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# Conflict Studies and Causality: Critical Realism and the Nomothetic/Idiographic Divide in the Study of Civil War

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## ABSTRACT

The study of civil war has increased exponentially during the post-Cold War period. This has not, however, resulted in greater levels of consensus with regard to the causes and nature of this phenomenon. Indeed, as Jonathan Goodhand has shown, the conflict studies discipline is currently experiencing something of a ‘crisis of theory as well as a crisis of practice’ (2006, 29). This article aims to show, however, that this situation can be alleviated by drawing on the critical realist approach to the philosophy of science. This is the case, in short, because critical realism provides conflict studies authors with a more sophisticated and coherent understanding of causality than has previously been available to them. More specifically, it has developed a *mechanism-based* understanding of causality which transcends the persistent split between (1) *nomothetically-oriented* (or ‘universal law-oriented’) approaches, predominantly associated with the work of various neo-positivist authors, and (2) *idiographically-oriented* (or ‘single case-oriented’) approaches, associated with the work of a much more diverse group of authors. By making the case for this mechanism-based approach, however, this article also aims to show that critical realist philosophy paves the way for an alternative approach to social science. An approach, that is, which – rather than consistently *abstracting* from (historical/geographical) context in the way that neo-positivist studies do – systematically *engages with* the context in which civil wars take place.

*‘Felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas’*

(Happy is s/he who is able to know the causes of things)

- Virgil

## Introduction

The study of civil war has increased exponentially during the post-Cold War period. This has not, however, resulted in greater levels of consensus with regard to the causes and nature of this phenomenon. Rather, conflict studies authors have developed a variety of contrasting approaches which have consistently made competing and contradictory claims. Indeed, even authors who have adopted the same philosophical/methodological orientation and have drawn on the same sources of data have often come to very different conclusions. This has, as Jonathan Goodhand has shown, resulted in something of a ‘crisis of theory as well as a crisis of practice’ (ibid) within the conflict studies discipline. In order to alleviate this situation the current article will (1) engage with the philosophical/methodological roots of the conflict studies literature in significant depth, and (2) argue in favour of an alternative to two of the main philosophical/methodological approaches that have been adopted during the post-Cold War period. An alternative, that is, which is rooted in the critical realist approach

to the philosophy of science. This approach – here explicitly understood as both developing and internally-differentiated in nature – has its origins in the important (though controversial<sup>1</sup>) work of the British philosopher Roy Bhaskar (2008 [1975], 1998 [1979]), and has more recently been adopted and developed by a limited number of authors working within the disciplinary confines of International Relations as well (see especially Kurki, 2008; Patomäki and Wight, 2000; Wight, 2006, 2007).

The aim of this article, however, is to show that the critical realist approach has developed a more sophisticated and coherent understanding of causality than has previously been available to authors working within the field of conflict studies, a sub-discipline which – for better or for worse – has until now remained relatively free from the important philosophical/methodological discussions that have characterized the broader International Relations literature. More specifically, it aims to show that critical realism has developed a *mechanism-based* understanding of causality which transcends the persistent split between (1) *nomothetically-oriented* (or ‘universal law-oriented’) approaches to the study of civil war, predominantly associated with the work of various neo-positivist<sup>2</sup> authors, and (2) *idiographically-oriented* (or ‘single case-oriented’) approaches to the study of civil war, associated with the work of a much more diverse group of authors. It deserves emphasis, however, that this article should not be read as suggesting that these two philosophical/methodological approaches are in fact the *only* approaches which have been adopted during the post-Cold War period. This is, quite clearly, not the case. Rather, it proceeds on the basis of the claims that it is these two approaches which (1) have been most influential, (2) have provided the most clearly-identifiable positions for conflict studies authors and students to adopt, and (3) that they are therefore deserving of greater attention when attempting to devise an alternative which is rooted in the mechanism-based understanding of causality that is favoured by critical realists. Before making the case for this alternative, however, the first part of this article will begin by uncovering/reviewing the claims and assumptions which the two aforementioned approaches have made concerning both the *nature* and the *range* of causal explanation, thereby aiming to clarify the exact nature of the debate between them. While doing so, however, this part of the article will also situate nomothetically- and idiographically-oriented approaches within the broader philosophical/methodological traditions from which they have emerged. The second part of the article will then proceed by discussing the approach to causality which critical realist philosophy has developed. This approach, it will argue, allows us to both *rethink* and *reclaim* causal analysis in a way that transcends the nomothetic/ideographic divide within the conflict studies discipline.

## **Conflict Studies and Causality: Two Divergent Approaches to the Study of Civil War**

### *Positivism and the Nomothetic Approach*

The nomothetic approach to the study of civil war is perhaps most closely associated with the kind of large-N/cross-national neo-positivist studies that have commonly been published by journals like the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* and the *Journal of Peace Research*. In journals such as these a wide variety of authors have sought to make the most of the rapid post-Cold War expansion of both data-sets and technical abilities by enquiring into the causes, nature, termination, etc. of civil war (for a useful overview of the development and current status of this literature see: Florea 2012; for a selection of especially influential neo-positivist conflict studies ‘classics’ see: Collier 2000, 2003, 2010; Collier and Hoeffler 2002, 2004; Collier and Rohner 2008; Collier *et al* 2004; Collier and Sambanis 2005; Fearon 2005; Fearon *et al* 2007; Fearon and Laitin 2003; Hegre and Sambanis 2006; Sambanis 2004a,

2004b). Such efforts have rarely been explicitly described, at least by these authors themselves, as involving the adoption of a positivist approach. Their work can, however, be plausibly described as belonging to this tradition for a number of key reasons. Prominent among these is the fact that the studies they have produced have, without exception, been *quantitative* (econometric/statistical) in nature. In adopting this philosophical/methodological orientation they have therefore clearly echoed the emphasis on *mathematical precision* which is commonly associated with positivist endorsements of a ‘hard sciences’ approach.

More important for the purposes of this article, however, is the understanding of causal explanation which has informed the work of these authors. This is the case because their work has clearly been influenced by the *covering law approach*.<sup>3</sup> This approach, which will be described below, has two main historical sources. The first of these is Newtonian physics, particularly celestial mechanics. This branch of astronomy is concerned with the movements of celestial objects, and Newton is generally understood as having successfully uncovered the universal/deterministic laws of motion which underpin these movements (Manicas 2006, 18). Indeed, Newtonian physics is often considered so successful that it has become the archetypal example of the ‘hard sciences’. In addition to having roots in Newtonian physics, however, the covering law approach has roots in a second source as well. This is the sceptical form of empiricism that was developed by David Hume, who argued that – as *causes themselves* are not observable, and must therefore be considered ‘metaphysical’ – we cannot legitimately speak of, or claim knowledge about, natural necessity (Kurki 2008, 37). Indeed, Hume claimed (1) that we should disavow metaphysics in its entirety by eschewing notions of causal *connection* and limiting ourselves to speaking of events that are regularly *conjoined*, and (2) that when we assume ‘that one object is connected with another, we mean only that they have acquired a connection in our thought’ (in Groff 2013, 13). Projecting such (internal) habits/customs onto the (external) world is, however, a mistake, as all that we are really entitled to say ‘is that the thought of soapy water is always followed by the thought of the rice starch on the dinner plates dissolving’ (Groff 2013, 14). Hume maintained, however, that these kinds of conjunctions of events are in fact *sufficient*, and that we may proceed to define a cause as ‘[a]n object precedent and contiguous to another, and where all objects resembling the former are placed in like relations of precedency and contiguity to those objects that resemble the latter’ (2009, 274-75). This has generally been interpreted to mean – whether accurately or not (Walters and Young 2001; Fleetwood 2005; Groff 2013, especially chapter two) – that we can only legitimately speak of *correlations* (conjunctions of events) and not of *causality* (natural necessity), and it has at times resulted in positivists limiting ‘real’ science to *prediction* rather than *explanation* (Kurki 2008, 47). More commonly, however, they have maintained (1) that science requires a symmetry between explanation and prediction, and (2) that the maturity of a scientific discipline can be measured by means of its ability to provide accurate predictions.

At their most confident positivists have also favoured the idea that, in order to provide an explanation for an event, we must describe the universal/deterministic covering law which governs it. Such laws refer, in short, to parsimonious statements of the sort: ‘when empirical event (A), then empirical event (B)’. More elaborately, however, they refer to the idea that causal explanations must stipulate the exact conditions (A) for the occurrence of a particular event (B). Whenever (A) arises, therefore, the covering law approach maintains that event (B) *must* also take place. This is the case because event (B) can be *deduced* from its initial conditions (A), making the explanation of a *particular* outcome a matter of identifying the *universal* law of which it is an instance. If this strategy fails – that is, if event (B) does not follow from initial conditions (A) as predicted – a theory (and the law it purportedly describes) is understood to be falsified (i.e. disproved). If, instead, this strategy succeeds, a theory (and the law it accurately describes) is understood to be verified (proved). This

approach was self-consciously modelled on common understandings of Newtonian physics, and – along with the mathematizing and empiricist (anti-metaphysical) demands of ‘real’ science – aimed to secure the indubitable/unassailable foundations for knowledge-development which Enlightenment/modernist thought had often sought in order to prevent a collapse into radical forms of scepticism and/or relativism.

### *Neo-positivism and the Nomothetic Approach*

It should be noted, however, that these ‘hard science’ demands have often been significantly ‘softened’ in practice by various forms of *neo-positivism*. Perhaps the most common way in which this has been done – in addition to relaxing the demands for mathematical exactness/precision – is by means of the claim that covering laws are in fact *probabilistic* (i.e. non-deterministic) in nature. Whenever (A) is found, therefore, it is claimed that it is *probable* that (B) will occur as well. This intellectual hedging strategy, while often continuing to employ the language of *laws*, has therefore more commonly been concerned with discovering ‘law-like’ *regularities*. This qualification has, however, been accompanied by a second qualification as well. A qualification, that is, which is directed at Hume’s claim that conjunctions of events are *sufficient* when describing a causal relationship. This is, quite clearly, not the case. As is common knowledge, it is often possible to get extremely reliable results on the basis of an entirely spurious correlation. As the rate of inflation ‘has correlated more strongly with the incidence of Scottish dysentery than the money supply’, for instance, ‘the former would have proved a better predictor of inflation than the latter’ (Sayer 2010, 90). Such ‘explanations’ are of course entirely at odds with our intuitions about the way the world works, but follow from the manner in which Hume’s claim has most commonly been interpreted. Neo-positivists have therefore maintained that, although regularities are a *necessary* feature of causal relationships, they are not in fact *sufficient*.

It is, importantly, this ‘softer’ (doubly-qualified) manifestation of the covering law approach which neo-positivist authors in the conflict studies discipline have adopted as well. As Paul Collier argues in his most recent book on civil war, for instance, his work is ‘not interested in the personalities and immediate political circumstances’ leading to a particular civil war (2010, 125). Such issues, he argues, ‘matter for a proper understanding of any particular war but clutter up and detract from our understanding of civil war as a phenomenon’ (ibid). His work therefore aims ‘to find [the] structural characteristics that expose a country to risks’ (ibid) instead, and – along with the work of other neo-positivist authors – has attempted to find robust correlations between a wide range of factors (ethnic fragmentation/polarisation/domination, resource abundance/scarcity, horizontal/vertical inequalities, low/high per capita or domestic income, regime type, state capacity, etc.) and the occurrence (initiation, duration, termination, prevalence, intensity, recurrence, outcome, etc.) of civil war. Indeed, while the work of these authors is often replete with talk of causal mechanisms in practice<sup>4</sup>, its implicit aim has been the development of a (probabilistic/quasi-nomothetic/quasi-deductive/quasi-falsificationist and parsimonious) *theory of civil war* which applies irrespective of historical and geographical context.

The same applies, importantly, to a number of well-known large-N/cross-national neo-positivist studies which have sought to overcome the seeming limitations of relying exclusively on quantitative data by incorporating qualitative evidence derived from case studies (Sambanis 2004a; Collier and Sambanis 2005). This is the case, as George Steinmetz has shown (in a different context), because these kinds of ‘mixed methods’ studies – while moving away from the exclusive reliance on quantitative data that is commonly associated with positivism – inevitably treat the data which they derive from such case studies as

“‘idiographic’ raw data waiting to be processed by ‘nomothetic’ theory machines’ (2004, 383). The assumptions which these kinds of studies have made about the nature of causal explanation, and how to verify/prove or falsify/disprove their theories, have therefore remained unchanged. In fact, these quasi-nomothetic philosophical assumptions have exerted such a powerful disciplining influence on large-N/cross-national neo-positivist studies of civil war that they have had a significant impact on their relationship to the study of history (and geography) as well. Specifically, these assumptions have resulted in neo-positivist studies conceiving of history as a ‘context-less data set or passive record through which abstract formulas, concepts and hypotheses can be assessed’ (Lawson 2010, 210). This has ensured that the conflict studies discipline currently reflects the much broader division of labour ‘between theory-building political scientists and chronicling historians’ which continues to hold sway throughout much of academic life (ibid, 214). Indeed, in a way that exactly mirrors the incorporation of *case studies* into their large-N/cross-national models the work of neo-positivist conflict studies authors has therefore reduced the role of *history* to the provision of idiographic raw data for their nomothetic theory machines as well.

As was highlighted at the start of this article, however, the adoption of this quasi-nomothetic strategy has failed to produce a consensus with regard to the causes and nature of civil war. This has inspired a variety of *reformist responses*, two of which have predominated. The first of these has aimed, quite simply, to refine large-N neo-positivist studies by attempting to resolve the various data and technical problems which they have encountered.<sup>5</sup> In a well-known discussion of coding problems, for instance, Nicholas Sambanis has stated that such problems should not lead his readers to think that ‘coding wars and analyzing them quantitatively is a futile exercise. Rather than abandon[ing] these efforts’, he claims, we should redouble them ‘by improving the coding rules, applying them transparently to the data, and studying the implications of differences across coding rules’ (2004a, 857; also see: Florea, 2012). While the existence of various data and technical problems is acknowledged, therefore, the aim of developing quasi-nomothetic forms of theory remains firmly in place. A second reformist response, however, has instead sought to abandon the large-N nature of neo-positivist studies in favour of a more spatiotemporally-restricted and disaggregated approach (Nathan 2008). This approach has, for instance, sought to combine the neo-positivist search for reliable statistical correlations with the use of various typologies which categorize civil wars in terms of their scale (Gleditsch *et al*, 2002), their origins and conduct (Kalyvas 2005, 2007), their geographical centre (Buhaug and Gates 2002), whether they are ‘identity’ or ‘non-identity’ conflicts (Sambanis 2001), whether they are ‘territorial’ or ‘governmental’ conflicts (Buhaug 2006), etc. The assumption which this strategy depends on, of course, is that the reliable statistical generalizations and empirical regularities which have eluded large-N neo-positivist studies may finally reveal themselves once we adopt a more disaggregated/spatiotemporally-restricted approach. As for instance Halvard Buhaug has warned, ‘an aggregated research design is likely to diminish or even conceal important causal relationships that apply only to conflicts of one kind’ (ibid, 692).

### *‘Generalization Anxiety’ and the Idiographic Approach*

Even after disaggregating the category of civil war in these kinds of ways, however, significant anxieties have persisted about the extent to which the results of any particular study are ever likely to be generalizable, or – indeed – whether any neo-positivist study is likely to produce reliable predictions (see for instance: Buhaug and Gates 2002, 421; Blattman and Miguel 2010, 37; Ward *et al* 2010). In fact, the seemingly ineliminable indeterminacy and complexity of civil wars has led some to develop an alternative to neo-

positivism by rejecting, rather than reforming, its tenets. Adrien Ratsimbaharison (2011), for instance, has argued that – because of the various deficiencies which he associates with *quantitative* and *deductive* forms of research – the neo-positivist approach (adopted mostly by economists and political scientists) should be abandoned in favour of *qualitative* and *inductive* forms of research (adopted mostly by historians and anthropologists).<sup>6</sup> A similar type of scepticism runs through the work of Christopher Cramer as well, who has argued that studies of civil war should always consider both ‘the diversity of its causes and motivations’ and ‘the diversity of its conduct and organisation’ (2006, 135). Indeed, he has suggested – in direct contradiction to what large-N/cross-national neo-positivist studies have always assumed to be the case – that ‘[p]erhaps there can be no theory of war’ at all (ibid).

The appeal of such ‘soft(er)’ approaches – while posing serious questions about the scientific status and maturity of the conflict studies discipline – has been apparent in the fact that numerous authors have chosen (whether self-consciously or not) to pursue forms of *idiographically-oriented* research instead. These kinds of research, making use particularly of case studies, historical narratives, and interpretive/hermeneutic methods (Fuji 2010, 2011; Hamilton 2007; Kaufman 2001), have adopted a much more contextual approach than has been apparent within neo-positivist forms of research, and – importantly – they have often produced findings which directly contradict the findings of nomothetically-oriented studies (Call 2010; Vinci 2006). Indeed, while a significant amount of the *contemporary* proponents of these forms of research would undoubtedly wish to take issue with the *historical* roots of the idiographic approach, it deserves emphasis that the aforementioned kinds of investigation have commonly been grounded by means of philosophical traditions which differ strongly from the Enlightenment/modernist tradition that has underpinned (neo-)positivism. These traditions are, in fact, typically understood as explicit reactions *against* positivism, and are therefore commonly grouped together under umbrella terms such as ‘anti-positivism’. At a very general level it can be argued that these anti-positivist traditions have taken issue with the mechanistic/deterministic tendencies which (neo-)positivism is said to represent. Indeed, these otherwise extremely varied philosophical/methodological traditions have been united in terms of their opposition to the covering law approach. Of particular importance for grounding this opposition has been the common observation that, unlike the events which are studied by physics, human/social events do not seem to recur. That is to say, concrete events – like, say, the Angolan civil war – do not seem to recur in their geographically/historically specific form. Rather, human/social events appear to be non-repeatable/unique in a way that, for instance, the movements of celestial objects seem not to be (Steinmetz 2004).

This observation has been theorized in a wide variety of different ways, but a number of approaches that are currently quite influential – and are commonly grouped together (imperfectly) as ‘post-structuralism’ and ‘the new materialisms’ – have argued in favour of what is essentially an *inversion* of the covering law approach. That is to say, these approaches have attempted to supplant the positivist ontology of deterministic, mechanistic, universal, and unchanging covering laws (‘being’) with an ontology that, instead, stresses indeterminacy, openness, particularity, and change (‘becoming’). As for instance Diana Coole has argued, her new materialist work ‘is not about Being, but becoming’ [...] ‘what is invoked is a process not a state’ (2013, 453). Such an approach has, to numerous types of authors, appeared to make better sense of the non-repeating/unique nature of human/social events, and, in addition, has seemed to better account for the enormous variety which characterizes both historical trajectories and forms of social organization around the world.<sup>7</sup> This is, however, a perceived strength of idiographic approaches to research more generally, as its advocates have – though certainly to varying degrees<sup>8</sup> – gravitated towards forms of enquiry which, instead of stressing the universal, the general and the law-like, stress the particular, the unique, the contingent, and the contextual.

As has happened everywhere else in the human/social sciences as well (Lawson 2010), however, the adoption of this ‘soft’ orientation has also resulted in accusations by conflict studies authors, here summarized by Cramer, that idiographic studies ‘are overly descriptive, [that] they do not confirm any general theoretical constancy and [that] the more detailed [i.e. complex/non-parsimonious] they are the less useful they are for the rest of the world’ (2006, 92; also see Kalyvas 2006, 7-9). Indeed, more generally, the adoption of an idiographic orientation to research has often been accompanied by the claim that, as these forms of enquiry do not conform to the (inductive and/or deductive) generalizing aims which are commonly associated with science, they are not in fact scientific at all.

It should be noted, however, that this is a conclusion that some proponents of anti-positivist approaches have themselves actively embraced. Numerous advocates of interpretive/hermeneutic approaches, for instance, have argued against the ‘physics envy’ which, they claim, characterizes the human/social sciences. This means, concretely, that they have sought to oppose the *naturalist* idea that the methods which are commonly associated with the natural sciences – particularly its quantifying tendencies – are also suitable for enquiries into the human/social world. Rather than attempting to model the study of human beings on celestial mechanics, for instance, the proponents of interpretive/hermeneutic approaches have commonly argued that the human/social realm requires very distinctive (and commonly qualitative) methods for its study. These methods should uncover the *meanings of* or *reasons for* particular human actions, but – it is now often claimed<sup>9</sup> – should refrain from engaging in the kind of causal (covering law) explanations which are typically associated with science. Indeed, rather than attempting to (causally) *explain* events in a (neo-)positivist manner, the proponents of these approaches have commonly argued that the human/social world must be (non-causally) *understood*.<sup>10</sup> Their adoption of this ‘soft’ *anti-naturalist* orientation towards making civil wars (and events more generally) intelligible has, of course, placed idiographic approaches firmly at odds with the quasi-nomothetic explanatory strategy which neo-positivist studies – such as the one by Collier (2010) that was alluded to above – have adopted. It should be noted, however, that this situation has commonly been exacerbated by the fact that anti-positivist authors have generally rejected the idea that science can in fact provide us with the indubitable/unassailable foundations for knowledge-development which proponents of Enlightenment/modernist thought had often aimed to secure. At best, this rejection of epistemic *foundationalism* has resulted in calls for greater modesty about our knowledge-claims. At its most pessimistic, however, the embrace of *anti-foundationalism* has resulted in the gradual drift towards radical forms of scepticism and relativism which positivists have always feared, and that – at least within the current intellectual climate – is most closely associated with the more defeatist strands of postmodernist theorizing.

Whatever analytical benefits may be derived from adopting an idiographic approach towards our research into the causes and nature of civil war it should therefore be clear that, at least at times, these benefits can (and have) come at a very significant price as well. As the second part of this article will show, however, this is not a price which it is in fact worth paying. This is not the case, importantly, because a return to the (quasi-)nomotheticism and ‘generalization anxiety’ of (neo-)positivism is warranted. Indeed, as the next section will show, the neo-positivist approach is untenable at both a philosophical and a practical level. Rather, this is the case because critical realism allows us to both *rethink* and *reclaim* causal analysis in a way that prevents us from having to pay the price that has often resulted from adopting an idiographic approach. Indeed, more generally, by adjusting our understanding of causality in the manner which critical realism has suggested, it becomes possible to transcend the nomothetic/idiographic divide in its entirety. It is to an elaboration and defence of this claim that this article will turn at present.



## Beyond the Nomothetic/Idiographic Divide: A Critical Realist Approach to the Study of Civil War

### *Philosophical Preliminaries and the 'Epistemic Fallacy'*

In order to provide this elaboration and defence, however, it is of key importance that we first situate critical realism – as an internally-differentiated and developing approach to the philosophy of science – by drawing attention to the positions which it has adopted concerning a number of key philosophical discussions. While the relevance of these discussions may not be immediately apparent to the readers of this article, and I am undoubtedly beginning to test the patience of even the most committed among them at this stage, I urge them to kindly bear with me. After all, when the path to (scientific) progress becomes muddled, and a disciplinary crisis such as the one that was alluded to at the start of this article arises, it is potentially far more fruitful for us to *step back* than it is to simply *push on* with those analytical strategies with which we are already familiar. Indeed, as will hopefully become clear throughout this section, the consequences understanding causality from a critical realist are far-reaching, and allow us to steer the study of civil war in a much more productive direction. It is therefore with the promise of a handsome reward after hard (philosophical) labour that this section will begin by drawing attention to the positions which critical realist philosophy of science has adopted concerning the aforementioned positivism/anti-positivism and foundationalism/anti-foundationalism debates.

With regard to the first of these debates, it should be noted that critical realism has adopted a clear anti-positivist stance. Importantly, however, it has done so in order to better ground the notion of science, and not – like many other anti-positivist approaches – to discard it or restrict its range. Indeed, as the next few sections aim to show, it is exactly the fact that it has adopted an anti-positivist orientation which has allowed it to *rethink/reclaim* both causal analysis and, more broadly, the notion of science. In order to make sense of these claims it will, however, be necessary to draw attention to the position which it has adopted concerning the aforementioned foundationalism/anti-foundationalism debate as well. In this, as in most matters of concern, critical realism has developed an alternative to both extremes. While it denies that there are indubitable/unassailable foundations from which absolutely secure knowledge can be developed, for instance, it has also denied that this means that we cannot develop robust forms of knowledge at all. Instead, it has developed a 'post-foundationalist' approach which relies largely on the *immanent critique* of rival positions in the philosophy of science. Indeed, with regard to the issue of causality Bhaskar has developed a type of immanent critique that he terms an *Achilles' heel* critique. This type of critique seizes on 'the most important premise for a particular position' and aims to show that 'all the beautiful insights that are hoped to be sustained by it cannot in fact be sustained' (Bhaskar in Bhaskar and Hartwig 2010, 79; also see Bhaskar 1989, 15, 155). This strategy is applied, throughout *A Realist Theory of Science* (2008 [1975]), to what is the archetypal activity of the 'hard sciences' – experimental activity – in order to show that the area in which positivism has long presumed it is strong, it is in fact weak. Bhaskar claims, for instance, that engaging in experimentation is both *incompatible with* and *unintelligible from* a positivist perspective. Concerning the more specific issue of causality, however, he claims that the apparent need to engage in experimentation illustrates that both the 'non-causal' approach which numerous idiographic approaches have adopted and the covering law approach which positivists have favoured are unsustainable/incoherent. Indeed, he claims, against even the more modest (probabilistic) manifestations of positivism, that the consistent need for scientists to engage in experimentation illustrates that regularities are neither a *sufficient* nor a *necessary* feature of causal processes.

In order to make sense of this claim it is essential that we proceed by posing a very basic question: why are the kinds of practical interventions into the natural world that are characteristic of experimentation required at all? The sceptical form of Humean empiricism which has helped to ground positivism demands, after all, that knowledge is derived solely by means of sensory experience. Such an approach is therefore *incompatible with* situations in which forms of experimental intervention are required in order to develop knowledge. If engaging in experimentation is in fact the necessary feature of science that it appears to be, however, it follows from this that the nature of the world is *not* in fact always accessible to us by means of our sensory organs. Indeed, as Andrew Collier has argued, the ‘nature of the work we must do in order to find out about the world’ illustrates ‘that the world is not transparent to us but [that it] needs to be discovered’ (1994, 22). If we could simply ‘taste the hydrogen and oxygen in water’, after all, ‘we would not need to separate them by electrolysis. Knowledge which we in fact have only by virtue of scientific experiment (water = H<sub>2</sub>O) could then have been acquired in the same way as we discover [that] the grass is green and lemons are sour’ (ibid, 31). The consistent need to engage in experimentation in order to find out what the world is like, however, illustrates that the most emblematic practice of the ‘hard sciences’ is not just *unintelligible from* a positivist perspective but – importantly – that it also aims to develop forms of knowledge which (1) *go beyond* sensory experience (trans-phenomenality), and (2) *contradict* sensory experience (counter-phenomenality).<sup>11</sup> It is the ability of science to develop these kinds of knowledge, in fact, which makes it necessary, as ‘without the contradiction between appearance and reality, science would be redundant, and we could [simply] go by appearances’ (ibid, 47).

As this does not actually appear to be the case, however, it seems clear that philosophers must give up on the idea that Humean empiricism – along with its rejections of metaphysics and natural necessity - can provide us with an epistemological framework which is suitable for engaging in scientific forms of investigation. Indeed, more specifically, Bhaskar’s analysis illustrates that Humean empiricism is suspect because it claims that what exists, or what can be legitimately spoken of/known, is exhausted by what human beings are capable of experiencing by means of our sensory organs. This is problematic because it means that positivism – despite its attempted monopolization of the term ‘science’ – cannot in fact sustain the intelligibility of key activities such as experimentation. In fact, the Humean form of empiricism that has helped to ground this tradition forces us into a position in which we must choose between the adoption of either a philosophical approach ‘which is consistent with its epistemology but of no use to science’ or a philosophical approach ‘which is relevant to science but more or less inconsistent with its epistemology’ (Bhaskar 1989, 57).<sup>12</sup> More generally, however, by reducing questions about *what is* (ontology) to questions about *how we know what is* (epistemology) positivism succumbs to the ‘epistemic fallacy’. This fallacy consists of ‘the analysis or definition of statements about being in terms of statements about our knowledge (of being)’ (2008 [1993], 373) and, in the case of Humean empiricism, results in the generation of an *implicit* (empirical realist) ontology which is tied to sensory experience. Critical realism, instead, has sought to *avoid* the anthropocentric idea that ‘[w]hat can be considered real always bears the mark, or insignia, of some human attribute’ (Patomäki and Wight 2000, 217). Rather than adopting the empiricist criterion for reality it has therefore explicitly rejected attempts to relegate the metaphysical to a lower status. In its place, it has argued in favour of a *causal* criterion for reality. If something is able to effect change in the world, after all, it can be legitimately said to exist, whether or not our sensory organs allow us to directly experience it.

Such arguments may be refined, however, by returning to Bhaskar’s analysis of experimentation a second time. This is the case because his analysis allows us to replace the *implicit* (empirical realist) ontology which results from Humean empiricism with an *explicit*

alternative. An alternative, that is, which illustrates that the world is characterized by ‘ontological depth’. The first thing to note in this regard is the fact that the persistent need to employ various types of measuring equipment illustrates that those events which occur are not necessarily accessible by means of our sensory organs. At the level of ontology it is therefore of key importance that we distinguish between the *empirical* realm (which concerns sensory experience, the exclusive focus of positivism) and the realm of the *actual* (which concerns the broader category of events as such). In addition to this, however, the nature of experimentation also suggests that our interventions can trigger (stimulate, release, enable, etc.) causal mechanisms which are both distinct/isolatable (Collier 1994, 46) and would have otherwise remained dormant. This is, again, of significant importance for the ontological stance we adopt, as such mechanisms may therefore be said to be *real*, irrespective of whether they are also activated (actual) or experienceable/experienced by means of our sensory organs (empirical). These conclusions are systematized in the model of ontological depth which is reproduced below, and are of course entirely at odds with Humean empiricism. Instead of the (implicit) ontology of *empirical events* in which this approach results, for instance, critical realist philosophy results in an (explicit) ontology of ‘*structurata*’ (Wight 2006, 218). These *structurata* may be conceptualized, quite simply, as the various types of ‘stuff’ which exist – ranging from quarks to atoms, trees, dogs, people, and social systems – and as possessing various types of *real* causal powers; causal powers, that is, which, when they are triggered, produce *actual* and *empirical* events.

**FIGURE 1: ONTOLOGICAL DEPTH** (Bhaskar 2008 [1975], 56)

	<i>REAL</i>	<i>ACTUAL</i>	<i>EMPIRICAL</i>
<i>MECHANISMS</i>	✓		
<i>EVENTS</i>	✓	✓	
<i>EXPERIENCES</i>	✓	✓	✓

### *Rethinking and Reclaiming Causal Analysis*

It is not just at the level of abstract philosophical reasoning, however, that this ‘depth ontology’ is of significant importance. Rather, as this section will show, this ontology also allows us to both *rethink* and *reclaim* causal analysis in a way that breaks free from both the *nomothetic* and the *idiographic* approach to the study of civil war. In order to make sense of why this is the case it will, however, be necessary to return to Bhaskar’s analysis of experimentation a third time, as during this analysis he asks us to consider a key question: why is it the case that experimentation is required at all? He answers in the following manner: ‘an experiment is necessary precisely to the extent that the pattern of events forthcoming under experimental conditions would not be forthcoming without it’ (2008 [1975], 33). If experimentation is in fact required in order to produce the regular sequences of events with which scientists are (most commonly) concerned, however, two key conclusions follow from this. First, it follows – against what has long been presumed to be the case by the proponents of (neo-) positivism – that even ‘hard science’ activities such as experimentation presuppose an account of its activities in which *it is not in fact concerned with the discovery of universal laws or event regularities as such* but, rather, in which *it seeks to shield or isolate causal mechanisms from counteracting forces in order to produce patterns of events which would not otherwise be forthcoming*.

In addition to this, however, it also entails that *non-experimental* settings are in fact unlikely to be characterized by the kinds of regularities which (neo-)positivists have long sought to discover. This is the case because mechanisms, when they are triggered in ‘open’ systemic settings, act in conjunction with other ‘stuff’. This stuff is likely to interfere with/cancel out the operation of the mechanisms they encounter, and hence results in changes to the outcome that would have resulted in (experimentally) ‘closed’ systems. Such closed systems, importantly, require both *intrinsic conditions* (a stable structuratum/set of structurata with actualized causal powers) and *extrinsic conditions* (a context in which external factors are stable) for their realization, and it is only when these two conditions are met that empirical event (A) will always follow empirical event (B). If this is true, however, it means that *there is in fact no need for causality to become manifest as regular sequences of empirical events at all*. Rather, Bhaskar’s analysis illustrates that such sequences of events are not just *insufficient* for the establishment of causal relations – as neo-positivists have long acknowledged to be the case – but that they are in fact *unnecessary* as well.

This has a wide range of philosophical/methodological implications, both at a general level and for the study of civil war. Among the most important of these, however, is the fact that it allows us to *rethink* the positivist (nomothetic) emphasis on prediction as a criterion for (1) demarcating ‘real’ science from non-science, and (2) measuring the maturity of a scientific discipline. This is the case, in short, because Bhaskar’s analysis illustrates that there is an unavoidable limit to making predictions in open systemic settings. A limit, that is, which results from a mechanism’s entirely contingent relations with other mechanisms throughout the wider (open-systemic) world. This invalidates the idea that it is an ability to predict which reflects the maturity of a discipline, whether conflict studies or any other, because even the most skilful of scientists may be able to retroactively *explain* the occurrence of events which take place in open systemic settings, but this does not mean that these events could also have been *predicted* by them. Rather, Bhaskar’s analysis of experimentation illustrates – in direct contradiction to what has historically been claimed by the proponents of positivism – that there exists a clear *asymmetry* between explanation and prediction, and that this asymmetry results from the ‘multiple determination’ of events in open systems (1989, 187). Indeed, as Steinmetz argues, his analysis shows that ‘in open systems, unlike the artificial closure characteristic of the experimental situation, mechanisms combine to produce actual events conjuncturally, that is to say, in concert with other mechanisms’ (1998, 177). More generally, however, Bhaskar’s analysis also illustrates that ‘aside from our forensic or other practical concerns, there is nothing that is “the cause”, only *causes*’ (Collier 1994, 125), and that these include the ‘structural’, ‘root’, ‘proximate’, and other types of causes which conflict studies authors have long sought to uncover.

If this is true, however, conflict studies authors would be wise to make a decisive shift *away* from the positivist assumption that it should develop a parsimonious (or even mono-causal) theory of civil war, and move *towards* explanations which engage with complex forms of co-determination (multi-causality). Moreover, Bhaskar’s analysis also illustrates that the conflict studies discipline requires a further shift away from the (overly-ambitious) positivist criterion of *predictive power* to the (more realistic) criterion of *explanatory power*. While conditional (*ceteris paribus*) predictions of course remain a possibility, ‘and a powerful explanatory theory will be capable of situating *ex ante* possibilities long before they are realized’ (1989 [1979], 194), after all, his analysis illustrates that there is no philosophically-sound reason to assume that ‘real’ science should be able to provide accurate predictions. Indeed, even something as simple as the exact path which a falling autumn leaf will take is unpredictable in open systemic settings, as this path will be subject to various types of unpredictably interacting causal forces: from the gravitational to the aerodynamic, the thermal, and so on (Lawson 2008, 288-289).

In addition to allowing us to rethink nomothetic claims in these ways, however, Bhaskar's analysis has a number of important implications for the proponents of the idiographic approach as well. First among these is the fact that it undermines the distinction which some anti-positivist approaches have sought to make between *causal* and *non-causal* approaches. This is the case, as Milja Kurki has shown, because both 'self-avowed causal theorists [...] and their critics have failed to recognize the role that a Humean background discourse of causation has had in shaping and delimiting the very starting points for the development of models and methods of causal analysis' (2008, 7). What has at times been described as 'non-causal' by anti-positivists can, in other words, be *reclaimed* for causal analysis once we adopt a critical realist perspective, even if the phenomena we study (reasons for action, rules, etc.) do not in fact produce regular sequences of empirical events.

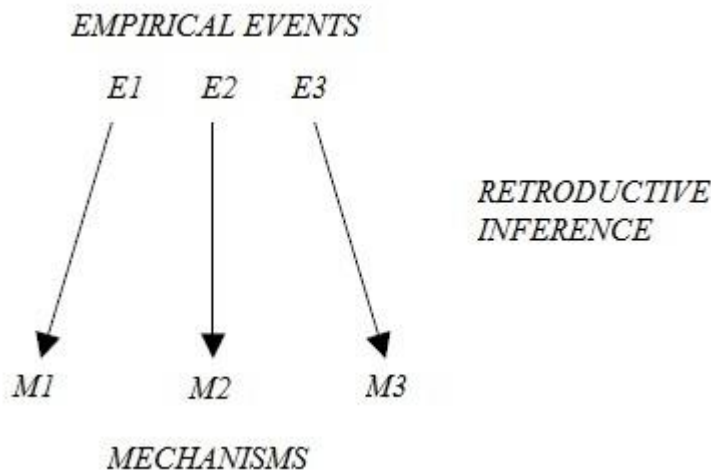
Further to this, Bhaskar's analysis has a second key implication for idiographic approaches as well. Specifically, it illustrates that there is in fact no need to draw on post-structuralism or the new materialisms in order to make sense of either the non-repeating/unique nature of human/social events or variations in both historical trajectories and forms of social organization. Indeed, doing so would be inadvisable, as the ontology which these approaches have adopted is likely to overstate the prevalence of flux. This is the case because limited examples of spatiotemporal closure ('quasi-closures') do in fact occur, even outside of experimental settings, and these result in what Tony Lawson has termed 'demi-regularities' (1997, especially chapter 15). While such closures/regularities are of course 'always relative to a particular set of events and a particular region of space and period of time' (Bhaskar 2008 [1975], 73) this does not mean that we should simply supplant the positivist ontology of unchanging covering laws with an ontology of unceasing change. Indeed, doing so would prevent us from making sense of powerful celestial regularities such as those that were described by Newton, and which characterize at least some (e.g. routinized) parts of the social world as well. What is required, instead, is an approach that is capable of accommodating both change ('becoming') *and* stability ('being'), (Clausewitzian) chance *and* causal determination/natural necessity, in a coherent manner. This is, arguably, exactly what the critical realist theorization of open and closed systems, along with its mechanism-based approach to causality, provides us with.

### *Beyond 'Generalization Anxiety'*

What, however, do these critiques of the nomothetic and the idiographic approaches mean for the (deductive and inductive) generalizing aims that are commonly associated with the notion of science? Before answering this question it is worth drawing attention to the fact that the critical realist critique of Humean empiricism that was discussed above suggests that the *main* mode of inference of the sciences is in fact neither deductive nor inductive in nature. Rather, if the point of the sciences is to move (1) *beyond* (or even *contradict*) sensory experience, and (2) *towards* explanations which are in accordance with the model of ontological depth that was described above, this suggests that their predominant mode of inference should in fact be *retroductive* in nature. This means, in short, that their primary aim should not be to simply relate (certain types of) empirical events to other (types of) empirical events but, rather, that they should aim to work back from manifest phenomena ('events, states of affairs, and the like') to the mechanisms which produce these phenomena (a move which is represented in figure 2 below) (Bhaskar 1989, 181). Indeed, more generally, it means that engaging in causal forms of explanation involves working back from a phenomenon at one ontological level to its causes at a deeper ontological level. This goal is achieved by constructing (and testing) models of/narratives about mechanisms which, *if* they

were to ‘exist and act in the postulated way, would account for the phenomenon [with which we are] concerned’ (Bhaskar 2009 [1986], 61). In accordance with the true aim of ‘hard science’ activities such as experimentation, therefore, this formulation makes *mechanisms* rather than *covering laws* or *event regularities* the locus of our explanations. In addition to this, it also illustrates that there exist a number of clear affinities between the critical realist approach and the philosophical/methodological perspective that was adopted by influential historical sociologists such as Charles Tilly (2010).<sup>13</sup>

**FIGURE 2: RETRODUCTIVE INFERENCE**<sup>14</sup>



Importantly, however, the critical realist emphasis on retroduction also means that this approach is in fact at odds with both the deductively-oriented neo-positivist approach to the study of civil war and the inductivist alternative to this approach which has been proposed by Ratsimbaharison (2011). This is not to say, however, that these modes of inference should somehow be eliminated from the conflict studies discipline. Rather, it means that they must be provided with a different meaning to the one which they have been given by other approaches to the philosophy of science. In order to understand what exactly this means, however, it will be necessary to return to the depth ontology which Bhaskar develops one final time. This ontology is of importance because it allows us to clarify that the inductive and deductive modes of inference which have been employed by conflict studies authors in the past must be severed from the *empiricist* and the *closed-systems* assumption to which they have traditionally been attached. These modes of inference take on a very different meaning, after all, when they are understood from the perspective of both the ‘structurata ontology’ and the ‘closed/open-systems’ logic which critical realism has developed.

As was shown, this approach claims that (actual/empirical) events are produced by the (real) causal powers of varied types of ‘stuff’. It is the activation of these causal powers in open and (quasi-) closed systems, therefore, that the uses of the inductive and deductive modes of inference apply to as well. If a (set of) mechanism(s) is actualized, its operation is internally stable, and it is operating in a stable context, for instance, we may *deduce* from this that (actual/empirical) patterns of events will continue to take place. Moreover, if an actualized (set of) mechanism(s) is not only internally stable but is also clearly dominating of other actualized (sets of) mechanism(s) within the context with which we are concerned we may *conditionally deduce/predict* that observed patterns of (actual/empirical) events will continue to take place. To the extent that the same (set of) mechanism(s) is actualized in the same systemic circumstances we may furthermore use *inductive* logic to generalize about

(actual/empirical) events that will take place in other spatiotemporal settings. Where such (sets of) mechanisms operate in *open* systems, however, we can no longer reliably generalize at the level of (actual/empirical) events, as counteracting tendencies are likely to alter or (partially) block the operation of the (sets of) mechanism(s) with which we are concerned.<sup>15</sup> From a critical realist perspective we can, however, generalize (as well as theorize) about the ways in which *structurata* operate, as these *structurata* have causal powers that are universal in nature. While patterns of (actual/empirical) events – like the Angolan civil war – are therefore quite *particular* in nature it is by directing our attention towards the causal powers of (real) stuff that a conception of *universality* can quite easily be sustained as well (Bhaskar 1989, 16). Indeed, as a result of drawing on critical realist philosophy we are now in a position to clarify that it is the particular *combination* of causal powers in open and quasi-closed systemic settings, as opposed to their *possession*, in which contingency inheres.<sup>16</sup>

This distinction between generalization at the level of *structurata* and the level of (actual/empirical) *events* is not, however, a distinction that has always clearly been made throughout the conflict studies literature. A clear example of the tensions that have at times resulted from this can be found in Stathis Kalyvas's *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, which explicitly adopts a 'deductive strategy' that is aimed at 'producing hypotheses about empirical variation' (2006. 9, also see 85). This formulation draws on a variety of familiar neo-positivist tropes, and therefore makes it seem like prediction and the verification/falsification of various hypotheses about violent conflict are the aims of his book. Indeed, one plausible interpretation of its aims is in terms of a kind of 'micro-nomotheticism' which is geared towards the development of theories of irregular warfare and microfoundational violence. On the page that follows this reference to deductivism, however, Kalyvas claims that 'contexts may differ, [but] mechanisms recur' (ibid, 10). This is – at least from a critical realist perspective – correct, but what is obscured by his account is an appreciation of the fact that mechanism-based explanations (of which there are many both throughout this book and his work more generally) and 'hard' deductivist research are in fact at odds with one another. We may, for instance, be able to spell out part of the 'deep structure' (ibid, 9) of civil war, as Kalyvas aims to do. Even if we manage to do so, however, it is important to keep in mind that we will not be able to reliably predict developments at the level of (actual/empirical) events, as *structurata* generally operate in open and/or quasi-closed systems. They will, therefore, inevitably interact with the powers of other stuff, and these may modify and/or cancel out their operation. Even if we establish the operation of a *universal* (set of) mechanism(s), therefore, we must, of necessity, engage with the *particular* context in which it/they operate as well. *Universalistic* analyses – such as the 'globalization' framework which Mary Kaldor (2001) sought to advance after the Cold War – are for such reasons unlikely to be fruitful.<sup>17</sup> A similar conclusion applies, however, to idiographic analyses of civil war which have stressed *particularity* at the expense of universality. Just because we cannot reliably generalize at the level of (actual/empirical) events, after all, it does not follow from this that we cannot generalize at all, or that we do not already generalize anyway. Mechanisms, as Kalyvas points out, do indeed tend to recur, and – although their operation in concrete spatiotemporal settings has contingent results at the level of (actual/empirical) events – this does not mean that all forms of universality can (or have been) be eliminated from our analyses of civil war.

Both nomothetic and idiographic research strategies, at least as they have been conventionally understood, are therefore problematic from a critical realist perspective. The first is problematic because it misguidedly attempts to secure the generalizing aims of science at the level of (actual/empirical) events, while such events are actually the more-or-less unique manifestations of '[s]hifting constellations of causal mechanisms' (Steinmetz 2004, 383). Idiographic forms of research are problematic, however, because they have mistakenly taken the non-repeatability/uniqueness of (actual/empirical) events to mean that the

generalizing aims of (especially) the human/social sciences are illusory, while we *can* (and do) in fact generalize at the level of structurata/mechanisms. While (actual/empirical) events such as the Angolan civil war are therefore certainly perfectly unique, it does not follow from this that the mechanisms which caused this war to occur (or endure, develop, terminate, recur, etc.) were also unique. The depth ontology that critical realism has developed prevents us from conflating these different ontological levels and forms of explanation, and thereby paves the way for a new approach to the study of civil war. This approach, instead of fetishizing either the *universal* at the expense of the *particular*, or vice versa, directs our social scientific attention towards providing explanations of the *concrete*, which may be understood as resulting from the complex (conjunctural/multi-causal) ways in which the *universal* powers of (real) stuff combine, very largely in open and/or quasi-closed systems, to form the *particular* events (actual and/or empirical) that take place.

It should be noted, however, that critical realism allows us to problematize an additional assumption that has been prevalent throughout the conflict studies literature as well. This is the assumption that, in order to come to terms with the phenomenon of civil war, it is necessary for us to uncover those factors with which it is regularly conjoined. Such ideas have of course had an impact on large-N/cross-national neo-positivist studies in particular, and can be helpfully disaggregated into two related problems. These will be referred to as the ‘uniformity fallacy’ and ‘regularity determinism’ in the next two sections.

### *Beyond the ‘Uniformity Fallacy’*

The first of these problems results from the fact that, against what Collier simply assumed in the sections that were quoted above, there may very well not *be* such a thing as ‘civil war as a phenomenon’ (2010, 125). That is to say, civil war may not be *a* phenomenon at all, but may be more adequately understood as a *plurality* of phenomena. Although, of course, the civil wars which conflict studies authors research may indeed turn out to have a variety of characteristics in common, it deserves emphasis that it is only *substantive investigations* which can in fact reveal whether or not this is the case. There are, in other words, no good philosophical/methodological reasons to simply *assume* that these authors should aim to uncover the causal pathways which result in a single phenomenon. This critique applies, importantly, to the more disaggregated studies that were discussed above as well. After all, even these disaggregated studies must demonstrate, rather than simply assume, that the implied unit homogeneity of for instance ‘identity conflicts’ is intellectually justified. Without engaging in substantive investigations, however, the adoption of a more disaggregated approach involves significant risks relating to unwarranted forms of generalization as well.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, these kinds of studies fare only marginally better than the large-N/cross-national studies which they have sought to supersede and/or correct.

Instead, conflict studies authors should draw on the philosophical framework which this article has developed in order to create the intellectual space that is required in order to dissociate their discipline from unjustified presumptions of uniformity. Indeed, avoiding the ‘uniformity fallacy’ would not just prevent conflict studies authors from succumbing to unwarranted presumptions of unit homogeneity among (particular types of) civil wars but, importantly, would also open up to substantive investigations the question of whether any example of civil war should itself be plurally-understood. Once we abandon traditional (but misleading) assumptions about the meaning of terms such as ‘science’, after all, there does not appear to be any reason left for us to simply take for granted the idea that concrete examples of civil war should in fact be understood as amounting to one single event, whether diachronically/synchronously or across spatial contexts/within a single spatial context.<sup>19</sup>



Steering clear of the uniformity fallacy would, however, allow conflict studies authors to better address another set of debates that have divided this discipline as well. These debates are concerned with the question of whether civil war in the post-Cold War era should be understood as *Clausewitzian* (political) or *post-Clausewitzian* (economic or cultural), *functional* (as a system) or *dysfunctional* (as the breakdown of a system), *without limit* (total/concentrated) or *without end* (dispersed), *rational* or *affective*, *New* or *Old*, *organized* or *anarchic*, etc. Like the aforementioned large-N/cross-national literature, however, these kinds of debates have too often been predicated on the idea that civil war can be one thing only. This is simply not the case. While (1) it seems likely that trends are indeed apparent within different *historical periods* and *geographical areas*, (2) there are undoubtedly ‘family resemblances’<sup>20</sup> to be found among the various historical and contemporary examples of civil war, and (3) particularly powerful (sets of) mechanisms may indeed result in important (though non-invariant) regularities, this does not entail that the conflict studies discipline as a whole is engaged in the study of a phenomenon which is entirely uniform in terms of its origins, nature, etc. Rather than changing its ‘war story’ from one which has now become defunct to one which is supposedly more adequate, therefore, it is essential that conflict studies authors begin to more systematically *pluralize* the stories they tell.

### *Beyond ‘Regularity Determinism’*

It deserves emphasis, however, that even if the conflict studies discipline *was* in fact concerned with the explanation of an entirely uniform phenomenon (i.e. if ‘unit homogeneity’ could be demonstrated) there would still be no reason to assume that the causal pathways which result in its occurrence are the same, or even similar, in all cases.<sup>21</sup> Just because I get on the bus every time I travel somewhere in London, after all, it does not follow that this empirical event is also brought about by the same, or even similar, causal mechanisms in each case. This assumption remains, however, a prominent feature of both large-N/cross-national studies and the more disaggregated and geographically-/temporally-restricted studies of civil war that were discussed above, as authors who have pursued these forms of research have their philosophical/methodological roots in nomothetically-oriented forms of neo-positivism. This has, as we have seen, resulted in attempts to uncover robust correlations between a large number of variables and the initiation/continuation/etc. of civil war in a wide variety of very different spatiotemporal settings. Precluded from consideration in the adoption of such a philosophical/methodological strategy, however, is the fact that any particular causal factor may indeed be extremely important when it comes to the explanation of one instance of (a particular type of) civil war, but irrelevant when it comes to the explanation of another. The results that both large-N/cross-national and more disaggregated and geographically-/temporally-restricted neo-positivist studies provide us with are, after all, representative only of the *mean* effect that a particular causal factor has had in all of the times/places that were considered. This, inevitably, does not tell us very much about the causes of any specific situation. Indeed, these mean values (1) continue to be insufficiently attentive to historical and geographical context, and (2) are likely to be, and have in fact already shown themselves to be, incredibly poor guides to understanding any concrete civil war. This results from the fact that neo-positivist studies, by relying on such mean values, succumb to what Bhaskar (2008 [1975], 60) has termed ‘regularity determinism’, a term which describes the assumption that the same (type of) event always has the same (type of) cause. As this assumption is not in fact philosophically/methodologically warranted, however, the nomothetically-oriented approach to conflict studies deserves to be treated with the utmost scepticism, despite its (entirely undeserved) monopolization of the term ‘science’.

## *Beyond Reformism*

More generally, however, it deserves emphasis that the arguments which the previous two sections have developed suggest that *reformist responses* to neo-positivist problems – such as those which focus on disaggregating the category of civil war, resolving data/technical problems, or restricting the time period/geographical range – simply will not allow us to overcome the obstacles that result from this approach. Instead, more *radical responses* to (neo-)positivist problems are required if the conflict studies discipline is to begin alleviating the crisis that was alluded to at the start of this article. Such radical responses should, in particular, make use of the ways in which critical realism allows us to both rethink and reclaim causal analysis (along with metaphysics and the ‘externality’ of natural necessity) in order to begin the more comprehensive task of rethinking and reclaiming science as such. Importantly, this would involve overturning the neo-positivist tendency to reduce history and geography to a ‘context-less data set or passive record through which abstract formulas, concepts and hypotheses can be assessed’ (Lawson 2010, 210). Indeed, it would involve putting to an end the merger between *science* and *a-historicism/a-geographicism* which has been effected by (neo-)positivism, and replacing this framework with an approach to scientific enquiry which is inherently *contextual* in nature.

The critical realist approach arguably paves the way for exactly this kind of framework. In particular, it paves the way for a contextual approach to social science by (1) shifting our focus away from the type of *universalism* which characterizes nomothetically-oriented approaches, (2) shifting our focus away from the type of *particularism* which characterizes idiographically-oriented approaches, and (3) shifting our focus towards systematic engagements with the *concrete* (historical/geographical) settings in which civil wars take place. This – along with its broader theorization of causality – has a number of distinct analytical advantages. First, it allows us to reclaim diversity – both in terms of the causal pathways that result in civil war and in terms of the diverse nature of these wars themselves – for social science by moving past ‘regularity determinism’ and the ‘uniformity fallacy’. Indeed, critical realism illustrates that, if it is to be effective at all, social science must systematically *engage with*, rather than just *abstract from*, diversity. Second, its focus on the concrete has the advantage of allowing us to both *historicize/spatialize* and *generalize* at the same time. This is the case because the ‘depth ontology’ which critical realism has developed clarifies that *generalization* occurs at the level of *structurata/mechanisms*, while *historicization/spatialization* takes place at the level of (actual/empirical) events. This matters because it overcomes the oft-encountered split between historical/geographical and scientific disciplines, and – importantly – re-integrates these disciplines into a contextual approach to social science which embraces the role of both historical/geographical narrative *and* causal explanation. Finally, the critical realist theorization of causality as a phenomenon which is characterized by a conjunctural logic has the advantage of allowing us to reject the neo-positivist search for a parsimonious (or even mono-causal) theory of (certain types of) civil war in favour of an approach to social science which embraces the principles of multi-causality/co-determination and complexity. Importantly, however, its adoption of these principles does not – as has commonly happened to idiographically-oriented studies of civil war in the past – result in the kind of ‘anti-parsimony’ or ‘absolute particularism’ to which various conflict studies authors have commonly objected. Rather, the critical realist insistence that causal mechanisms are likely to recur in different historical/geographical contexts means that – despite the uniqueness/non-repeating nature of (actual/empirical) events – civil wars can in fact be made intelligible by means of our social scientific investigations, especially when these investigations draw on our collective knowledge about the operation and effects of causal mechanisms in other civil war settings.

## Conclusion

On the whole it seems clear, therefore, that the mechanism-based understanding of causality which critical realism has developed is able to provide the conflict studies discipline with a significant number of the philosophical/methodological tools which it requires in order to begin to alleviate the crisis that was identified at the start of this article. As we have seen, this crisis has resulted from the fact that conflict studies authors have developed a variety of very different approaches which have consistently made competing/contradictory claims. The understanding of causality which critical realism has developed, however, allows us to better discriminate between the veracity of these claims, as it allows us to move past one particularly important source of these disagreements. In particular, this understanding allows us to move past the persistent split between *nomothetically-oriented* and *idiographically-oriented* approaches to the study of civil war. As this split has continued to both *divide* the discipline and *impede* its development this is clearly of significant importance.

With regard to its more specific contributions, however, this article has shown that drawing on critical realist philosophy would allow conflict studies authors to counter the influence of the ‘epistemic fallacy’, ‘regularity determinism’, and the ‘uniformity fallacy’. Indeed, at a more constructive level, it has illustrated that doing so would help these authors to (1) shift attention towards the use of *retroductive* logic, while severing the *inductive* and *deductive* modes of inference from the empiricist and closed-systems positions to which they have traditionally been attached, (2) shift attention away from the kinds of *universalism* and *particularism* that characterize nomothetically- and ideographically-oriented approaches towards a focus on *concrete* civil war settings, (3) shift attention away from *mono-causal* (and parsimonious) to *multi-causal/conjunctural* (and relatively complex) explanations of civil war, (4) shift attention away from *predictive power* to *explanatory power*, and (5) make *mechanisms* rather than *covering laws* or *regularities* the locus of both our explanations of actual/empirical events (the realm of the applied sciences) and theorizations (the realm of the abstract/pure sciences). Importantly, however, this article has also shown that drawing on critical realist philosophy would allow the conflict studies discipline as a whole to do all of this without (1) rejecting, or restricting the range of, scientific forms of investigation, (2) rejecting, or restricting the range of, causal forms of explanation, and (3) nullifying our ability to engage in certain types of cross-context generalization (i.e. succumbing to ‘generalization anxiety’). More generally, however, this article has shown that the mechanism-based understanding of causality which critical realism has developed would allow us to begin the important process of rethinking and reclaiming the notion of science by developing an approach to the study of civil war which is systematically contextual (historically-/geographically-sensitive) in nature. If this approach is in fact adopted by conflict studies authors this would – for a variety of reasons – have a transformational effect on the discipline. It would, for instance, drastically alter the discipline’s understanding of what is ‘good’ and ‘bad’ research, it would undermine the power and prestige that is currently associated with various prominent journals, and it could even help to open up prevailing patterns of peer review, research funding, hiring, etc.

Before we get ahead of ourselves, however, three issues are worth keeping firmly in mind. First, it should be noted that a critical realist-based approach to the study of civil war would not have to start its investigations from scratch. There remains, after all, much that is of use within especially the existing ideographically-oriented literature, even if the philosophical/methodological positions which this part of the conflict studies literature have historically been rooted in are problematic. Second, it deserves emphasis that (1) the ideographic and nomothetic approaches which this article has sought to transcend are by no means the only post-Cold War approaches to conflict studies, and (2) mechanism-based

approaches, such as those by Kalyvas and Tilly that were alluded to above, already exist. These approaches, while they have been unable to provide the conflict studies discipline with a philosophical/methodological basis which is sufficiently rigorous in nature, can nonetheless provide a critical realist approach to the study of civil war with a significant amount of the empirical and/or theoretical resources which it requires. The adoption of a dismissive attitude towards the existing conflict studies literature is therefore by no means warranted if we also choose to endorse the mechanism-based understanding of causality which critical realist philosophy of science has developed.

Finally, one additional issue should be kept in mind as well. This issue concerns the fact that none of the aforementioned claims about the superiority of a critical realist understanding of causality should be read as suggesting that the aforementioned lack of disciplinary consensus can simply be *resolved* by adopting this understanding. There are, after all, very good reasons to believe that philosophical/methodological forms of reasoning – no matter how sophisticated they may become – can never fully eliminate the existence of competing and contradictory theorizations/explanations. Indeed, there are very good reasons to believe that theory choice is likely to forever remain an extremely precarious process, even if we do subscribe to the critical realist approach to understanding causality. This approach could, in fact, be argued to add to earlier discussions about why theory choice is often such a problematic process, as the depth ontology which earlier sections have described has a number of important epistemological implications as well. For instance, as a result of this ontology critical realist philosophy has commonly sought to draw attention to the fact that those sciences in which experimentation is either impossible or rarely-useful are ‘denied, in principle, decisive test situations for their theories’ (Bhaskar 1998 [1979], 50). This observation adds to existing discussions about the precarious nature of theory choice because it suggests that (1) the creation of an artificially-closed system which shields or isolates causal mechanisms from counteracting forces is very largely impossible for social scientists, especially those working on the tumultuous issue of civil war, and (2) the creation of such an artificial form of closure is of significant importance if we are to ensure that our tests provide us with decisive forms of verification and/or falsification for our theoretical claims. From a critical realist perspective it seems clear, therefore, that the ‘hard scientific’ aim of fully eliminating competing and contradictory theorizations/explanations from our accounts of civil war – that is, the creation of a consensus which is final, complete, and perfect – is extremely unlikely to be realized. Indeed, from this perspective, our accounts of civil war are likely to forever remain incomplete, partial, provisional, subject to refinement, and open to iterative improvements. A consistent commitment to both epistemic modesty and a significant degree of theoretical pluralism is therefore clearly warranted by the adoption of a critical realist philosophical/methodological perspective.

While a lack of disciplinary consensus cannot simply be *resolved* by drawing on critical realism, however, this does not mean that it cannot be *alleviated* in this manner. Despite its rejection of foundationalism, after all, critical realism has maintained that science can in fact make progress, and that it is often possible to arbitrate between competing and contradictory claims. Knowledge can therefore be *accumulated* and is not – as some of the more radical proponents of post-modern theory have suggested – merely *performed*. While, as authors like Andrew Bennet have shown, there do not appear to exist any ‘simple or infallible standards for theory choice [...] useful standards [do] exist for judging theoretical progress and assessing some interpretations and explanations to be superior to others’ (2013, 470). In order to engage in such assessments conflict studies authors might, for instance, make use of a number of common criteria for the evaluation of different theoretical claims, ranging from logical coherence to empirical support, theoretical realism, and explanatory power. More important for the purposes of this article, however, is the fact that re-focusing

our efforts on concrete civil wars would make the alleviation of theoretical disputes much more feasible. As opposed to attempting to mitigate a persistent lack of consensus by seeking to explain either a completely or a partially de-historicized, de-spatialized, and uniform notion of civil war, after all, this would shift our attention towards the diverse and historically-/geographically-specific civil wars which social scientists actually encounter, and which their various victims are either forced to live through or die from. It is arguably only by re-focusing our efforts in this way that questions about the causes and nature of civil war can potentially be addressed, and that relatively robust forms of knowledge can potentially be developed. Indeed, while this is unlikely to be a linear, monistic, or straightforwardly-cumulative process, it is only by re-focusing in such a manner that (1) inferences to the best explanation (so-called ‘abductive inferences’) have the potential to succeed, and (2) the path towards an ‘intermediate’ (not too ‘hard’ and not too ‘soft’) social scientific approach to the study of civil war can be cleared. The dominant neo-positivist strategy of attempting to uncover a probabilistic/quasi-nomothetic/quasi-deductivist/quasi-falsificationist and parsimonious theory of (particular types of) civil war which subsumes every instance of this phenomenon under a covering law, however, is ill-fated.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Bhaskar’s later work has become increasingly controversial, even (or especially) among critical realists. The version of critical realism which I employ throughout this article, however, is perhaps best described as ‘basic’ critical realism. That is to say, I employ the positions that were developed in Bhaskar’s earlier work – and which were enriched/corrected by various other authors – without drawing on his later dialectical or spiritual writings. As of yet, I remain unconvinced of the position that Bhaskar has adopted in these writings.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this article I will employ the term (neo-)positivism in an essentially heuristic or ideal-typical manner. That is to say, I use this term as a practical shorthand for a number of related propositions about the nature of science and causal explanation, all of which continue to exert a significant amount of influence throughout especially the human/social sciences. It deserves emphasis, however, that, at an historical level, this inevitably has the effect of obscuring the existence of a significant degree of diversity and disagreement among those authors who developed what are now commonly held to be the key tenets of (neo-)positivism. For instance, while contemporary (neo-)positivists generally incorporate at least some of the tenets of falsificationism into their work, this approach in fact has its historical roots in the ‘critical rationalism’ that was pioneered by Karl Popper, a critic of empiricism and ‘logical positivism’. The historical reality of (neo-)positivism is therefore significantly more ‘messy’ than will be made apparent throughout this article.

<sup>3</sup> This approach is referred to by a number of analogous terms as well. The most prominent among these are the deductive-nomological (or D-N) model of explanation and the Popper-Hempel model of explanation. A related notion is the idea of Humean constant conjunctions of events.

<sup>4</sup> These causal mechanisms range widely from greed and grievance to broader types of motives, preferences, opportunities, values, etc.

<sup>5</sup> Neo-positivist studies of civil war have faced persistent problems with (1) distinguishing between causal and non-causal (spurious) regularities, (2) establishing when hypothesized causes and effects are reversed, (3) engaging with interaction effects, and (4) establishing the equivalence and/or adequacy of proxies. For further discussions of these kinds of problems see for instance Cramer (2002, 2006) and Blattman and Miguel (2010).

<sup>6</sup> On historians and their relationship with inductive/deductive generalization see Lawson (2010, especially 210)

<sup>7</sup> Though it deserves emphasis that especially new materialist approaches have not applied these kinds of arguments exclusively to the human/social realm.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, as Mark Bevir and Jason Blakely (2015: 41) have shown, interpretive/hermeneutic approaches – though commonly associated with small-scale research – do not in fact need to be tied to this scale.

<sup>9</sup> Importantly, many of the early proponents of interpretive/hermeneutic work did not in fact reject causal analysis as such. On the causal thought of Max Weber, for instance, see Ringer (2002).

<sup>10</sup> Or, using Clifford Geertz’s well-known term, it must be ‘thickly described’ (1973, see especially chapter 1).

<sup>11</sup> We can think of these claims as the philosophical/scientific equivalent of common-sense statements such as ‘there is more than meets the eye’ (trans-phenomenality) and ‘appearances can be deceiving’ (counter-phenomenality).

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<sup>12</sup> Indeed, as Collier comments, '[w]e could imagine a possible world in which everything there was to be known could be discovered in this way. But if, in *our* world, we restricted ourselves to such sources of knowledge, we would never have got out of the Middle Ages' (1994, 32).

<sup>13</sup> On critical realism and historical sociology more generally see especially Steinmetz 1998

<sup>14</sup> This figure is a simplified version of the figure which is provided by Danermark *et al* (2001, 77).

<sup>15</sup> As Bhaskar has argued, causal powers may 'be possessed unexercised, exercised unrealized, and realized unperceived (or undetected)' (2008 [1975], 175). This means, amongst other things, that a distinction must be made between the existence of causal powers and their effects. In addition to this, however, it also means that causal mechanisms may be said to operate *transfactually*; that is, 'independently of any particular sequence or pattern of events' (Bhaskar, 2008 [1975], 3).

<sup>16</sup> This is, importantly, a position which I intend to qualify somewhat in a future article, as I consider Bhaskar's 'thin' account of the role of meaning in sociocultural life to be in need of some 'thickening' if it is to adequately account for the constitutive (as opposed to the representational) function of semiotic practices.

<sup>17</sup> From the perspective of critical realist philosophy Mats Berdal was therefore correct when he claimed that the problem with analyses such as the one that is favoured by Kaldor lies in their totalising pretensions, and 'the deeply distorting effect this invariably has on any effort to understand individual cases and specific mechanisms at work' (2003, 480)

<sup>18</sup> This is especially problematic because neo-positivists – as a result of the naturalist approach that informs their work – neglect the fact that human behaviour is, at least at times, the manifestation of forms of meaning which are highly contextual in nature. The meaning of appeals to 'ethnicity' (whatever that means) in various civil war settings therefore cannot simply be taken for granted, but must be investigated. This is a point that I intend to develop in greater depth in the same article that I referred to (above) in endnote number 15.

<sup>19</sup> More radically still, the conflict studies discipline could take an additional step by more systematically reflecting – as authors like Florea (2012), Blattman and Miguel (2010), and Cramer (2006) have already urged it to do – on the distinction which has historically grounded their discipline; the distinction, that is, between civil war and other forms of war and violence.

<sup>20</sup> Hidemi Suganami (1996, 190-195) was, it seems, the first to apply this (Wittgensteinian) term to the study of war. My encounter with it, however, was in the work of Christopher Cramer (2006, 94, 136).

<sup>21</sup> A similar argument is made by Suganami, who writes that the '[o]rigins of wars are so diverse that [...] there is no one item which can be considered as the underlying cause of all wars' (1996, 190).

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