parties well after the transformation.[79]

Zeng examines party origins more generally, but does analyse party development, institutional strength, and public goods provision when in government in a critical juncture framework, with special attention to civil wars: he argues that successfully revolting against the state requires building mass linkages and institutional strength, with a wider support base incentivising public goods provision and institutional strength facilitating it.[80] Zeng admittedly focuses more on mechanisms

---

[73]Thaler, 'From insurgent to incumbent', p. 114.

[74]Thaler, 'From insurgent to incumbent', p. 157.

[75]Kalowatie Deonandan, David Close, and Gary Prevost (eds), *From Revolutionary Movements to Political Parties: Cases from Latin America and Africa* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Carrie Manning, 'Constructing opposition in Mozambique: Renamo as political party', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 24:1 (1998), pp. 161–89; Carrie Manning, 'Party-building on the heels of war: El Salvador, Bosnia, Kosovo and Mozambique', *Democratization*, 14:2 (2007), pp. 253–72; Jeroen de Zeeuw (ed.), *From Soldiers to Politicians: Transforming Rebel Movements after Civil War* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2007).

[76]John Ishiyama and Michael Widmeier, 'From "bush bureaucracies" to electoral competition: What explains the political success of rebel parties after civil wars?', *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 30:1 (2020), pp. 42–63; Aila M. Matanock, 'Using violence, seeking votes: Introducing the Militant Group Electoral Participation (MGEP) dataset', *Journal of Peace Research*, 53:6 (2016), pp. 845–85; Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs and Sophia Hatz, 'Rebel-to-party transformations in civil war peace processes 1975–2011', *Democratization*, 23:6 (2016), pp. 990–1008; Sherry Zaks, 'Do we know it when we see it? (Re)-conceptualizing rebel-to-party transition', *Journal of Peace Research*, 61:2 (2024), pp. 246–62.

[77]Sarah Zukerman Daly, *Violent Victors: Why Bloodstained Parties Win Postwar Elections* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022), analyses the electoral success of both parties with rebel origins and those with origins in counter-insurgent states.

[78]Sherry Zaks, 'Resilience beyond rebellion: How wartime organizational structures affect rebel-to-party transformation', PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley (2017).

[79]Gyda Marås Sindre, 'Internal party democracy in former rebel parties', *Party Politics*, 22:4 (2016), pp. 501–11.

[80]Qingjie Zeng, 'Party origins, party infrastructural strength, and governance outcomes', *British Journal of Political Science*, 54:3 (2024), pp. 667–92.

of reproduction and legacies than other elements of the critical juncture when parties are form-ing, mobilising, and challenging the incumbent;[81] this study, though, offers a platform for future work examining rebel-to-party transitions or effects to fully apply a critical juncture framework to capture all stages of the process.

Post-war security institutions

Post-war security institutions can also be considered in a critical juncture framework, examin-ing how wartime processes led to their evolution or stasis, and how this affects security forces' interactions with the population. Scholars have analysed military transformation following rebel victory,[82] but other war outcomes may also lead to changes with roots in civil war dynamics. Government counter-insurgency policies and practices can have long-lasting legacies in cases of incumbent victory or negotiated settlements. In two cases of negotiated settlements in Central America, wartime security structures developed by the government persisted after the wars ended and incumbents left power. Nicaragua's policing institutions and military built by the Sandinista government during the 1980s Contra War remained intact and generally maintained popular trust into the 2010s.[83] Meanwhile, counter-insurgent militias organised by the Guatemalan military per-sisted informally in the post-war period, engaging in patrols and undertaking extralegal vigilante violence.[84] Regardless of war outcome, state security forces may also continue targeting repression based on civil war period identities, rather than actual post-war behaviour.[85] Critical juncture anal-ysis can help trace a wartime security practice or policy through the post-war period to examine outcomes in security force structures and behaviour or societal relations and crime or contentious politics, clearly specifying how the explanatory variable of interest developed, institutionalised, and was reproduced.

Local and behavioural effects

The research areas discussed above generally focus on national-level actors and institutions, but civil wars can also generate significant disruptions and potential for change at the local and indi-vidual levels. One possibility for analysis is tracing the long-term impacts of local-level political institutions that may persist or be adapted after civil war. In Uganda, for instance the National Resistance Army (NRA) developed Resistance Councils (RCs) in rebel-controlled areas as local representative institutions; the NRA formalised RCs' role in governance after victory spreading them nationwide and maintaining these institutions up to the present.[86] RCs were not originally envisioned by the NRA as their political model, but after forming them during the war to gather

---

[81]Ibid., p. 672.

[82]Jonathan R. Adelman, *Revolution, Armies and War* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1985); Ted Robert Gurr, 'War, revolution, and the growth of the coercive state', *Comparative Political Studies*, 21:1 (1988), pp. 45–65; Martin, 'Insurgent armies'; Theda Skocpol, 'Social revolutions and mass military mobilization', *World Politics*, 40:2 (1988), pp. 147–68.

[83]E.g. Roberto Cajina, 'Security in Nicaragua: Central America's exception?', working paper (Washington, DC: Inter-American Dialogue, 2013).

[84]Regina Bateson, 'The socialization of civilians and militia members', *Journal of Peace Research*, 54:5 (2017), pp. 634–47.

[85]Laia Balcells, 'Continuation of politics by two means: Direct and indirect violence in civil war', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 55:3 (2011), pp. 397–422; Francisco Herreros, 'Peace of cemeteries: Civil war dynamics in postwar states' repres-sion', *Politics and Society*, 39:2 (2011), pp. 175–202; Liu, 'Control, coercion, and cooptation'; Rachel Seoighe, *War, Denial and Nation-Building in Sri Lanka: After the End* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

[86]Nelson Kasfir, 'Guerrillas and civilian participation: The National Resistance Army in Uganda, 1981–86', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 43:2 (2005), pp. 271–96; Dan Ottemoeller, 'Institutionalization and democratization: The case of the Ugandan Resistance Councils', PhD diss., University of Florida (1996), p. 274; Rebecca Tapscott, *Arbitrary States: Social Control and Modern Authoritarianism in Museveni's Uganda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Per Tidemand, 'The Resistance Councils in Uganda: A study of rural politics and popular democracy in Africa', PhD diss., Roskilde University (1994).

support and organise the population, the NRA began holding elections to gain greater local legitimacy and, seeing these elections' popularity, reoriented their political planning around elected RCs as the manifestation of the NRA's commitment to democracy.[87]

Wartime processes can also durably shift identities and patterns of political and social participation in society.[88] Many studies have identified pro-social effects of exposure to civil war in a variety of settings,[89] but these participatory effects and attitudes towards the state and other groups may be mediated by social network ties[90] or by whether individuals lived primarily under state or rebel influence.[91] Delving into the process of how civil wars generate attitudinal and behavioural changes is therefore important for exploring how experiences and social ties interact during and after the critical juncture of civil war to shift and then reinforce participatory patterns, as Shenk has done in tracing wartime experiences' impact on participatory institutions in Colombia.[92]

Gender relations and women's political and social status can also be altered, for better or worse, by civil wars, and I discuss in the next section how a critical juncture framework might be applied to studying this topic.

Civil wars and the reshaping of gender relations

Civil wars have rarely, if ever, begun specifically over grievances about women's rights and political participation, so we might not expect them to open opportunities for lasting, significant shifts in women's roles or standing in society; yet wartime processes and post-war outcomes have in fact done so in many cases.[93] Some civil wars result in high rates of sexual violence and other negative consequences for women,[94] generating lasting cycles of gender-based violence and rights deprivation. Civil wars, though, can also lead to women's participation in armed groups as combatants and in non-combat roles,[95] and greater participation in the workforce or civil society roles, in some

---

[87]Kasfir, 'Guerillas and civilian participation', pp. 285–8; Yoweri K. Museveni, *Sowing the Mustard Seed: The Struggle for Freedom and Democracy in Uganda* (London: MacMillan, 1997), p. 134; Rebecca Tapscott and Eliza Urwin, 'The origins and legacies of unpredictability in rebel-incumbent rule', *Civil Wars* (2024), available at: {https://doi.org/10.1080/13698249.2024.2302731}; Tidemand, 'The Resistance Councils', p. 82.

[88]Laia Balcells, 'The consequences of victimization on political identities: Evidence from Spain', *Politics & Society*, 40:3 (2011), pp. 311–47; Laia Balcells, *Rivalry and Revenge: The Politics of Violence during Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Joan Barceló, 'The long-term effects of war exposure on civic engagement', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 118:6 (2021), pp. 1–12; Michal Bauer, Christopher Blattman, Julie Chytilová, et al., 'Can war foster cooperation?', *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 30:3 (2016), pp. 249–74; Blattman, 'From violence to voting'.

[89]Other forms of exposure to violence likewise affect political participation: Laia Balcells and Gerard Torrats-Espinosa, 'Using a natural experiment to estimate the electoral consequences of terrorist attacks', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 115:42 (2018), pp. 10624–9; Regina Bateson, 'Crime victimization and political participation', *American Political Science Review*, 106:3 (2012), pp. 570–87; Arturas Rozenas, Sebastian Schutte, and Yuri Zhukov, 'The political legacy of violence: The long-term impact of Stalin's repression in Ukraine', *Journal of Politics*, 79:4 (2017), pp. 1147–61; Yuri M. Zhukov and Roya Talibova, 'Stalin's terror and the long-term political effects of mass repression', *Journal of Peace Research*, 55:2 (2018), pp. 267–83.

[90]Cassy Dorff, 'Violence, kinship networks, and political resilience: Evidence from Mexico', *Journal of Peace Research*, 54:4 (2017), pp. 558–73.

[91]Liu, 'Control, coercion, and cooptation'; Philip A. Martin, Giulia Piccolino, and Jeremy S. Speight, 'The political legacies of rebel rule: Evidence from a natural experiment in Côte d'Ivoire', *Comparative Political Studies*, 55:9 (2022), pp. 1439–70; Jamie L. Shenk, 'Does conflict experience affect participatory democracy after war? Evidence from Colombia', *Journal of Peace Research*, 60:6 (2023), pp. 985–1001.

[92]Shenk, 'Does conflict experience affect participatory democracy'.

[93]Dara Kay Cohen and Sabrina M. Karim, 'Does more equality for women mean less war? Rethinking sex and gender inequality and political violence', *International Organization*, 76:2 (2022), pp. 414–44.

[94]Dara Kay Cohen, *Rape during Civil War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016); Ragnhild Nordås and Dara Kay Cohen, 'Conflict-related sexual violence', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 24 (2021), pp. 193–211; Elisabeth Jean Wood, 'Armed groups and sexual violence: When is wartime rape rare?', *Politics & Society*, 37:1 (2009), pp. 131–61.

[95]Jessica Trisko Darden, Alexis Henshaw, and Ora Szekely, *Insurgent Women: Female Combatants in Civil Wars* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019); Meredith Loken, 'Noncombat participation in rebellion: A gendered typology', *International Security*, 47:1 (2022), pp. 139–70; Meredith Loken and Hilary Matfess, 'Women's participation in violent non-state

cases durably increasing women's legal rights and participation in decision-making and politics at all levels.[96] What explains when and how a civil war results in one outcome or another?

As Berry writes, women 'experience war, bear witness to its effects, and exert agency', with civil war constituting 'a period of rapid social change that reconfigures gendered power relations by precipitating interrelated demographic, economic, and cultural shifts'.[97] Women who fight and mobilise to aid combatants can carve out larger roles after civil wars, but this is not guaranteed. In El Salvador and Nicaragua, for instance, there were gaps between rhetoric and action and between policy changes and implementation in practice in armed groups and after wars.[98] And depending on the war outcome, changes in gender relations and power may not be solidified. In Kenya's anti-colonial Mau Mau rebellion, women took on new social roles and were instrumental in sustaining the movement, forcing colonial authorities to increase their attention to women's needs as a counter-insurgency measure.[99] The Mau Mau rebellion was ultimately defeated, though, and when Kenya gained independence through negotiations in 1963, gendered inequalities were maintained in rights, representation, and, critically, landholding.[100]

After several civil wars, however, women's political representation has greatly increased, with women participating at higher rates in legislatures and other elected and appointed offices than before the war and compared to other states, especially since the 1980s.[101] Gender quotas, women's empowerment initiatives, and higher numbers of women candidates, however, do not necessarily translate into greater societal acceptance of women's empowerment, nor women winning office or being able to meaningfully wield political power.[102]

To illustrate the potential benefits of a critical junctures approach, I analyse two influential books about civil wars' impact on women's political participation and power: Aili Mari Tripp's *Women and Power in Postconflict Africa* and Marie Berry's *War, Women, and Power*.[103] Both books identify civil wars as creating opportunities for women's political empowerment, but only Berry takes a historical institutionalist critical junctures approach, although without explicitly identifying each element of the critical juncture. This allows me to compare the benefits and trade-offs of each author's approach and to discuss how fully applying a critical juncture analysis could offer additional insights, especially through a deeper engagement with historical background and critical

organizations', *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* (2022), {https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.712}; Sarah Elizabeth Parkinson, 'Organizing rebellion: Rethinking high-risk mobilization and social networks in war', *American Political Science Review*, 107:3 (2013), pp. 418–32; Jakana L. Thomas and Kanisha D. Bond, 'Women's participation in violent political organizations', *American Political Science Review*, 109:3 (2015), pp. 488–506; Jocelyn Viterna, *Women in War: The Micro-processes of Mobilization in El Salvador* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Reed M. Wood, *Female Fighters: Why Rebel Groups Recruit Women for War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019); Reed M. Wood and Jakana L. Thomas, 'Women on the frontline: Rebel group ideology and women's participation in violent rebellion', *Journal of Peace Research*, 54:1 (2017), pp. 31–46.

[96]E.g. Berry, *War, Women, and Power*; Melanie M. Hughes and Aili Mari Tripp, 'Civil war and trajectories of change in women's political representation in Africa, 1985–2010', *Social Forces*, 93:4 (2015), pp. 1513–40; Tripp, *Women and Power*.

[97]Berry, *War, Women, and Power*, pp. 1–2.

[98]Karen Kampwirth, *Feminism and the Legacy of Revolution: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004); Maxine Molyneux, 'Mobilization without emancipation? Women's interests, the state, and revolution in Nicaragua', *Feminist Studies*, 11:2 (1985), pp. 227–54.

[99]Cora Ann Presley, 'The Mau Mau rebellion, Kikuyu women, and social change', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 22:3 (1988), pp. 502–27.

[100]Kara Moskowitz, '"There was no change": Kenyan women, temporality, and decolonization', *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 32:3 (2023), pp. 267–85.

[101]Melanie M. Hughes, 'Armed conflict, international linkages, and women's parliamentary representation in developing nations', *Social Problems*, 56:1 (2009), pp. 174–204; Hughes and Tripp, 'Civil war and trajectories of change'; Cosima Meyer and Britt Bolin, 'Power in the post-civil war period: The effect of armed conflict and gender quotas on women in political leadership positions', *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 7:4 (2022), p. ogac009.

[102]Marie E. Berry and Milli Lake, 'Women's rights after war: On gender interventions and enduring hierarchies', *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, 17 (2021), pp. 459–81; Dino Hadzic and Margit Tavits, 'Wartime violence and post-war women's representation', *British Journal of Political Science*, 51:3 (2021), pp. 1024–39.

[103]Berry, *War, Women, and Power*; Tripp, *Women and Power*.

antecedents prior to and affecting the outbreak of civil war and then how these mattered or not in shaping the causal process of social and institutional change or stasis.

Tripp examines the effect of the end of major civil wars on women's rights and political representation in Africa, combining cross-national statistical analyses and process tracing in comparative case studies of Angola, Liberia, and Uganda.[104] Tripp looks at how the end of conflict created political openings for women to influence peace agreements and post-conflict constitutions, and to take on political leadership roles. She argues that disruptions in gender relations 'unique to countries experiencing conflict' provide a necessary but insufficient causal effect on post-conflict women's rights, which can only lead to move positive outcomes for women's rights and representation in the presence of (a) the opening of political space allowing for increased women's mobilisation, and (b) changes in international norms and pressures related to gender and women's rights.[105] She thus recognises that civil wars create possibilities for change but do not always result in it, with her study of Angola examining a negative case where civil war did not result in longer-term increases in women's representation. The wartime disruptions in gender relations and norms identified by Tripp as critically important were women's increasing voice in their communities, women taking on new economic roles, and women envisioning new, more politically and economically active public lives.[106] In her case studies, Tripp does give some attention to antecedent conditions in the form of pre-war gender relations and women's movements, and then examines how war disrupted prior social structures and norms. Her emphasis on the post-conflict period, however, gives greater attention to the mechanisms reproducing gender disruptions and their post-conflict legacies, while the nature and potential limits or inequalities of wartime gender disruptions receive less exploration.

A critical junctures approach would fill in the earlier links in the causal chain, complementing Tripp's excellent analysis of the post-conflict period with more focus on how and where within countries conflict most disrupted pre-existing gender relations and structures – especially in the case of Uganda, where fighting and rebel military activity was more geographically limited – and how these disruptions were maintained or diffused during conflict. Such an approach would give greater attention to how Tripp's key causal mechanisms developed and how the domestic groundwork was laid for women's increased prominence and participation in peace negotiations and agreements, and then in post-conflict politics.

Tripp has, in fact, recognised in later work that civil wars constitute critical junctures, looking at civil conflict and popular revolutions as critical junctures for the adoption of constitutional reforms codifying women's rights.[107] More recently, she has argued that major interstate wars and civil wars constitute critical junctures creating 'changes in the political elite and ruling class, resulting in the necessity to rewrite constitutions and other rules of the polity', opening opportunities for women's suffrage and political representation.[108]

While not explicitly naming each element of the critical junctures that civil war opened Rwanda and in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Berry's book gives clear and equal attention to antecedent conditions and how they came into crisis; how structural changes were produced during war and at its end; and how these shifts were reproduced, institutionalised, and locked into the post-conflict context.[109] This is made clear by her chapter titles moving through each respective case: 'Historical Roots of Mass Violence' (chapters 2 and 5), 'War and Structural Shifts' (chapters 3 and 6), and 'Women's Political Mobilization' (chapters 4 and 7). Berry examines how civil war and mass violence unsettled the pre-existing order and led to demographic, economic, and cultural shifts in

---

[104]Tripp, *Women and Power*.

[105]Ibid., p. xxii.

[106]Ibid., p. 35.

[107]Kaden Paulson-Smith and Aili Mari Tripp, 'Women's rights and critical junctures in constitutional reform in Africa (1951–2019)', *African Affairs*, 120:480 (2021), pp. 365–89.

[108]Aili Mari Tripp, 'War, revolution, and the expansion of women's political representation', *Politics & Gender*, 19:3 (2023), pp. 922–27 (p. 922).

[109]Berry, *War, Women, and Power*.

each country, with openings for women's activism and everyday involvement in politics helping spawn new, politically active women's organisations and initiatives.

Civil wars can disrupt society and gender relations in multiple ways. Berry highlights how demographic change occurred due to men's disproportionate death, participation in fighting, and imprisonment, and due to mass displacement more generally disrupting prior social and political geographies; economically, infrastructural and agricultural capacity was destroyed, leading to changes in production and increased reliance on international aid that came with conditions or incentives around women's rights; and culturally women took on new public roles and were seen as more 'peaceful' than bellicose men.[110] These shifts permitted greater informal political participation by women, which was reproduced after the end of war, but the additional factor of a new, 'gender-sensitive political regime' in Rwanda allowed for gender quotas for public office and increased women's formal participation and political representation.[111] Berry's critical focus on the historical legacies on wartime changes also highlights how women's new roles in post-conflict society faced challenges due to the unequal nature of political settlements, which 'created hierarchies of victimhood', displacement of local knowledge and organisations by international humanitarian actors, and patriarchal backlash against changing gender roles.[112]

Examining civil wars as critical junctures is important, Berry argues, because the approach entails analysing 'other possible outcomes at every stage of the event trajectory, engaging counterfactuals and expecting contingency', something that is 'essential, since hindsight often leads to overly deterministic explanations of war's occurrence and impact'.[113] While agreeing wholeheartedly with Berry, I would also argue that clearly specifying the different elements of such critical junctures helps clarify temporal sequencing and what mechanisms were acting at what points in the process within each case.[114] This would more clearly separate Berry's 'Historical Roots of Mass Violence' chapters into the antecedent conditions of politics and women's status in each country and then what brought on political crisis and war onset. It would also specify in her 'Women's Political Mobilization' chapters when, exactly, the mechanisms of reproduction of women's empowerment and participation should be considered solidified, and whether formal and informal participation might crystallise at different points; this would then make clearer when the analysis of legacies for each type of participation would begin in Berry's chapter on the medium- to long-term 'Limits of Mobilization' (chapter 8).

As research on gender relations and rights during and after civil wars continues, a critical junctures approach can help to analyse structural shifts and the ways that pre-existing institutions persisted or were strengthened,[115] as well as examining how long women's political empowerment endures after wars and what might change or erode it.[116] Research can also further investigate cases where civil wars result in regressions of women's rights, and how that might vary spatially. The case of Afghanistan, for instance, shows the importance of looking at within-case variation, since the Taliban's harsh, restrictive gender regime in the 1990s and more recently was reproducing norms from rural Pashtun areas of the country; there was, therefore, little transformation in those rural

[110] Ibid., p. 14.

[111] Ibid., p. 14.

[112] Ibid., p. 15. Women's mobilisation can persist and even deepen, though, in response patriarchal backlash: Egor Lazarev, 'Laws in conflict: Legacies of war, gender, and legal pluralism in Chechnya', *World Politics*, 71:4 (2019), pp. 667–709; Julia Margaret Zulver, 'The endurance of women's mobilization during "patriarchal backlash": A case from Colombia's reconfiguring armed conflict', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 23:3 (2021), pp. 440–62.

[113] Berry, *War, Women, and Power*, p. 16.

[114] See Tulia G. Falleti and Julia Lynch, 'From process to mechanism: Varieties of disaggregation', *Qualitative Sociology*, 31:4 (2008), pp. 333–9; Grzymala-Busse, 'Time will tell?'

[115] Lazarev, 'Laws in conflict'.

[116] Kaitlyn Webster, Chong Chen, and Kyle Beardsley, 'Conflict, peace, and the evolution of women's empowerment', *International Organization*, 73:2 (2019), pp. 255–89.

Pashtun areas, but more extensive regressions of women's rights and social roles elsewhere in the country, particularly in urban areas.[117]

When examining civil wars' gendered effects, researchers must pay close attention to inequalities and take an intersectional approach to ensure that apparently progressive changes on paper or in some women's rights, political representation, and access to justice are not masking the continuation of exploitative systems and the marginalisation of certain identity groups.[118] Work should also continue problematising binary and essentialist conceptions of gender identity and heteronormative views of sexuality, and how they are reproduced or challenged during and after conflict.[119] This is especially important because women's participation in warmaking efforts may be framed in terms of 'traditional' gender roles, signalling an incumbent or armed group's intent for a return to stereotypical socio-political roles and divisions of labour after conflict ends.[120] A critical juncture framework can help incorporate some of these critiques by specifying as antecedent conditions what prevailing gender and sexual norms and roles were prior to a civil war; how gender and sexual identities were or were not salient during the civil war and ways in which wartime processes reinforced or produced changes in treatment or societal inclusion of women and gender and sexual minorities; which wartime effects were solidified or dissipated as conflict came to an end; and what post–civil war legacies resulted.

Conclusion

I have argued that we can consider civil wars as critical junctures in states' and societies' institutional development, moments when contestation of the state's legitimacy and coercive power lower structural barriers to change and increase actors' choice sets. Importantly, civil wars may lead to relatively rapid and radical change, or they may instead perpetuate the status quo: a critical juncture is defined by possibility, not only by outcomes of major change.

A critical juncture approach invites researchers to untangle how civil war processes unfold over time and may shift socio-political and economic institutions in both endogenous and path-dependent ways, acknowledging continuities *and* contingency.[121] It helps focus research on big questions of how civil wars do or do not change major social, political, and economic structures and behavioural patterns, enabling theory building and testing that is also deeply attuned to contextual factors.[122] Further study of civil wars as critical junctures can provide an improved, more structured

---

[117]Hassan Abbas, *The Return of the Taliban: Afghanistan after the Americans Left* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023); Anand Gopal, 'The other Afghan women', *New Yorker* (6 September 2021), available at: {https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/09/13/the-other-afghan-women}; Anand Gopal and Alex Strick van Linschoten, 'Ideology in the Afghan Taliban' (Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2017); Ashley Jackson, 'The ban on older girls' education: Taleban conservatives ascendant and a leadership in disarray' (Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2022).

[118]Berry, *War, Women, and Power*; Berry and Lake, 'Women's rights after war'; Elin Bjarnegård and Pär Zetterberg, 'How autocrats weaponize women's rights', *Journal of Democracy*, 33:2 (2022), pp. 60–75; Keshab Giri, 'Do all women combatants experience war and peace uniformly? Intersectionality and women combatants', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 1:2 (2021), pp. 1–11; Milli Lake, *Strong NGOs and Weak States: Pursuing Gender Justice in the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[119]Cohen and Karim, 'Does more equality for women mean less war?'; Tessa Devereaux Evans, 'Conflict and coalition: Securing LGBT rights in the face of hostility', *Comparative Political Studies*, 57:6 (2024), pp. 1035–67; Luisa Maria Dietrich Ortega, 'Looking beyond violent militarized masculinities: Guerrilla gender regimes in Latin America', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 14:4 (2012), pp. 489–507; Jamie J. Hagen, 'Queering women, peace, and security', *International Affairs*, 92:2 (2016), pp. 313–32.

[120]E.g. Çağlayan Başer, 'Women insurgents, rebel organization structure, and sustaining the rebellion: The case of the Kurdistan Workers' Party', *Security Studies*, 31:3 (2022), pp. 381–416; Meredith Loken, '"Both needed and threatened": Armed mothers in militant visuals', *Security Dialogue*, 52:1 (2021), pp. 21–44; Meredith Loken and Anna Zelenz, 'Explaining extremism: Western women in Daesh', *European Journal of International Security*, 3:1 (2018), pp. 45–68.

[121]Shesterinina, 'Civil war as a social process'.

[122]Gerardo L. Munck, 'The power and promise of critical juncture research', in David Collier and Gerardo L. Munck (eds), *Critical Junctures and Historical Legacies: Insights and Methods for Comparative Social Science* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), pp. 389–401 (pp. 390–2).

understanding of wartime processes, paths taken and opportunities missed, and how institutional change or stasis is produced and reproduced even after civil wars have ended. Given civil wars' complexity,[123] by explicitly examining them and their effects within a critical juncture framework, researchers can improve analytical clarity and rigour, discussing the elements of theories, cases, and data in ways that faithfully capture crucial context and nuance while still enabling cumulative knowledge-building[124] and the testing of theories and findings across contexts and methods.

Kai M. Thaler is Assistant Professor of Global Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He is also an affiliated researcher of the University of California Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation.

---

[123]Broschë, Nilsson, and Sundberg, 'Conceptualizing civil war complexity'.
[124]See also Munck, 'Power and promise,' p. 392.