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Theorizing the Land–Violent Conflict Nexus

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Summary. — While disputes over land are prominent in many situations of protracted violent conflict, questions remain about the precise relationships between land and violent conflict. Political ecology and legal anthropology have rightly questioned dominant approaches in theorizing land-related conflict that are centered on scarcity and institutional failure. While underlining the contribution of these critical approaches, we argue that questions about what is actually at stake in so-called "land-conflicts", and in particular how localized land disputes and large-scale violence get connected, are not yet adequately addressed. To further theorizing on this point the paper proposes to take on board advances made in the wider field of conflict studies, notably the notions of war as a "social project" and "warscapes". We emphasize the importance of "alliances" between local disputes and broader cleavages, and of processes of "framing". The added value of such a perspective is then illustrated by case-studies based on original fieldwork in Burundi and Chiapas (Mexico), that bring out how sense-making of social actors at different levels, including development interveners, interlocks through alliances and framing. We suggest that academic research should analyze how particular land-related conflicts are performed, stimulated, interpreted, and used. Our argument also implies that policy makers and development practitioners should be aware that their work is not neutral, and should be more attentive to how their programs feed into processes of sense-making and mobilization. More generally, the paper de-naturalizes the link between land and conflict and draws land conflict analysis into the realm of social practice.
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1. INTRODUCTION

The prominence of disputes over land in many situations of protracted, violent conflict has fed easy labeling of such disputes as "land conflicts" and has invited conceptualizations of the broader conflict as being "about land". Despite such apparent "obvious" relationships between land and violent conflict, questions remain about the precise linkages between the two. While there is plenty anecdotic evidence for the claim that land may be an important "source" or "driver" of conflict, to date no statistically significant direct causal relationship has been found between land distribution, polarization, or categorical inequality in land ownership and the outbreak of civil war (Pons-Vignon & Solignac Lecomte, 2004; Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). It remains equally difficult to assess the degree to which localized land disputes pose risks to (pre- or post-conflict) stability; or to predict whether interventions may work toward solving land-related conflict, or instead cause new divides and violence. The question is not only one of evidence; it is also about gaps in theorizing the nature of land-conflict. A first difficulty, of course, is that the term "land-conflict" lumps together different types of issues, ranging from local disputes about ownership of particular plots, to large-scale political contestation about prevailing tenure regimes, and, recently, so-called "land-grabbing". It is not self-evident what actually is at stake in what are called land-conflicts, while the ways in which localized disputes over land "add up" to produce broader contention, and even large-scale political violence remains a black box.

There is ample literature linking land to wide-spread violence and civil war (just to mention a few: Cramer & Richards, 2011; Homer-Dixon, 1999; Huggins & Clover, 2005; Pantuliano, 2009). What these literatures, with their differences, make clear is that people are prepared to fight over land when their livelihoods are threatened due to dwindling resources, in response to enclosure and dispossession, or in

order to increase their possibilities. However, why and how people fight over land is explained in diverging ways. Theories on land and violent conflict in the environmental security school are often resource-deterministic and reductionist, locating the cause of conflict "in" the resource (with Homer-Dixon as a key exponent). Others, by contrast, locate the source of conflict in the wider historical and political developments within which particular resources become subject to competing claims, inducing scarcity and challenging access. These approaches are found especially in the fields of political ecology and political geography, which have phrased some of the most elaborate and profound criticisms of the "scarcity-breeds-war" thesis (Le Billon, 2001; Peluso & Watts, 2001). A third vein of theory relates land-conflict primarily to governance and regulation; the source of conflict here is "in" the institutions that govern property and access and that canalize tensions and conflicting interests. Some of this literature reduces land-conflict to institutional failure (Ostrom, 1990; see Turner, 2004), whereas others—building on political ecology but also legal anthropology—place contestations over rules and regulatory frameworks in a broader political context (Lund & Boone, 2013; Peters, 2004; Sikor & Lund, 2009; Unruh, 2003).

A key insight articulated in the more critical perspectives that move away from reductionist approaches to land-conflict, is that conflict *about land* is in the first place a conflict *between people*. What they do, more or less explicitly, is drawing land-conflict into the realm of social relations, in which conflict is an expression of social interaction and a site at which social tensions become manifest. This invites theorizing around friction, opposition and identity, agency and sense-making (Richards, 2005). This is the direction in which we intend to take the debate with this article. Rather than exploring the diverse ways in which land may *cause* violent conflict, we argue that it is more fruitful to explore the social production of violent conflict, and how land becomes part of larger patterns of violent contestation. We propose that the theorizing around agency and sense-making such as that has taken shape in the broader field of conflict studies has much to offer to better understand land conflict. It foregrounds key questions around mobilization and the articulation of local and global dimensions of conflict, such as: how do local land disputes become violent? What is the role of wider scale societal upheaval in local land disputes? How may grievances around land serve as breeding ground for broader scale violence? And how do local land disputes come to connect to broader patterns of conflict in society?

To make this argument, we first review the emergence of new, critical perspectives in the wider field of conflict studies, and discuss some of their key notions, notably of war as a "social project" (Richards, 2005) and "warscapes" (Nordstrom, 1997). We then turn to a review of theoretical frames for the land–violent conflict nexus, arguing that questions about the ways in which localized land disputes and large-scale violent conflict get connected are not yet adequately addressed. This leads to our main argument, that to deepen our understanding of the relationships between land and violent conflict requires further exploration of the role of agency: how "alliances" (Kalyvas, 2003) come about between land and other contentious issues, and how those are actually "framed" (e.g. Tarrow, 1998). This argument is illustrated by two case studies based on our own research. The paper ends with reflections on what this implies for research on land–violent conflict relationships.

2. FROM CONFLICT CAUSALITY TO "WARSCAPES: ADVANCES IN THE FIELD OF CONFLICT STUDIES

With the end of the Cold War, academic and policy attention was drawn to the intra-state and highly violent nature of contemporary conflicts. This new concern with civil war triggered all kinds of questions about the "root causes" of conflict. Debates centered on the role of identity and ethnic difference; on population pressure and resource scarcity; on greed, criminality and globalized war economies; on patrimonialism and state failure. In the late 1990s, however, this focus on the "root causes" of civil violence gave way to broader concerns with conflict "dynamics", recognizing that causes of conflict are multiple and interlinked, and develop in a non-linear fashion over the course of conflict (see e.g. Miall, Ramsbotham, & Woodhouse, 1999; Wood, 2001/2003; Cramer, 2006). Conflict dynamics were increasingly found to be contingent upon contextual factors, rather than on root causes (Cramer, 2006; Doyle & Sambanis, 2006, p. 41; Goodhand, 2006, p. 179; Kalyvas, 2006). Neo-classical economists have contributed to the ontological and epistemological shift away from (proximate) causes and (structural) conditions under which civil war developed, toward the individual behavior of conflict actors, both conflict entrepreneurs and local

people (Galtung, 1996/2003; Brown, 2001). They placed the rational, profit-maximizing actor at the center of analysis, and ventured to explain what factors facilitate the mobilization of (individual) fighters, including their age and education level, and expectations of individual reward (e.g. Collier & Hoeffler, 2004).

In response to both causal approaches and "rational actor theorizing", we see the emergence of what has been called an interpretative or "micro-political" (King, 2004) turn in conflict studies, with authors like Lubkemann (2005), Richards (2005), Cramer (2006), Kalyvas (2006), Korf (2006), and Korf, Engeler, and Hagmann (2010), Vigh (2006) and Utas (2012). Like the economists, these authors dissociate themselves from a preoccupation with causes, linearity, and structural explanations, and are concerned with agency. But instead of understanding agency in terms of economic rationality and utility maximization, they consider actors as socially situated, with knowledge contingent upon context, and creatively—so not always predictably—responsive to their environment. Where the rational actor is assumed to react to external stimuli and threats almost automatically, social actors interpret and reflect on what happens around them and use their knowledge and capabilities to respond to and navigate the conditions of war.

These authors have foregrounded that war and violence (as well as peace) need to be socially organized and hence cannot be understood outside of agency, sense-making, and discursive construction. This leads them to question the very categories of war and peace, problematize the heterogeneity of those phenomena that are coined "conflict", and emphasize the politics involved in labeling conflicts. Richards has described war as a "social project among other social projects" (Richards, 2005: 5), as but one option in a wide range of social possibilities, and one that has to be socially organized. "'[P]eace' can often be more violent and dangerous than 'war', [while] fighting draws upon the [same] social and organizational skills people deploy to sustain peace" (Richards, 2005, p. 5). Likewise, Lubkemann urges us to consider war not as an exceptional event that suspends normal social processes, but may become "the normal [. . .] context for the unfolding of social life" (Lubkemann, 2008, p. 1). If war is understood as a "social project" rather than as an aggregation of causal factors, as Paul Richards (2005) proposes, we need to explore how actors organize war, including how they interpret violent conflict, legitimize it, and give it meaning in their daily lives.

Rather than isolating particular contentious issues or violent events, the authors cited propose to study them as part of wider, fragmented "warscapes": the highly complex, volatile, and uncertain context characterizing many civil war zones that social actors navigate (Nordstrom, 1997, as cited in Korf *et al.*, 2010, p. 385). In such warscapes, different actors, levels, and multiple conflict issues come together and interact in constantly changing constellations, where the salience of a particular issue unfolds, changes, and takes multiple forms in different arenas of contestation (Bobrow-Strain, 2001, p. 156). While violence is omnipresent in the lives of warscape inhabitants, it does not script it (Lubkemann, 2005). Moreover, individuals in warscapes are often not just "combatants", "civilians", or "victims", but each pursue different multi-dimensional agendas and life projects which cannot be easily labeled as war or not war-related, as participation or non-participation (Richards, 2005; Utas, 2005).

We contend that such insights may help us in better understanding the dynamics at play that link land and violent conflict. Before making that argument, we first discuss contemporary, more main-stream perspectives in analyzing the land–violent conflict nexus.