

Reviews, Otherwise: Introducing the New Reviews Section of *Civil Wars*

Rebecca Tapscott & Daniel Rincón Machón

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Reviews, Otherwise: Introducing the New Reviews Section of *Civil Wars*

ABSTRACT

The conclusion to this reviews section reflects on the role that reviews play in the sub-discipline of conflict studies, and – from this vantage point – it takes stock of the reviews section in *Civil Wars* since its inception. We find that the reviews section to date both reflects and to some extent reproduces hierarchies and power dynamics that are well-recognised in the academy. With this in mind, we have set out a proposal for ‘reviews, otherwise’, including several new review types intended to further cultivate critical reflection and engagement while also opening the reviews section to new and different perspectives.

What is the purpose of book reviews? We started contemplating this question in 2022, when we were invited to take over *Civil Wars*’ reviews section from the now-journal editors, James and Alex. Though we had both written book reviews in the past and found them challenging and stimulating exercises, we were already keenly aware of the genre’s peculiarities. A book review can have a deep meaning for the book’s author – and possibly their publisher and promotions committee – but often is less remarkable outside this small circle. At the same time, we were reluctant to dismiss this enduring scholarly tradition out of hand.

Reviewing the evidence largely confirmed our initial sense: while book reviews were once thought of as a public good distinguishing high-quality scholarship from ‘unmeritorious work’ (Obeng-Odoom 2014, p. 79), today many believe the genre has ‘lost its critical edge’, now ‘marked by increasing degrees of politeness and summation’ (Leo 2009, p. 172). Book reviews commonly spend the majority of their word count summarising the book’s contents, leaving a gentle ‘if I had one small quibble’ critique – or the kinder ‘pathways for future research’ – for the closing sentences. Even understood as a synopsis or a form of publicity, book reviews are obsolete: digital search engines, social media and formats like podcasts and blogs offer broader reach and accessibility than gated scholarly journals (Sturm 2022, p. 1). Along with the fact that they are rarely read or cited, many institutions do not consider book reviews when granting promotions or awards (Obeng-Odoom 2014, p. 78; although this should not be overstated, as it varies geographically and by discipline). Even the small perk for reviewers of receiving a hard copy of a new book is vanishing, as e-copies become the norm.

And yet, in an increasingly competitive and output-driven academy, the genre remains one of the few spaces to foster critical reflection for its own sake. A ‘good’

book review can go beyond outlining the key points to elucidate and engage new paradigms or to reveal and rectify problematic assumptions or arguments (Orteza y Miranda 1996, p. 191). Reviews that synthesise multiple works can be particularly helpful in identifying evolutions within a field and potentially crystallising new research agendas. For these reasons, they can serve as a useful introduction to a given topic including its core problematics and debates, offering a valuable tool for researchers and students alike. For example, Diane Davis set the tone for discussions on violence Latin America over the following decade through her influential review essay on the 'era of insecurity' in the region. The essay reviews a diverse set of works to set out more than the sum of their parts, revealing larger concerns including macro-structural transformations such as liberalisation or globalisation as they interface with 'history and/or the uniqueness of each community, city, or country' (Davis 2006, p. 180).

Reviews can therefore constitute a collective academic space of critique and contemplation, offering a venue for learning within our subfield. Taking this stance is in itself a small act of resistance to an academic culture that is increasingly output- and metric-driven (see, for example, Bogaards 2023, in this issue on the need for such assessments). In this sense, Sean Sturm's description of book reviews as 'critical gifts' in the 'gift ecology' of the scholarly community seems increasingly apt (Sturm 2022, p. 1). Here Sturm is drawing on Ann Chinnery, who writes that book reviews are 'an act of intellectual generosity – a kind of other-centred responsibility that may not reap institutional rewards, but which is essential if we are to ensure the preservation of a critical culture within academic communities' (Chinnery 2010, p. 418).

How Has *Civil Wars* Approached Book Reviews?

Undeterred by the more sobering elements of our assessment and bolstered by the promise of book reviews' critical potential, we extended our enquiry to ask how *Civil Wars* has approached book reviews. Until recently, *Civil Wars* mainly selected books for review using a 'books received' model, in which publishers' marketing departments sent review copies directly to the reviews' editors. In James' words, when he recruited reviews in this model, the immediacy and tangibility of handing over a physical book for review served as a kind of contract, facilitating the acceptance and completion of book reviews. Authors also sometimes directly contacted the reviews editors to suggest their work for review – unsurprisingly, reproducing familiar biases within the academy (see, e.g., Djupe *et al.* 2019).

To flesh out this picture, we created a dataset of all publications in *Civil Wars*' reviews section from the journal's founding in 1998 through to 2021, for a total of 104 reviews. We catalogued various aspects of the reviews, including the institutional affiliation of reviewers and authors, their gender, the kind of outputs they wrote and whether the reviews have been cited. All data presented have been rounded to the nearest integer, not taking into account missed data. The analysis helps understand how book reviews have functioned in *Civil Wars* and serves as a basis for our plans for the future.

Since 1998, *reviewed works* have been predominantly single-authored books written by senior male political scientists based at Anglophone and Global North institutions. After politics (61 per cent), the most common disciplines are history (21 per cent) and anthropology (2 per cent). A range of publishers are represented, though in recent years the trend has been increasingly to review university press books (from around 30 per cent in earlier years to nearly 50 per cent since 2012). Reviewed books have been written predominantly by US (42 per cent) or UK-based (30 per cent) scholars, the vast majority of them authored by men (76 per cent). Reviewed works are typically by more senior scholars: professors (48 per cent) and associate professors (20 per cent), as contrasted with assistant professors (13 per cent) and non-tenured researchers (11 per cent). Moreover, 74 per cent of the reviews published until now in *Civil Wars* were not the author's first book. These patterns are notable, mirroring the US-orientation of the sub-field and of political science more broadly.

Until 2011, *reviewers* also were mainly senior male academics; after 2011, *Civil Wars* implemented a new policy that invited junior scholars to write book reviews, with the view that these scholars could benefit from an early publication and an opportunity to begin a conversation with more senior scholars in the field. Reviewers have been overwhelmingly from the UK (66 per cent) or Europe (13 per cent), likely reflecting the UK-based editorial team and their professional networks. As with reviewed works, most reviews have also been written by men (75 per cent).

After the new approach to reviews adopted in 2011, *Civil Wars* has published more reviews by early career scholars. There are clear benefits to cultivating a diverse group of reviewers, including those earlier in their careers who may be immersed in fieldwork and cutting-edge research. However, we also note that this formulation is characterised by a substantial power imbalance. Junior scholars may be less keen to engage critically with their senior colleagues. Moreover, if book reviews are acts of scholarly generosity, it seems only right that senior colleagues should give as much as they get.

The substantive topics of reviews are widespread, with foci on peacebuilding, insurgencies, and the dynamics of civil wars, as well as humanitarian intervention and ethnic conflict. About half of the reviewed books focus on a specific country or geographic region, and of these, the most represented is Europe (36 per cent), particularly regarding the Spanish Civil War, the disintegration of Yugoslavia, and the conflict in Northern Ireland. South Asia and Africa are also well-represented, mainly linked to the Afghan conflict, insurgencies in India and Sri Lanka, and various conflicts across the African continent. Very few reviews are of works studying North Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America (6 per cent between the three), even though these regions have been highly conflict-affected over the last several decades.

Our analysis also confirms that book reviews are rarely read and poorly cited – only 6 per cent of all published reviews in *Civil Wars* have any citations, and all of these review multiple works, rather than single books. Recognising this potential, under the leadership of James and Alex, there was a push towards more review essays and more innovative forms – especially review roundtables and review

essays which mixed discussion of books and journal articles together. Additionally, in 2020, the journal introduced a new article format, 'Reimagining the Field'. This new fully peer reviewed format combines aspects of a review article and a research article to get the best of both, including a deep discussion of cutting-edge scholarship on a particular theme that points towards trends and gaps, and uses research to develop ideas and pathways for future developments.

Re-Envisioning the Reviews Section

The patterns set out above – and their underlying rationale – work with the grain of the output-driven neoliberal academy: providing junior scholars with a publication opportunity (albeit for a less-valued genre), soliciting reviews of publisher- or self-nominated works and using the book review to facilitate networking across scholars with shared interests. These are valuable practices and seek to carve out and maximise benefits, even within a system that we may find unsatisfactory.

However, in the light of our review and aspirations, we decided that it is time to try some new approaches. We have revamped the reviews section for *Civil Wars* with the goal of preserving – even reclaiming – space for critical reflection on the study of civil wars, broadly understood. We aim to do this through a two-pronged approach: first, using the section to broaden the authorial and substantive perspectives on the study of civil wars (see also Shesterinina 2023, Perazonne 2023, this issue, for what a wide lens on political violence can offer the study of civil wars), and second, to augment engagement with reviews. We are committed to bringing in voices from outside the US and the UK as reviewers; at the same time, we wish to move beyond a standpoint conception of diversity by broadening the types of materials we review. In doing so, we follow the lead of other publications such as the *Journal of Refugee Studies*, and the *American Historical Review*, which have designed more inclusive Reviews Sections (Cole 2021, *American Historical Review* 2021). Finally, the current Journal Editors have committed to make the reviews section a greater priority of the journal, including providing more space for reviews than was possible in the era of strict page budgets. With these things in mind, we have launched four new review types.

Language and Translation Reviews

First, our 'language and translation' reviews focus on non-Anglophone conceptions of conflict and civil war. The main objective is to recognise the importance of language in mediating academic production. As in many other disciplines, the most influential theories on armed conflict have traditionally been produced in English, by English-speaking researchers, based in institutions whose working language is English. However, armed conflict occurs worldwide. Many influential studies in the sub-discipline are on non-English-speaking regions.

Our aim is not to question English as *lingua franca* of academic research; rather, we seek to open a space for reflection on the limitations that the English language imposes on research communities and knowledge production, particularly outside the English-speaking world. These limitations are bi-directional, both regarding how English concepts travel to different academic environments; and how research produced in other languages remains inaccessible to Anglophone scholars and the resulting ‘mainstream’ (analogous dynamics have also been referred to as centre/periphery, see, e.g., Kristensen 2015).

With this in mind, we invite and will also solicit reviews of how concepts that originated in the (typically Anglophone) academic mainstream have been transposed to debates on armed conflict in other regions, assessments of their influence, and how they have been helpful (or not). At the same time, we welcome reviews of non-English language work, and reflections on concepts that do not translate well to English. In addition to drawing visibility to the role of language in the way we think about conflict, we hope these reviews can be helpful for academics who wish to benefit from more diverse perspectives, as well as potential teaching resources for those seeking to broaden their classroom materials.

Arts and Culture Reviews

Second, we invite reviews of ‘arts and culture’, that engage with outputs about civil war or political violence beyond academic books – including, for example, film, artwork, fiction, short stories and performances. Following others, such as Cole (2021), we welcome reviews that engage with form as well as substance, and consider how different modes of representing and analysing political violence can deepen our understanding of violent conflict and war (see, for example, Chapman 2023).

Like reviews of non-English language work, the ‘arts and culture’ reviews are part of our attempts to think about and challenge the boundaries of dominant and fashionable forms of academic scholarship. The academic book in particular prizes a particular formulation of scholarly puzzles and lacunae, literature reviews and novel interventions, which can limit the types of questions we ask and insights we glean. This is especially pronounced for studies of political violence and conflict, which are by their nature embodied and lived, relational and contested, ever-evolving and multi-faceted. We hope these reviews can help us contextualise our academic view, and open new pathways for innovative studies of political violence and civil war, creating space to question and rethink foundational assumptions.

Reviews and Rejoinders

Third, we will recruit ‘reviews and rejoinders’. In this section, a more traditional book review (or several reviews) will be published alongside

a response from the book's author. These reviews will be geared towards research contributions, emphasising how the reviewed work pushes forward theory, method, or empirical understanding of civil wars or political violence. The goal of this format is to allow for an exchange of ideas, thereby intervening in the field in addition to constituting it. As proposed by Ann Chinnery, we similarly hope that this format will be an opportunity for authors to respond, 'sometimes defending and sharpening the original argument, and at other times revisiting initial assumptions or rethinking the argument in light of new questions, challenges and contexts raised by the reviewer. [The] pieces are then published together, sparking what we hope will be a wider conversation within [our scholarly] community' (Chinnery 2010, p. 418).

Capsule Reviews

Finally, we plan for one issue every other year to be dedicated to 'capsule reviews', which will present short reviews (600–800 words) of recently published books. This section intends to highlight new book-length works in the field in order to help educators update and diversify their syllabi, to help students studying civil war and political violence identify further reading that might help them in their studies and to help scholars learn about perspectives or interventions they might otherwise have missed.

We wish to include books from diverse methodological and disciplinary perspectives, substantively focused on different parts of the world, that can help rethink paradigms of violent conflict and civil war. Capsule reviews should emphasise how new works might fit into teaching, including what level of student they might be suitable for, and how they might contribute to teaching on political violence and civil war in their theory, method and/or empirics. We do not invite rejoinders for this section as their purpose is mainly to draw attention to new works, rather than a full critical engagement with their argument and contribution.

Contributing to the Reviews Section

We therefore aim to cultivate a reviews section that offers a place for creative attempts to question and rethink assumptions in studies of civil war and political violence, broadly understood; to review lessons learned and highlight especially productive methods, findings or perspectives on which our sub-field might build. We welcome your suggestions either for specific contributions that fall into our new review types or indeed other approaches that we might take. In particular, for our capsule reviews, we would appreciate recommendations and contributions, as the section can only be successful as a collective endeavour.

Given the inequalities noted above, we especially encourage senior colleagues to volunteer their time to engage with the work of women, early career researchers and scholars based in or educated outside the Global North. In giving these ‘critical gifts’ – not only to our friends and colleagues but also outside existing personal and institutional networks – we can help cultivate a reflective, critical, and intellectually rich space for the study of civil wars and political violence. We hope these innovations will make the reviews section an intellectually stimulating space to revisit old ideas and experiment with new ones; and a venue to build an ever-more more horizontal, open and inclusive community, welcoming of all those driven to understand civil wars and political violence, in connection with the wider mission of the journal and its broad and inclusive remit.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Rebecca Tapscott
Department of Politics, University of York, York, UK
Graduate Institute Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland
 rebecca.tapscott@graduateinstitute.ch

Daniel Rincón Machón
Centre for Development Studies, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

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