

# Civil Wars as Critical Junctures: Theoretical Grounding and Empirical Applications

Kai M. Thaler, University of California, Santa Barbara<sup>1</sup>

*Civil wars are not only destructive: they can also give birth to new, long-lasting social, political, and economic structures and processes. To account for this productive potential of civil wars and analyze post-conflict changes, I argue that we should view civil wars as critical junctures. Civil wars relax structural constraints, opening opportunities for changes generated by wartime processes. The results of the conflict can lock in these changes, creating path dependency. Government victory may foreclose change (critical junctures do not necessarily lead to transformation), but governments can also make lasting reforms in response to conflicts. Rebel victory, meanwhile, has major potential for statebuilding and societal transformation, depending on rebel group ideology. Finally, negotiated settlements can institutionalize a new balance of domestic political power. The liminal period as a war approaches resolution is therefore a crucial moment for postwar political, social, and economic development, and for the likelihood of conflict recurrence. I illustrate the benefits of a critical junctures approach to civil wars in the literature on women's empowerment during and after war, and I discuss how a critical junctures framework may prove useful for studies of civil war using methods beyond its traditional application in comparative historical analysis.*

## Introduction

Since the rise of nation-states, civil war has been seen as an aberration, a breakdown of normal relations within societies that had ostensibly advanced beyond the stage of anarchic, localized competition among specialists in violence.<sup>2</sup> Though long a feature of human history, civil war “has gradually become the most widespread, the most destructive, and now the most characteristic form of organised human violence” (Armitage 2009, 18).<sup>3</sup> Despite the destruction inherent in civil wars and the ways they break social bonds and political and economic relations, they may also be productive and generative, leading to the creation of new orders and institutions. Civil wars,

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Global Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara ([thaler@ucsb.edu](mailto:thaler@ucsb.edu)). Paper prepared for the 2022 APSA Annual Meeting, Montreal. This research was supported in part by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. I am grateful for comments on earlier versions from Sophia Dawkins, Colin Elman, Nelson Kasfir, Terrence Lyons, Salih Noor, Tricia Sullivan, and participants at the 2018 Southwest Workshop on Mixed Methods Research, 2020 APSA Annual Meeting, and 2022 ISA Annual Convention.

<sup>2</sup> On this stage of violent competition in stateless societies, see Bates, Greif, and Singh (2002) and North, Wallis, and Weingast (2009).

<sup>3</sup> See Mann (2018), Pettersson and Wallensteen (2015), and Wimmer and Min (2006, 2009) for data and analysis on changing levels and characters of interstate and intrastate war.

however, may also durably reinforce the status quo in cases of successful counterinsurgency and government victory, representing temporary breaches in preexisting structures and hierarchies—breaches that failed to widen to create enduring change.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, I argue, civil wars are critical junctures: moments of possibility in which the long-term institutional trajectory of a state and society *can* be rapidly shifted, depending on the manner in which the conflict is resolved and actors' post-conflict behavior.

Lower-level conflicts with at least 25 battle deaths per year are the most prevalent form of organized civil conflict (Pettersson and Wallensteen 2015) and many rebellions never advance beyond a few initial anti-state attacks (Lewis 2017, 2020). These low-level conflicts may create societal changes on a localized scale. My focus, however, is on the national level and the potential for civil conflict to create institutional changes to state and nation. I therefore follow Sambanis's (2004) definition of civil war as entailing competition between the state and an effective, organized armed resistance group in a sustained violent conflict that causes at least 500 deaths over the course of its first year. Different violence and battle death thresholds may affect the analysis of civil war and its effects both conceptually and empirically (Anderson and Worsnop 2016; Sambanis 2004), but this definition means that a civil war lasts long enough and involves significant enough violent contestation of state power that wartime social processes and orders and their postwar effects (Shesterinina 2022; Staniland 2012; E. J. Wood 2008) can diverge from the status quo ante.

I explore the analytical utility of critical junctures analysis and its applicability to the study of civil wars and their consequences. I then discuss how the existing literature touches on aspects of civil wars as critical junctures, but has not explicitly embraced the critical junctures framework.

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<sup>4</sup> Cramer (2006, 279) states pithily, “the conflicts and activities in which violence is involved are not always purely destructive. In destroying, violence can also keep things in place; it can even set in motion change and the construction of the new.”

This framework's potential application is then explored, focusing on the example of war's effect on women's role in politics and society. I then discuss methodological considerations for critical junctures analysis and critical junctures' analytical utility in studying related phenomena, revolutions and coups. The conclusion discusses opportunities for further research applying critical junctures to the study of civil wars and post-conflict political, social, and economic relations and outcomes.

### **Critical Junctures as Concept and Analytical Tool**

Critical junctures were developed fully as a concept by Collier and Collier (1991) in their path-breaking study of political development in Latin America, building on Lipset and Rokkan (1967).<sup>5</sup> Scholars have since refined the critical junctures concept and developed methodological principles to study them. Collier and Collier (1991, 29) define a critical juncture as “as a period of significant change, which typically occurs in distinct ways in different countries (or in other units of analysis) and which is hypothesized to produce distinct legacies.” The critical juncture framework need not be used only in comparative, cross-case analyses, but can also be fruitfully applied to single case studies in which a marked divergence from past patterns is noted (Pierson 2004; Slater and Simmons 2010). Critical junctures analyses often focus on *change*, with Slater and Simmons (2010, 888) arguing critical junctures are “periods in history when the presence or absence of a specified causal force pushes multiple cases onto divergent long-term pathways, or pushes a single case onto a new political trajectory that diverges significantly from the old.”

Another school of thought, however, argues divergent outcomes are less important than the *contingency* and *opportunities for agency* (see especially Mahoney 2001) that emerge when a

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<sup>5</sup> See Capoccia (2016) and Collier and Munck (2022) for recent surveys of the critical junctures literature.

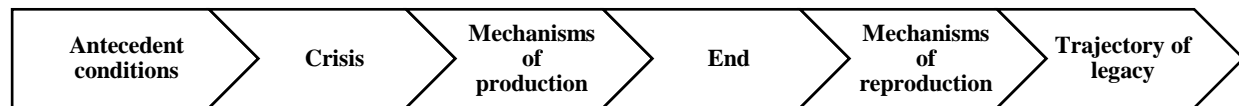
critical juncture opens. Soifer's (2012) specification of critical junctures' causal logic focuses on the presence or absence of permissive and productive conditions. Permissive conditions loosen structural constraints, enabling possible change, while productive conditions are those that, when permissive conditions are present, "produce the outcome or range of outcomes that are then reproduced after the permissive conditions disappear and the juncture comes to a close" (Soifer 2012, 1573). Capoccia and Kelemen (2007, 348) likewise emphasize that critical junctures are "relatively short periods of time during which there is a substantially heightened probability that agents' choices will affect the outcome of interest."

While Soifer (2012, 1574–75, 1580) holds when permissive conditions are present but major, divergent change does not occur, it is a "crisis without change or missed opportunity," I follow Capoccia and Kelemen (2007) in considering cases where permissive conditions were present and change was possible but did not occur to still be critical junctures. Even though rapid, major change is *possible*, the high contingency of a critical juncture means it may also revert to and reinforce the status quo ante: "Hence, *change is not a necessary element of a critical juncture*" (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007, 352 emphasis added). Even analyses focused on divergence should still consider negative cases, too, where change did not occur under similar conditions.

As shown in Figure 1 below, critical junctures have six elements (R. B. Collier and Collier 1991, 30–31; Soifer 2012, 1579). *Antecedent conditions* are the preexisting state of affairs and the basis against which change must be assessed, with special attention to 'critical antecedents' (Slater and Simmons 2010) that may exert causal influence independently of or in interaction with productive conditions during the critical juncture. A *cleavage* or *crisis* that develops from the antecedent conditions provides the permissive conditions to open the critical juncture and create possibilities for change. *Mechanisms of production* are the factors that shape the critical juncture's

and the change that might occur. The *end of the critical juncture* is the point at which the permissive conditions that opened the critical juncture are no longer present and a new status quo solidifies, reducing contingency. *Mechanisms of reproduction* are processes that reinforce and perpetuate the legacy of this particular critical juncture after the juncture is closed. Productive conditions can contribute to mechanisms of reproduction if they are institutionalized and retained after the juncture is closed, helping lock in the outcome path and creating path dependency (see e.g. Mahoney 2000; Pierson 2004). Finally, the *trajectory of the legacy* is the stability over time of the legacy’s key elements, continuing to the point at which the legacy ends and the critical juncture’s outcomes cease to outweigh more proximate causes related to dependent variables of interest.

**Figure 1. Elements in a critical juncture sequence**



**Civil Wars within a Critical Junctures Framework**

How might civil wars fit as critical junctures within the definitions and applications established by the current methodological literature? The idea of critical junctures as crises or “unsettled times” (Capoccia 2016, 89) easily fits civil wars. Revisiting Collier and Collier’s (1991, 29) definition of a critical juncture as “a period of significant change, which typically occurs in distinct ways in different countries (or in other units of analysis) and which is hypothesized to produce distinct legacies,” civil wars appear to clearly match these criteria, so long as we specify them as periods of significant *potential* change. Civil wars do represent a significant change from ‘peacetime’ life and vary widely across and within countries in the salient cleavages and motivations between

belligerent groups and governments, levels of violence, technologies and organization of fighting forces, conflict outcomes, and other factors (Kalyvas 2009; Kalyvas and Balcells 2010; Kreutz 2010; Lyall and Wilson 2009; Sambanis 2004; Weinstein 2007).<sup>6</sup>

Civil wars are moments of contingency and potentially heightened agency, in which single battles or strategic choices may mark clear tuning points in the downstream trajectory of the conflict and the country at large, and the qualities of individual or collective leaders loom large in decision making, organization, and the fate of belligerent groups (Abrahms and Potter 2015; Bakke, Cunningham, and Seymour 2012; Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis 2015; Jordan 2009; Lutmar and Terris 2016; Prorok 2016; Sargsyan and Bennett 2016; Tiernay 2015). The rationalist literature on civil wars as bargaining failures (e.g. Fearon 1995; Walter 2009) highlights that, while constrained by structural factors, information asymmetries, and uncertainty, leaders' decisions still play a central role in determining moments of onset, change, and resolution in civil wars. Within civil wars, leaders have choices of ideologies and methods for mobilization and political planning, choices over strategy and tactics, and decisions about what goals to pursue. Civil wars and their processes also produce distinct institutional legacies across and between conflict-affected countries or regions and units that were not affected by conflict or in which wartime processes took a different form (Blattman 2009; Gates et al. 2012; Hegre and Nygård 2015; Selbin 1999; Thaler 2018; Walter 2015).

In applying a critical junctures framework to studying civil wars, one must account for each of the different elements of a critical juncture, from antecedents to end to legacies. One must also choose dependent variables of interest that may be produced by a specific wartime process,

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<sup>6</sup> Though in some cases of limited state influence and capacity and pervasive violence, civil war may be more a continuation of prior patterns of violence, rather than a clear change (see e.g. Debois 2016 on Chad).

in order to trace that process's impact and how it may create path dependencies shaping post-conflict political, social, or economic life.

Some research on a state and society's general pre-war background is always necessary, but the dependent variable(s) of interest will determine what antecedents are relevant to closely examine and trace through the critical juncture. The beginning of a civil war in which rebels seek institutional change (not only a change of leadership) and the escalation from a pre-conflict status quo to violent contestation of state power marks a permissive condition that can also open the possibility for major, rapid, and durable change institutional change (see also Shesterinina 2022). One overarching productive condition for change is sufficient rebel power to either a) carve out significant areas of influence in which to exercise rebel governance (e.g. Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly 2015; Mampilly 2011); b) force the state into significant policy changes or concessions; or c) topple the existing government and then pursue desired institutional changes.

The specific objects of institutional contestation or possible reform will depend on rebel and government goals and strength, and researchers' particular outcome(s) of interest. The outcome of the critical juncture is the set of institutions that are produced or reinforced by wartime processes, while the critical juncture ends not necessarily with the termination of the civil war, but when post-conflict political power is consolidated sufficiently that institutions stabilize. The mechanisms of reproduction are those institutions or institutional changes that emerged or were reified during wartime and that persist after the conflict has ended, continuing to shape policy and practice. These institutions or changes generate continued downstream consequences until another civil war or other crisis creates a critical juncture that once again permits rapid and major institutional change.

Different types of civil war resolutions can be considered as either permissive or productive conditions for reinforcing and reproducing wartime processes or solidifying new institutions, inducing variation in downstream structural, policy, and behavioral effects. Institutions built or changed by the government or rebels may have lasting effects regardless of the ultimate war outcome, however. Governments defeat many rebel movements early on or they reach peace agreements in which rebel leaders are coopted by the government, but government mobilization efforts or the integration of former rebels into the state and society can still have lasting effects (e.g. Lewis 2020). Kubota (2017) shows how wartime rebel governance in Sri Lanka had enduring political effects in areas of rebel influence, despite an eventual crushing government victory, and Huang (2016) likewise finds lasting political legacies of rebel governance across conflict outcomes. A definitive end to a civil war also is not necessary for the critical juncture to have closed, since the structural contingency and opportunities presented by conflict may close and stabilize while conflict persists at a low intensity or without any formal resolution. Southern Sudan experienced durable institutional changes due to its civil war against the government in Khartoum, which in the 1990s and early 2000s had settled into a stalemate and de facto southern independence ahead of formal independence in 2011 (e.g. Rolandsen 2005). The hurting stalemate that developed in Ukraine's civil war against separatists and Russian personnel in the eastern regions after 2014 led to major institutional changes in the Ukrainian military and increased the proportion of the population with combat experience and strongly nationalist sentiments, which offered major advantages when Russia launched a full-scale invasion in 2022 (Bonenberger 2022). Therefore, it should be possible to undertake a critical junctures analysis tracing institutions through a civil war no matter the war's outcome.



## Critical Junctures in the Existing Civil Wars Literature

The existing mainstream literature on civil wars has tended not to apply the critical junctures framework or to intersect significantly with historical institutionalism (see Berry 2018 for an exception).<sup>7</sup> Discrete moments may be discussed as critical junctures within a civil war, and rebel leaders themselves may use the term to refer to a particular battle or shift in operations. For example, Darfurian leader and Sudan Liberation Army adviser Sharif Harir described the opening of new operations in North Darfur to Roessler (2016, 191) as “a ‘critical juncture’ as ‘there was no government of Sudan presence’ in the region.” While this may have been a turning point in the conflict, it was not a critical juncture in the scholarly sense, but rather a tactical change with limited institutional consequences. More accurately, Ugandan scholar Joe Oloka-Onyango (1993, 513) saw the country’s civil war and National Resistance Army rebel victory as a critical juncture for national political development, stating:

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

Comparative studies of social revolutions take more seriously the idea that revolutions are moments of potential rapid, major societal change, though they have tended to focus more on why revolutionary seizures of power happen than on their consequences (Foran 2005; Goodwin 2001; Skocpol 1979). Serious comparative consideration of agency and contingency in revolutionary moments and their aftermaths has been rarer (though see Lawson 2019; Selbin 1997, 1999). Considerations of the impact of revolutions on military organization and war-making have been

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<sup>7</sup> This lack of crossover has also afflicted international security studies (Solingen and Wan 2016). Reyntjens (2020) is also exceptional in taking a critical junctures approach to examining the interaction of interstate and civil conflict in Africa.

common (Adelman 1985; Colgan and Lucas 2017; Gurr 1988; Kim 2018; Skocpol 1988; Walt 1996), but the revolutions subfield often failed to examine other institutional effects.

Scholars of regime durability, however, have recently incorporated insights from the revolutions literature to examine how wartime institutions and experiences may contribute to stronger, more cohesive single-party or competitive authoritarian regimes following rebel victory in a civil war (Lachapelle et al. 2020; Levitsky and Way 2012, 2013, 2016; Lyons 2016a, 2016b). Sustained, ideologically-motivated successful violent struggle destroys alternative power centers in society, creates in-group cohesion within the rebel organization-turned-ruling party, generates strong ties between leaders and the security forces, and leaves powerful security apparatuses (Lachapelle et al. 2020; Levitsky and Way 2012, 2013, 2022). While not explicitly discussed by Levitsky and Way and Lyons as critical junctures, it is clear in their accounts that civil wars and the need to organize for violent struggle entail both the destruction of old sociopolitical institutions and the construction of new ones, creating long-lasting legacies locked in and reproduced after rebel victory. García-Ponce and Wantchekon (2022), meanwhile, have explicitly adopted a critical junctures framework, arguing that the end of colonialism was a critical juncture in which the independence movement's form shaped long-term regime trajectories: countries with urban anti-colonial protest movements more likely to be democratic and counties with rural insurgencies more likely to become autocratic. In contrast to the revolutionary route to regime durability, Slater (2010) argues that moments of crisis and threats of subaltern insurgency may forge new and durable counterrevolutionary alliances and institutions among the state and societal elites, shaping subsequent national political development.

Similarly, scholars of statebuilding have considered the potential role of civil wars in shaping longer-term state building trajectories, though only sometimes adopting a critical junctures

approach. There is a large literature on the role of interstate war or its absence in state formation or long-term statebuilding (Barnett 1992; Centeno 2002; Herbst 2000; Lu and Thies 2012; Thies 2005; Tilly 1985, 1990). The consideration of civil wars' effects has been more limited in this 'bellicist' literature, with mixed results (Kisangani and Pickering 2014; Porter 1994; Rasler and Thompson 1989; Slater 2010; Thies 2005, 2006; Vu 2010).

Modern statebuilding and institutional change have tended to follow a 'punctuated equilibrium' model of long periods of stasis and critical moments of rapid evolution (Krasner 1984), yet only Slater (2010) and Vu (2010) take specific critical juncture approaches. Both argue that the post-1945 moment of rapid state formation, as Japanese and European colonialism were retreating from East and Southeast Asia, was a critical juncture. For Slater (2010), the varying intensity of contention and threats from the masses led to divergent authoritarian statebuilding patterns in Southeast Asia, while for Vu (2010), variation in intra-elite and elite-mass relations led Asian states down divergent developmental paths depending on accommodation or confrontation between these collective elite and mass actors. Both authors focus on civil war or the threat of it as a potential occurrence within a broader regional critical juncture, but not on civil war itself as a critical juncture. Dorman (2006) more specifically examines the role of rebellion in shaping statebuilding trajectories, implicitly treating civil wars as critical junctures and the ideas, institutions, and experiences of rebel organizations during war as generating particular statebuilding strategies, while Arias and De la Calle (2021) look at how variation in local mobilization during the Mexican War of Independence had long-run effects on local statebuilding and local government capacity.

Building on these regime and statebuilding literatures, and studies of civil war and rebel governance, Thaler (2018) takes a more explicit approach to civil wars as critical junctures,

comparing across three victorious rebel organizations that emerged in similar structural circumstances in Liberia, Nicaragua, and Uganda, though he fails to analyze each element of the critical junctures. He argues that rebel leaders' varying ideals and goals led them to create different internal institutions and relations with civilians during their rebellions, creating self-reinforcing patterns carrying over into statebuilding and service provision efforts once they controlled the state, resulting in either limited statebuilding and private accumulation of public resources or efforts to build infrastructural power and deliver public services. Thaler argues that the breakdown of preexisting state institutions during the civil war created the scope in each case for wide-ranging institutional change, but that where leaders lacked the ideational drive to exercise agency and try to implement it, there was less divergence from the status quo ante.

Other studies of civil wars have not so explicitly taken up the critical junctures mantle, though there are many whose ideas and findings suggest possibilities to do so. Beyond regime durability and statebuilding efforts, a range of political, social, and economic institutions may be affected by civil war processes to which a critical junctures analysis could be applied. As Skocpol (1979) highlights, however, even in social revolutions, many institutions may remain unchanged, so scholars applying a critical juncture framework in examining consequences of civil wars should specify in which areas they expect to see changes or stasis, rather than focusing on wholesale systemic change.

Within the growing civil wars literature, a number of areas of study that seem ripe for critical junctures analyses. Though it has long been a subject of scholarly interest (Deonandan, Close, and Prevost 2007; Manning 1998, 2007; de Zeeuw 2007), there has been increasingly sophisticated data gathering and studies of rebel organizations' transitions to political parties after civil wars and their participation and performance in postwar elections (Ishiyama and Widmeier

2020; Matanock 2016; Söderberg Kovacs and Hatz 2016; Zaks 2017). Zaks' (2017) mixed methods work links decisions about wartime organizational structure to postconflict party building patterns using cross-national statistical analyses to capture aggregate patterns and process-tracing case studies for theory testing and mechanism examination. This type of analysis could provide a platform for a critical junctures analysis that traces the organization building opportunities of rebellion through postwar party building to longer term party structures, policies, and performance, since wartime institutions continue exerting influence within parties well after the transformation (see Sindre 2016).

Whether or not rebel organizations create political parties after civil wars, wartime processes can durably shift identities and patterns of political and social participation in society (Balcells 2011, 2017; Barceló 2021; Bauer et al. 2016). Blattman (2009) found a positive effect of civil war violence exposure in northern Uganda, in the form of abduction and forced conscription, on later electoral participation and community leadership, following up surveys with interviews demonstrating how the experiences of abductees in the crucible of war changed their mentality and visions of their place in society. Blattman's qualitative evidence, however, was used cursorily to confirm survey results, rather than tracing fully how the civil war changed Ugandan youths' patterns of participation from pre-war norms, beyond differentiating those who were and were not abducted during the war. Such prosocial effects of exposure to civil war have been found in a variety of settings (see Bauer et al. 2016),<sup>8</sup> but these participatory effects and attitudes towards the state and other groups may be mediated by social network ties (Dorff 2017) or by whether individuals lived primarily under government or rebel control (Liu 2022; Martin, Piccolino, and

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<sup>8</sup> Other forms of long-term insecurity and exposure to violence may likewise affect political participation, though possibly heterogeneously depending on the type of violence and target groups (Balcells and Torrats-Espinosa 2018; Bateson 2012; Rozenas, Schutte, and Zhukov 2017; Zhukov and Talibova 2018).

Speight 2022). This last point suggests that deeper long-term analyses could complement quantitative observational or experimental data with longitudinal qualitative process tracing to explore how experiences and social ties interact during and after the critical juncture of civil war to shift and then reinforce participatory patterns.

Postwar security institutions can also be considered in a critical junctures framework that examines how wartime processes led to their evolution or stasis. The revolutions literature has looked closely at military transformation following rebel victory (Adelman 1985; Gurr 1988; Skocpol 1988), but other war outcomes may also lead to changes with roots in the civil war. Government counterinsurgency policies and practices may have long-lasting legacies in cases of incumbent victory or negotiated settlements. For example, Nicaragua's policing institutions, built by the Sandinista government in the 1980s during the Contra war, persisted long after the war ended and the government left power (e.g. Cajina 2013). In Guatemala, counterinsurgent militias organized by the military during the country's civil war have persisted informally in the postwar period, engaging in patrols and undertaking extralegal vigilante violence (Bateson 2017). Critical junctures analyses could trace a wartime organizational practice or policy through the postwar period to examine outcomes in security force structures and behavior or societal relations and crime or contentious politics.

Other issues such as economic relations and growth (Chen, Loayza, and Reynal-Querol 2008; Gates et al. 2012) or land rights and distribution (Albertus and Kaplan 2012; Grajales 2013; E. J. Wood 2003) may also be durably shifted by wartime processes, and so these, too, could be grounds for critical juncture analyses. One of the most promising areas of scholarship generally, as well as for critical junctures analysis, is the study of civil wars' impact on gender relations and women's political and social status.

## Civil Wars and the Reshaping of Gender Relations

A recent wave of scholarship has examined how civil wars not only lead to women's victimization, or at times their participation as combatants and in non-combat roles (Darden, Henshaw, and Szekely 2019; Loken 2022; Loken and Matfess 2022; Thomas and Bond 2015; Viterna 2013; R. M. Wood 2019; R. M. Wood and Thomas 2017), but they can also result in major changes to women's role in society, durably increasing their participation in decision-making and politics at all levels.<sup>9</sup> As Berry (2018, 1–2) writes, women “experience war, bear witness to its effects, and exert agency,” with civil war constituting “a period of rapid social change that reconfigures gendered power relations by precipitating interrelated demographic, economic, and cultural shifts.” Women who fight and mobilize to aid combatants can carve out larger roles after civil wars, but, as in El Salvador and Nicaragua (Kampwirth 2004; Molyneux 1985), there may be gaps between rhetoric and action and between policy changes and policy implementation in practice.

One of the most remarkable shifts after several civil wars has been in the degree of women's political representation, participating at a higher rate in legislatures and other elected and appointed offices than pre-war and in comparison to other states, especially since the 1980s (Hughes 2009; Hughes and Tripp 2015; Meyer and Bolin 2022).<sup>10</sup> To understand the mechanisms behind this cross-national pattern, researchers have usually turned to comparative case studies, sometimes complemented by statistical analyses. To illustrate the potential benefits of a critical junctures approach, I discuss two recent books on civil wars' impact on women's political participation and power: Aili Mari Tripp's (2015) *Women and Power in Postconflict Africa* and Marie Berry's (2018) *War, Women, and Power*. Tripp uses process tracing to try to test causal mechanisms, while Berry adopts a historical institutionalist critical junctures approach, but does

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<sup>9</sup> On how sex and gender inequality may affect conflict, see Cohen and Karim's (2022) review.

<sup>10</sup> See Berry and Lake (2021) for a review and critique of post-war interventions around gender issues.

not explicitly identify each element of the critical juncture. I discuss the benefits and tradeoffs of each author's approach, and how a critical junctures analysis offers additional insights, especially by a deeper engagement with historical background and critical antecedents affecting the outbreak of civil war and shaping the causal process.

Tripp (2015) examines the effect of the end of major civil wars on women's rights and women's political representation in Africa, combining cross-national statistical analyses, building on Hughes and Tripp (2015), and process tracing in comparative case studies of Angola, Liberia, and Uganda. Tripp looks at how the end of conflict created political openings for women to influence peace agreements, postconflict constitutions, and to take on political leadership roles. She argues that disruptions in gender relations "unique to countries experiencing conflict" provide a necessary but insufficient causal effect on postconflict women's rights, which can only lead to move positive outcomes for women's rights and representation in the presence of a) opening of political space allowing for increased women's mobilization, and b) changes in international norms and pressures related to gender and women's rights (Tripp 2015, xxii). The wartime disruptions in gender relations and norms identified by Tripp (2015, 35) as critically important were women's increasing voice in their communities, women taking on new economic roles, and women envisioning new, more politically and economically active public lives. In her case studies, Tripp does give some attention to pre-war gender relations and women's movements and how war disrupted prior social structures and norms. However, her emphasis on the postconflict period means there is greater attention to the mechanisms of reproduction of gender disruptions and their postconflict trajectory, while the nature and potential limits or inequalities of wartime gender disruptions receive very limited exploration.



Tripp (2015) provides an excellent analysis of how, at the end of conflict, wartime gender disruptions were reproduced and interacted with political opening and international norms, as well as exploring why women's rights and empowerment were more limited in Angola. A critical junctures approach would fill in the earlier part of the causal chain, complementing the analysis of the postconflict period with more focus on how and where subnationally conflict most disrupted preexisting gender relations and structures (especially in the case of Uganda, where fighting and rebel military activity was more geographically limited) and the ways these disruptions were maintained or diffused during conflict. This would give greater attention to how Tripp's key causal mechanism developed and the domestic groundwork was then laid for the increased prominence of women and women's rights in peace negotiations and agreements ending conflicts, as well as in postconflict politics.<sup>11</sup>

While not explicitly naming each element of the critical junctures that civil war opened up in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Rwanda, Berry's (2018) book gives clear and equal attention to antecedent conditions and how they came into crisis, how structural changes were produced during war and at its end, and how these shifts were reproduced, institutionalized, and locked in in the postconflict context. This is made clear by her chapter titles for each case: first, a chapter on "Historical Roots of Mass Violence;" second, "War and Structural Shifts;" and then "Women's Political Mobilization" (Berry 2018, vii–viii). Berry looks at how civil war and mass violence led to demographic, economic, and cultural shifts in each country, with openings for women's activism and everyday involvement in politics helping spawn new, politically active women's organizations and initiatives in both countries. Demographic change occurred due to men's

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<sup>11</sup> In other work, Tripp does adopt a critical junctures approach, looking at independence, shifts to multipartyism, civil conflict, and popular revolutions as critical junctures for the adoption of constitutional reforms codifying women's rights (Paulson-Smith and Tripp 2021).

disproportionate death, participation in fighting, and imprisonment, and mass displacement more generally; economically, infrastructural and agricultural capacity were destroyed, leading to changes in production and increased reliance on international aid; and culturally women took on new public roles and were seen as more ‘peaceful’ than bellicose men (Berry 2018, 14). These shifts allowed for greater informal political participation by women that was reproduced after the end of war, but the additional factor of a new, “gender-sensitive political regime” in Rwanda allowed for gender quotas for public office and increased women’s political representation (Berry 2018, 14). Berry’s critical focus on the historical legacies on wartime changes also highlights how women’s new roles in postconflict society faced challenges due to the unequal nature of political settlements, which “created hierarchies of victimhood,” displacement of local knowledge and organizations by international humanitarian actors, and patriarchal backlash against changing gender roles (Berry 2018).<sup>12</sup>

As research on gender relations and rights during and after civil wars continues to develop and advance, a critical junctures approach can help to analyze both structural shifts and the ways that preexisting institutions persisted or were strengthened, as well as examining how long after wars women’s political empowerment lasts and what might change or erode it (Webster, Chen, and Beardsley 2019). Researchers and practitioners must pay close attention to inequalities and take an intersectional approach in order to ensure that apparently progressive changes on paper or in some women’s rights, political representation, and access to justice are not masking the continuation of exploitative systems and the marginalization of certain identity groups (Berry 2018; Berry and Lake 2021; Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2022; Giri 2021; Lake 2018). Work should also continue to problematize binary conceptions of gender identity and essentialist notions of

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<sup>12</sup> Patriarchal backlash seeks, often violently, to preserve hierarchical masculine power and control in society (see also Pankhurst 2007), though women’s mobilization can persist and even deepen in response to it (e.g. Zulver 2021).

masculinity and femininity and how they are reproduced or challenged during and after conflict (Cohen and Karim 2022; Dietrich Ortega 2012; Hagen 2016), especially as women's participation in warmaking efforts may be framed in terms of 'traditional' gender roles, signaling a government or armed group's intent for a return to stereotypical sociopolitical roles and divisions of labor after conflict ends (e.g. Başer 2022; Loken 2021; Loken and Zelenz 2018).

### **Methodological Approaches to Civil Wars as Critical Junctures**

What methods can or should civil wars scholars use in trying to employ a critical juncture framework? The critical junctures approach has been applied most frequently in historical institutionalist studies like Berry's (2018), primarily deploying qualitative case study methods (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007; Pierson 2004; Slater and Simmons 2010). Historically-grounded case studies organized systematically using process tracing like Tripp (2015) or analytic narrative techniques (Bates et al. 1998) are well-suited for theory testing and accounting for the multiple different elements and stages of a critical juncture (Bennett and Elman 2006; Hall 2003).

Close historical knowledge is particularly useful to account for issues of temporality and sequencing in the unfolding of critical junctures and causal processes (Grzymala-Busse 2010; Lieberman 2001; Mahoney, Kimball, and Koivu 2009) and the interaction of contexts with choice in evaluating contingency and change (Falleti and Lynch 2009). Evidence for case studies can emerge from multiple different sources: archival materials; interviews; reports from government agencies, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and other actors; media reports; and the secondary literature. In combination with case studies, regression analyses can help demonstrate how the presence or absence of a hypothesized productive condition during a

critical juncture led to divergence either subnationally or across similar country cases in a comparative case study framework.

Regression analysis on its own, when not accompanied by significant historical and contextual data or knowledge to enable interpretation and the identification of key elements of a critical juncture, requires assumptions that are ontologically incompatible with critical juncture frameworks (Hall 2003). Scholars must be able to identify not only baseline structural conditions and how measures of them might change during and after a critical juncture, but also the elements of contingency, opportunity, and choice that emerged during the critical juncture, where *potential* pathways were not taken or became foreclosed and the observed outcomes were produced instead. There are possibilities, especially in the growing historical political economy literature, for using quantitative analyses in a critical junctures approach, but this must be undertaken carefully (Munck 2022), as regression analyses are most useful in combination with historical and contextual data that permit exploration of all components of critical junctures.

The compatibility of quasi-experimental and experimental research methods with critical juncture frameworks may be more tenuous. Even when examining cases where a clearly exogenous shock occurs, such as a natural disaster (Beardsley and McQuinn 2009; Lazarev et al. 2014), this only facilitates a natural experiment setup within a critical juncture framework if it can be satisfactorily demonstrated that antecedent conditions were congruent and exerted uniform effects during a critical juncture. Justifying the existence of a natural experiment also requires a great deal of historical and contextual knowledge, and intuitions or observations about how a hypothesized causal process works, with the ‘as-if random’ restriction difficult to satisfy even where these data are available (Dunning 2008).

Field and laboratory experiments may abstract away the macro-level structural context that is of concern in critical junctures analyses and historical institutionalism more generally (Hall 2016). Steinmo (2016, 116), however, sees experiments as potentially useful for historical institutionalist scholars, especially in a multimethod approach that “would combine institutional analysis and experiments precisely so that we can test the propositions generated in our historical work.” For Steinmo (2016, 116), combining case study methods with experiments offers potential to better connect levels of analysis, a continuing concern in civil war research (Balcells and Justino 2014; Balcells and Stanton 2021).

For analyzing civil wars as critical junctures, as with many other complex, contingent situations, controlled case comparisons remain the most straightforward option (Slater and Ziblatt 2013). There is, however, much to gain from combining case studies with other research methods to complement case studies’ strengths. As mixed methods research has become more common across the social sciences, conflict and violence scholars (including those studying civil wars) have increasingly sought to combine different qualitative, quantitative, and formal methods (see Thaler 2017, 2019 for reviews). Civil wars’ complexity and contingency and their crucial importance as humanitarian and public policy issues demand methodological openness and eclecticism in order to generate knowledge that provides as complete a picture as possible of civil war processes and effects,<sup>13</sup> and that is also accessible to as wide an audience as possible. Mixed methods can potentially help meet these goals.

How could mixed methods be used for critical junctures analyses of civil wars and their aftermaths? Looking at aspects of civil wars themselves as a potential dependent variable, cross-

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<sup>13</sup> Collins (2008, 32) argues that “Methodological purity is a big stumbling block to understanding, particularly for something as hard to get at as violence,” and I would suggest that this applies to the downstream effects of violent conflict, as well.

national regression analysis could be a component of a critical junctures argument where a global or widespread shock occurred that is theoretically expected to change the nature of civil wars. Kalyvas and Balcells (2010) demonstrate statistically that Cold War-era and post-Cold War civil wars exhibit variation in the ‘technologies of rebellion’ used by rebel organizations, with the end of superpower competition reducing the prevalence of well-resourced and durable ‘robust insurgency.’ Using this quantitative analysis to reveal important variation, researchers could then select cases within which to examine the hypothesized causal process of superpower support changing the technology of rebellion, specifying the critical antecedents to superpower support, superpower support’s effects and how they were reinforced over time. In comparison with these cases, it could be fruitful to also examine cases of rebel organizations in the same country that lacked superpower support, cases where superpower support was received but practices did not change, and rebel groups who received superpower support during the Cold War and then lost it in the 1990s. Case selection could be undertaken based on regression lines (Lieberman 2005),<sup>14</sup> or purposively based on the variation of interest and data availability.

One possibility for analysis, to give a concrete example, is tracing the long-term impacts of wartime political institutions that may persist or be adapted after civil war.<sup>15</sup> For instance, in Uganda, the Resistance Councils (RCs) that developed in rebel-controlled areas as local representative institutions were formalized after the victory of the National Resistance Army and implemented nationwide (Kasfir 2005; Ottemoeller 1996; Tidemand 1994). Ottemoeller (Ottemoeller 1996) in fact has the elements of a mixed methods critical junctures analysis, combining historical case evidence, interviews, and surveys to examine variation in the postwar

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<sup>14</sup> Though see Rohlfing’s (2008) critique.

<sup>15</sup> See Arjona (2014, 2016) on local wartime institutions generally and in the Colombian context and Vargas (2018) on their post-war impacts in Colombia.

institutionalization of RCs, though he does not deploy a critical junctures framework. Historical and survey evidence could provide a picture of geographical variation in the wartime presence and strength of local rebel or government institutions, and the effects of these different institutional ‘treatments’ could be traced over time through local case studies and surveys about postwar institutional strength and legitimacy. Another possibility is using cross-national data from different time periods to statistically test the impact of civil wars over time, as Hughes and Tripp (2015) do in using latent growth curve modeling in their study of civil war’s impacts on women’s political representation, and then complementing statistical analyses with case studies in the same or related work (Tripp 2015).

Recent cross-national datasets on rebel governance and service provision (Heger and Jung 2017; Huang 2016; Stewart 2018) do not currently have sufficient disaggregation at the subnational level to add a cross-national statistical complement to the type of subnational critical junctures analysis discussed above. These data, however, can be used in concert with selected close case studies to explore how rebel institutions and practices may contribute to longer-term political institutional outcomes at the end of civil wars. While not explicitly utilizing a critical junctures framework, this is essentially the approach taken by Huang (Huang 2016). She examines transformations induced by wartime rebel governance, using cross-national regression analyses to illustrate the association between higher levels of rebel governance and greater postwar democratization and case studies to trace the specific ways in which rebel governance changed institutions and state-society relations beyond the end of the conflict. This approach could be extended beyond political institutions, for example to examining how wartime healthcare or education provision affects longer-term outcomes in these areas, given that civil war tends to have

strong negative effects on health and education (Ghobarah, Huth, and Russett 2003, 2004; Lai and Thyne 2007).

Formal models have demonstrated utility in critical junctures studies of conflict, as in Weingast's (2005) analysis of the initiation of the American Revolution, building on a formal model to develop an analytic narrative. Game trees, in particular, may help in specifying which potential paths were or were not taken due to actors' decisions, exogenous shocks, or structural shifts, clarifying elements reported in a case study. Formal models can also motivate quantitative theory testing of aspects of critical junctures arguments. Their incorporation could therefore enrich and potentially clarify critical junctures analyses of civil wars when well-integrated with evidence and findings from qualitative and/or quantitative methods.

## **Discussion**

Are civil wars significantly different from other domestic political conflicts or crises in the potential applicability of the critical juncture framework? I focus here on revolutions and coups d'état as the closest analogues to civil war, though critical junctures frameworks may be suited to other situations of regime change, mass protest, or major governmental reform (see Barrenechea, Gibson, and Terrie 2016; Branch and Mampilly 2015, 20; Paulson-Smith and Tripp 2021). Social revolutions have more often been subject to qualitative critical junctures analyses, and they may be amenable to the integration of formal models and quantitative analyses that are used for descriptive, but not causal, inference. The explicitly transformative character of social revolutions makes it difficult to use cross-case quantitative analysis to try to isolate the causal effect of revolution on downstream outcomes, due to issues of post-treatment bias, collinearity, temporal sequencing, and mediation (Landau-Wells and Thaler 2013)—though single-case studies using



statistical analyses with instrumental variables or interrupted time-series can identify causal effects of revolutions (Dell 2012; Lewis-Beck 1979).<sup>16</sup>

Coup-makers do at times implement wide-ranging, transformative programs of governance (e.g. Trimberger 1978), but they may also simply be trading power among elites and implement only minor reforms (Roessler 2016), while the short duration of coups means they are less likely than civil wars to permit the development of new, durable institutions and patterns of behavior (Dorman 2006). One fruitful avenue for study could be a comparison, using a critical junctures framework, of coups that maintained the status quo in comparison to more reformist, transformative coups to examine what permissive and productive conditions were present or absent in different cases. Cross-national statistical analyses can be useful in isolating the background correlates of coup-risk and success and of different political and economic legacies of coups, allowing for more targeted case studies employing process tracing to examine the path from coup plot to specific governmental programs, practices, or out socioeconomic outcomes.

## **Conclusion**

I have argued that we can consider civil wars as critical junctures in states' institutional development, moments when contestation of the state's legitimacy and coercive power lower structural barriers to change and increase actors' choice set. Importantly, civil wars may lead to relatively rapid and radical change, or they may instead perpetuate the status quo: a critical juncture is defined by possibility, not only by outcomes. Critical junctures analyses have tended to be pursued using historical case studies, yet in studying civil war processes and their potential long-term impacts, scholars should choose from the range of methodological approaches available to

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<sup>16</sup> See Stewart (2022) on how even failed revolutions can leave lasting legacies.

them, depending on their questions and data availability. Whatever methods are used, a critical junctures approach invites researchers to untangle how civil war processes may shift sociopolitical and economic institutions in both endogenous and path dependent ways (Shesterinina 2022). Further study of civil wars as critical junctures will improve understanding of wartime processes, paths taken and opportunities missed, and how institutional change or stasis is produced and reproduced even after wars end.

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