Qualitative Methods and the Study of Civil War

A Doctoral Course within the University of Oslo, NTNU and PRIO
Research School in Peace and Conflict

Overview: This course is about the application of qualitative methods to the study of civil war. It begins with an overview of the cutting edge in qualitative methods, intentionally casting its epistemological net broadly. We thus assess methods inspired by positivism (case studies, process tracing) and those more interpretative in nature (discourse analysis, ethnography) - the goal being to provide students with a robust set of tools for explaining and understanding the dynamics of civil war. The course also reviews the promise (and pitfalls) of methodological pluralism or so-called mixed methods.

The stage set, we then explore applications of qualitative and mixed methods to the study of civil war. Our focus is not so much what these studies say about civil conflict; rather, we assess their use of qualitative methods. What slippage occurs (and why) between the abstract methodological ideal and real world applications? What counts as good process tracing in the context of civil war? What are the special challenges of employing mixed methods?

The course thus operates at two levels – data and epistemology. On the former, we explore the strengths and weaknesses of various qualitative methods, and how they shape and influence data collection in the special context of civil war. Epistemology brings us to the more foundational level of ‘how we come to know.’ How does one’s epistemological position influence methodological choice, and why might this matter for students of civil war?

Admission: The deadline for applications is 1 March 2015. Please fill in the application form on the course homepage. PhD candidates should specify the topic of their project under ‘Research interests.’ PhD students get priority, but others with graduate training from a relevant discipline may also apply.

There is no course fee, but the cost of transportation and accommodation must be covered by the participants. A limited number of stipends to cover basic accommodation at the neighbouring Anker Hotel are available for PhD students who do not have funding for such course participation through their universities.

If needed to make the necessary travel arrangements, students may request an early evaluation of their application in an e-mail to Kristoffer Lidén (Kristoffer@prio.no), with a cc to Maral Mirshahi (marmir@prio.no).

Credits: 10 ECTS.

Requirements: There are three.

1) Active Participation in Class Discussions: The course will be run as a seminar, where debate and discussion are the norm; for each session, written discussion questions will serve as
our starting point. For this format to be successful, students need to read the seminar readings prior to our first meeting on 27 April.

2) Preparation of Discussion Points: For each class session, students should prepare a brief list of discussion questions and comments (3-5 in number); these should be based on the readings and will be distributed to all other seminar participants. (Please make sufficient copies for distribution!) Your questions/comments should reflect a critical assessment of those readings. What are their strong and weak points? Their meta-theoretical, theoretical, methodological, empirical contributions? How do they relate to or build upon other readings or discussions?

3) Completion of an Analytic Essay: Students have two options. (I) Prepare an analytic review on a topic that is of special interest and is consistent with the course's purpose and theme; or (II) prepare a draft research design for a PhD project on civil war where qualitative methods play some role. In either case, essays should be 6000-10000 words and are due by 15 August 2015. On the first day of class – Monday, 27 April - students should provide the instructor with a 2-3 page introduction to their proposed essay. These overviews will then be discussed at one-on-one meetings on the morning of Wednesday, 29 April, 0900-1100, when there will be no formal class sessions.

Readings: The following six books – all available as paperbacks - should be purchased.

Bennett, Andrew and Jeffrey T. Checkel, Editors, Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014)


Students should be able to access most other assigned reading – especially journal articles - through their local libraries. A selection of hard-to-get readings (single chapters in books, contributions to newsletters) will be made available on the course homepage by late March.

Syllabus and Class Schedule

Day #1: Monday, 27 April

Session I (0900 – 1200): Causal Mechanisms and Case Studies
The Turn to Mechanisms


Case Studies – Nuts and Bolts


Case Studies – Applications


Nuts and Bolts


Applications


Lyall, Jason, “Process Tracing, Causal Inference, and Civil War,” in Andrew Bennett and
Day #2: Tuesday, 28 April

Session III (0900 - 1200): Interpretive Analysis

Nuts and Bolts


Applications


Session IV (1315 - 1630): Ethnography and Field Work

(With the participation of Kristian Berg Harpviken, PRIO)

Nuts and Bolts


Applications

Harpviken, Kristian Berg, Social Networks and Migration in Wartime Afghanistan (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), Appendix.


Day #3: Wednesday, 29 April

Session V (0900 - 1100): Individual Meetings on Course Essays

Session VI (1100 – 1200, 1315 - 1415): Mixing Methods

Nuts and Bolts


Applications


Session VII (1415 - 1700): Qualitative Methods and Civil War - Kalyvas


Day #4: Thursday, 30 April
Session VIII (0900 - 1200): Qualitative Methods and Civil War - Weinstein


Session IX (1315 - 1600): Qualitative Methods and Civil War - Wood

(With the participation of Kristian Berg Harpviken, PRIO)


Session X (1615 - 1700): Wrap Up & Conclusions

No readings.