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# CONTROL IN ASYMMETRIC CONFLICT: UNPACKING THE COMPLEXITIES OF A CONCEPT

## WORKSHOP

### Scientific Committee

José A. Gutiérrez, Université libre de Bruxelles

Alex Waterman, German Institute of Global and Area Studies

Christian Olsson, Université libre de Bruxelles

Francis O'Connor, Wageningen University

**CLOSED EVENT**



**REPI**  
RECHERCHE ET ÉTUDES EN  
POLITIQUE INTERNATIONALE



**GIGA**  
German Institute of Global and Area Studies  
Leibniz-Institut für Globale und Regionale Studien

Université libre de Bruxelles | 39 avenue Franklin Roosevelt, 1050 Bruxelles

# CONTROL IN ASYMMETRIC CONFLICT: UNPACKING THE COMPLEXITIES OF A CONCEPT

## DAY 1

Thursday, April 20, 9am–5:10pm

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|-------------|--|
| 9:00–9:30   | Registration   Settling in   |
| 9:30–9:40   | Introductory remarks<br><i>Christian Olsson (ULB) &amp; José A. Gutiérrez (ULB)</i>  |
| 9:40–11:40  | Territorial claims and control in civil wars: A sociohistorical analysis<br><i>Anastasia Shesterinina (University of York)</i><br><br>Toll and control: Rebel taxation in asymmetric conflict<br><i>Shalaka Thakur (IHEID)</i>   |
| 11:40–12:00 | Coffee break   |
| 12:00–12:50 | Freedom and control: liberating life amidst ongoing wars and insecurities in Maxmur Camp<br><i>Isabel Käser (University of Bern)</i>   |
| 12:50–13:50 | Lunch  |
| 13:50–15:50 | Order-Knowledge-Control: A Framework for Comparative Counterinsurgency Studies<br><i>Alex Waterman (GIGA) &amp; James Worrall (University of Leeds)</i><br><br>Social Control in Civil Wars<br><i>Corinna Jentzsch (Leiden University) &amp; Abbey Steele (Amsterdam University)</i> |
| 15:50–16:10 | Coffee break   |
| 16:10–17:10 | Routinised Insurgent Space: Spatial Dimensions of Insurgent-Civilian Relations and Support<br><i>Francis O'Connor (Wageningen University)</i>  |

## DAY 2

Friday, April 21, 9:00 am–5:30pm

- 9:30–11:20      Violence, Legitimacy, and Control: Salvaging the conceptual tools to explore phenomena of rebel governance from Weber's theory of power  
*Stefan Malthaner (HIS)*
- Strategising social networks: a socio-spatial relational approach to the dynamic development of the Red Brigades  
*Lorenzo Bosi (Scuola Normale Superiore)*
- 11:20–11:40      Coffee break
- 11:40–12:40      Like Lions in the Jungle: Rethinking Armed Group Control during Civil War  
*Leigh Mayhew (ODI)*
- 12:40–13:40      Lunch
- 13:40–15:30      In their own words. Concepts of control, influence and presence among FARC-EP commanders (Colombia)  
*José A. Gutiérrez (ULB) & Clara Voyvodic (University of Bristol)*
- The three stages of the Colombian ELN political war  
*Francisco Gutiérrez-Sanín (UNAL)*
- 15:30–15:50      Coffee break
- 15:50–16:50      Manufacturing Consent without Coercion: Rebel Control in a Maoist Base Area in Nepal  
*Rumela Sen (Colombia University)*
- 16:50–17:30      Summary | Future Plans  
*Alex Waterman (GIGA) & José A. Gutiérrez (ULB)*

# CONTROL IN ASYMMETRIC CONFLICT: UNPACKING THE COMPLEXITIES OF A CONCEPT

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This workshop consolidates and builds on recent advances in the civil wars and specifically rebel governance scholarship by unpacking and theorising the concept of control. Control is often understood through the prism of a zero-sum game, as something that is predominantly bound to territory and something that is predominantly shaped by violence. In recent years, important works have critiqued these assumptions by highlighting the messy, overlapping realities of wartime control, but have yet to develop the conceptual tools to take us beyond these assumptions. This workshop and subsequent special issue seek to explicitly unpack and theorise the territorial, social, institutional, gendered, information-based, ideological and agential dimensions of control. Bringing together leading scholars each drawing from their extensive experience in rich, fieldwork-based approaches, we adopt grounded approaches to build concepts to better grasp the messy, multidimensional facets of wartime control. Developing working definitions promises to equip scholars with the conceptual and methodological tools to plot changes across an array of interactions in the field of intra-state conflict studies, from rebel governance and insurgency to militia activity and counterinsurgency, informing and enhancing comparative qualitative and indeed quantitative research into these dynamics.

Prevailing notions of control, key to the idea of governance, combatant-civilian interactions and a host of other civil war dynamics, have predominantly been understood as a zero-sum game. In this line of thinking, actors are mutually exclusive and the more control one actor has, the less control for the opponent, which has also led to an excessive focus on violence as a means for establishing control. This is perhaps best expressed in Kalyvas' seminal *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* when he argues that 'Political actors maximize territorial control (...) I assume no anarchy; when one actor abandons a territory, the rival actor moves in' (2006: 196). The underlying idea behind this argument is that sovereignty is indivisible and absolute. This assumption has, to a great extent, shaped the field of rebel governance research, which essentially begins from the departure point of 'how rebels govern once they control territory' (Waterman, 2022, p.5). The adoption of such narrow parameters reduces rebel governance's scope as it excludes all insurgent groups which provide incipient forms of governance without territorial control. It cannot address early phases of governance prior to insurgent territorial control, limits focus to insurgent territorial strongholds and ignores areas of lesser insurgent presence (Staniland 2010, O'Connor, 2021). What's more, even when groups are consolidated, their control is far from homogenous or mutually exclusive to the state or other groups, 'for during rebellions, borders are rarely clear-cut. They are rather porous -often deliberately so' (Gutiérrez, 2022, p.31). The underlying problem, both practically and theoretically, was graphically illustrated by the controversies surrounding the maps produced prior to 2021 by international bureaucracies on the areas and districts controlled respectively by the Taliban and the Afghan government (Bahiss et al 2022).

This dominant understanding of control has come under increased scrutiny and questioning over the past few years (Worrall, 2017; Jackson, 2018 and 2021; O'Connor, 2019 and 2021; Gutiérrez 2019; Loyle et al., 2021, Malthaner & Malešević, 2022; Bahiss et al 2022). Although theoretically plausible, and undoubtedly the situation in some cases - particularly in conventional civil wars (Balcels and Kalyvas 2014), it is far from universal, and the more we gain insights and knowledge of empirical case-studies, the more inadequate it seems to explain a huge number of cases that rarely fit this model, particularly in asymmetric conflicts. More often than not, what we find are messy situations in which control is patchy, uneven and overlapping with that of other actors (Gutiérrez, 2022; Van Baalen & Terpestra, 2022, Sen 2021, Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2019), together with diffuse and shifting forms of power (Mann 1986). In these cases, ad hoc rebel governance practices shape some aspects of societal life while other actors (such as the state) shape others (Thakur and Venugopal, 2018, Mampilly 2011), with the boundaries between these actors often blurred.

This growing recognition that understanding control as a zero-sum game is inadequate to reflect ground realities in a way that is conceptually or methodologically satisfactory, was exemplified in two recent conferences: the Wageningen University workshop “The Margins of Insurgent Control”, and two Rebel Governance panels at the 2022 Conflict Research Society (CRS) conference in Belfast. The conversations emerging from these events recognised that while control may in some cases represent something akin to a zero-sum game, this is far from a universal experience. Indeed, in cases where previously firm notions of territorial control were applied (Arjona, 2016), recent work has shown this to be far more complex, overlapping and partial in nature (Gutiérrez, 2022). While emerging from conversations in rebel governance studies, these issues are not unique to rebel governance, but also manifest themselves in various dimensions of conflict studies research, including the activities of paramilitaries (Gutiérrez-Sanín 2022; Thomson and Pankhurst 2022) and counterinsurgents (Tripodi 2020; Kitzen 2016).

This workshop will aim at developing adequate conceptual tools to grasp the messy realities of control and interaction on the ground in armed conflict and civil war. In order for the discipline to progress there is a need to re-assess the many layers and aspects of control in civil wars. What do we mean when we talk about control? Are we talking about control over territory, social control over people, ideas, military assets, institutions, or over flows and mobilities? Within each of these, are we talking about complete control, significant control, partial control, direct or indirect forms of ‘rule’? How do we measure degrees of control? What theoretical tools are useful (and when?) to shed light on the concept of control in conflict situations? What can notions of power, order, hegemony, governmentality and other concepts offer us?

We have enough qualitative data and case-studies at present to decisively develop this conceptual framework. We will bring these insights together at a workshop, to be held in Université Libre de Bruxelles on 19-20 April 2023. Specifically, we will further unpack the concept of control, exploring its various dimensions, and move towards working definitions that take us beyond existing notions and help us to better grasp those realities we are finding in our fieldwork.

We have identified a number of areas which constitute important core areas to reflect upon and discuss:

- **Territorial control:** in what type of conflicts does the paradigm continue to serve as a useful concept? How do military imperatives (with the importance of territorial continuity, of holding the rear, high points, axes of communication etc) affect the territorial logic of control? How can heterogeneity and territorially differentiated modes of control be accounted for, for example between urban ‘population centres’ and scarcely populated rural areas?
- **Social control:** The social geography literature has long argued that as “there are no purely spatial processes, neither are there any non-spatial social processes” (D. B. Massey 1995: 51), thereby inextricably combining the territorial and the social-relational. What role can more nuanced spatial concepts (space/place/safe territories) play in assessing the territorial vagaries and inconsistencies of conflict? Leading to the question if social control can be considered outside of its spatial context? How do geographical mobilities and transnational flows shape control in civil war?
- **Institutional control:** Through what types of institutions is control pursued and how? Is control to be framed differently for incumbents and insurgents, government and non-state actors? When and why is ‘less control’ sometimes ‘more’, as when governments resort to pro-government militias, ‘strongmen’ or other ‘power-brokers’ rather than seeking ‘direct’ control? Why is control over differentiated (rather than purely subservient) legal institutions so important in establishing effective ‘administrative control’?
- **Gendered control:** How do gender regimes affect control over gendered subjects? What forms of insurgent/state control reaffirm prevailing gendered structures and which ones challenge or completely reconfigure them? How relevant is gender to resist or reinforce forms of control whether state-led or rebel-led?
- **Knowledge, information and control:** Conflict actors rarely if ever command a full picture of the environment or dynamics they try to control. What role do information and knowledge-generation efforts play in shaping patterns of control? How do rebels and other conflict actors use (or withhold) information to try and build (or prevent) understanding of spaces, actors, structures and relations and leverage this into forms of control (Waterman and Worrall 2020)? What role do pre-existing social ties play in shaping reciprocal learning between parties, and what bearing does this have on control (Jackson 2021: 29)?



- **Legitimacy and ideology:** in what ways ideology affects forms, practices and understandings of control? What is the exact role of ideology in the consolidation of control? Is legitimacy a prerequisite or a result of control?
- **Civilian Agency:** How do communities resist strategies of control, negotiate ambiguous political situations, play multiple claims to control against each other or proclaim multiple allegiances? How do such strategies reframe rebel/state strategies and practices of control?

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## **Strategising social networks: a socio-spatial relational approach to the dynamic development of the Red Brigades**

*Lorenzo Bosi*

Today it is well acknowledged in the social sciences that social networks can serve to facilitate or inhibit processes of collective action, given we are mainly focusing on the effects of network structures. This has for the most tacitly implied picturing collective actors as passive objects of mobilising influences exerted by pre-given and persistent social networks. With this article, by tracing the interaction of different collective actors and their struggles, we want to show that there are considerable amounts of strategic initiatives on the part of collective actors who consciously seek to shape socio-spatial relations to succeed in their projects. We employ multiple primary sources to investigate the Red Brigade's (henceforth, BR) pre-existing social networks and self-perception of the Italian context, and how it has consciously attempted to shape socio-spatial relations as a result of deliberate and goal-oriented actions of the BR itself, between 1970 and 1978. By focusing on the BR, this article strives to answer the following empirical research question: how was the BR consciously seeking to shape socio-spatial relations upon its pre-existing social networks and perception of the Italian context during the 1970s? In answering to this question it draws attention to how the repression of the Italian state at the same time has re-configured the socio-spatial context where the BR operated its armed campaign shaping in turn its strategy, shifting from "armed propaganda" to "civil war unfolded".

## **In their own words. Concepts of control, influence and presence among FARC-EP commanders (Colombia)**

*José Antonio Gutiérrez D. & Clara Voyvodic*

Control has been for some time a catchword in the conflict studies literature. Often it is assumed that parties at a conflict are all trying to gain or maximise control. Control, as widely believed, is the ultimate goal of any military campaign. But what is it control? Is it something you can measure with objective parameters? What is the threshold to determine if we are (or not) in front of control? What does control entails? Is control the same concept in a rural or urban environment? Is the same for a secular than for a religious armed actor? We will discuss that, while control has many facets and it is a complex concept, there is one aspect that it is unavoidable when defining control in a ny given situation: the subjectivity of those using the term. This is, ideas of control are not 'objectifiable' regardless of the actor exercising them. As such, ideas of control are highly contextual, subjective and dependant on the culture and/or ideology of the actors in conflict. This paper aims at exploring the subjective dimension of control by discussing the concepts of control used by the FARC-EP throughout some key documents and also in a revealing interview with a commander in the Southern locality of Cauca.

## **The three stages of the Colombian ELN political war**

*Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín*

An implicit but fundamental point of departure of the debates about civil war's political nature (or lack of) in the last decades is that the politics of organized violence is static. Correspondingly, armed group territorial control never changes.

I take here exactly the opposite view. To describe the evolution of the politics of war I rely on Clausewitz' two most important definitions of the phenomenon: war is, certainly, "politics by other means", but because it is also



“a duel”. The most important events of wars as duels are pitched battles. I show that for the Colombian ELN war indeed started in the 1960s and the early 1970s as a (fundamentally failed) duel. But then the ELN evolved towards “war as an ambush”, where the skirmish was the key armed action. And, finally, ELN’s struggle has turned into “war as supervision”, where patrolling is the fundamental armed activity. Through the ELN military doctrine and its trajectory in the department of Arauca, I trace the unfolding of these forms of war and the different types of politics, of addressing the population, and of controlling territories associated to them.

## **Social Control in Civil Wars**

*Corinna Jentsch & Abbey Steele*

This review highlights the central role that the concept of territorial control has played in the development of the vibrant civil wars research agenda, sparked by Kalyvas’s *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (2006). We argue that the primacy of territorial control in theories of civil war has advanced our understanding of war dynamics, most notably lethal violence, but has also hindered our ability to grapple with others. We propose to complement the concept of territorial control by separately conceptualizing social control. We then develop a framework in which state and non-state armed groups choose which form of control to prioritize, before attempting the other in order to gain sovereignty, which we conceive of as incorporating both territorial and social control. We believe that this simple framework allows us to reason about non-lethal forms of violence that armed groups are likely to pursue depending on whether social or territorial control is their priority. In particular, it allows us to theorize the most prevalent form of civil war violence: civilian displacement. The framework makes three contributions: (1) it extends the existing focus on territorial control and serves as a tool to theorize systematic forms of violence beyond killings; (2) it connects research agendas on lethal violence, displacement, and rebel governance; and (3) it reveals new avenues for future research.

## **Freedom and control: liberating life amidst ongoing wars and insecurities in Maxmur Camp**

*Isabel Kaser*

Maxmur Camp is inhabited by roughly 12,000 Turkish Kurds who fled the armed conflict between the Turkish army and the PKK in the mid-1990s. Today the camp is not only home to refugees but also retired PKK militants, wounded fighters from Rojava and active PKK kadros (military and civil), whose task it is to organise the camp according to Democratic Confederalism, the Kurdish Freedom Movement’s liberation paradigm. However, the camp is also part of Iraq and Iraqi Kurdish territory and jurisprudence, and subject to regular attacks by Turkish drones, and between 2014–2018 also the so-called Islamic State (or daesh). Based on extended ethnographic research in the camp in 2016, and ongoing conversations with (former) camp residents and (former) camp commanders, this paper investigates how different forms of control coexisted in Maxmur pre-2014: between the PKK (ideology, diplomacy, gender regimes), the Kurdish Regional Government (access, security, water, electricity, salaries, education) and the UN (refugee ID cards). Since the PKK retook the camp from daesh in 2014, they not only gained more legitimacy but also the sole responsibility for its internal and external affairs. I argue that while the camp continues to be a key tactical location for the movement, it is becoming increasingly difficult to provide the ‘free life’ that this party promises its constituency, not least due to the ongoing economic crisis in the country, which leads to dire job prospects for the youth and many families deciding to leave the camp and migrate to Europe.

## **Violence, Legitimacy, and Control: Salvaging the conceptual tools to explore phenomena of rebel governance from Weber’s theory of power**

*Stefan Malthaner*

The recent shift in the literature on rebel governance towards re-examining underlying assumptions of civil war as some kind of zero-sum competition over violent territorial control between rebels and state has introduced a much more nuanced discussion of relationships between armed groups, their opponents, and local populations – focusing, in particular, on the interaction of violence, legitimacy, and control. Conceptual frameworks to capture these processes, however, seem still in a nascent state, with the majority of works not progressing much beyond a critique of the control-compliance model or a vague notion of “social control”.

On this background, it comes as a surprise that researchers have only rarely turned to Weberian theory of power

as a potential resource to fill that gap. After all, Max Weber famously conceptualized power based on a notion of control – as the ability of individuals or groups to assert their own will over others, even against resistance –, and he conceived of domination (Herrschaft) as the stabilization and institutionalization of practices and capabilities of control. Weber himself never really related his theory of power to violence, and never developed a more precise understanding of violent and social control (which might explain the hesitance to use it in research on violent conflicts); but Heinrich Popitz did, in his (recently translated) *Phenomena of Power*.

In this paper/talk I try to salvage some conceptual tools from Weber's (and Popitz') theory of power as well as emphasize the potential of the heuristics that comes with it – as a new angle from which to approach the phenomenon and a set of new questions to ask. Drawing on examples from my work on armed groups in the Middle East and Latin America, I seek to show that this is not some kind of self-indulgent exercise in abstract theory, but that we can derive a set of very concrete analytical tools from this body of work. I focus on four main aspects: (1) the way violence can be specified as one form of control – and one element of sustained relationships of rebel governance – among others; (2) an understanding of territorial control based on processes of extending control beyond violent dominance in particular situations via mechanisms of controlling people and movement; (3) the inherently processual perspective that forms the core of Popitz notion of the “institutionalization of power”; and (4) Weber's concept of “staff” and “followers”, which allows us to go beyond a homogenizing view of armed groups as coherent and clearly delimited organizations, and to examine the role of legitimacy “within” armed groups as well as the fluent and shifting boundaries with what is often conceived (in equally homogenizing terms) as “the population”.

### **Like Lions in the Jungle: Rethinking Armed Group Control during Civil War**

*Leigh Mayhew*

Within contemporary civil wars, control and influence are often thought of in terms of territory. In any given conflict, there is an array of colour-coded maps aiming to illustrate who controls what. Yet they so often fail to capture the everyday complexity of how armed groups operate and exert control. The paper argues that armed group control is better thought of in terms of different forms of influence, especially vis-à-vis the civilian population. In particular, it suggests distinguishing between three distinct but interrelated dimensions that form a cycle of control: Spheres of control that encompass the realms in which armed groups exercise control over civilian life, the practices of control that armed groups use to exercise control, and the capacities for control that describe the resources that enable an armed group to exert various types of control.

### **Manufacturing Consent without Coercion: Rebel Control in a Maoist Base Area in Nepal**

*Rumela Sen*

In the 1990s, the Maoists in Nepal established their first base area in six mid-western hilly districts of Nepal, which the Nepali state also promptly identified as the ‘most affected’ (Class A) by Maoist presence and absence of security forces. However, rebel capacity, control and governance varied considerably within this base area. Drawing on several rounds of conversation with Maoist leaders, ranging from local cadres to regional commanders and central committee leaders, this paper shows how the rebels assumed the provisional and transient nature of territorial control within their base area, which they viewed as contingent on the availability of informal networks.

This paper makes three contributions: First, it maps the district-level variation in territorial control established by the Maoists in Nepal. Second, it shows how the Nepal Maoists balanced needs for legitimacy, efficacy and capacity in formulating a three-staged, seven-step, four-level design of territorial control. Three, it postulates that rebels valued the parallel acts of norm making that proceed alongside territorial control more than area domination per se, as a crucial tactic for creating civilian buy-in without coercion.

### **Territorial claims and control in civil wars: A sociohistorical analysis**

*Anastasia Shesterinina*

Traditionally, analyses of control in civil wars have focused on shifting territorial control within the boundaries of internationally recognized states where government and insurgent parties to the conflict are subject to common

sovereignty at the outset of hostilities. However, in contexts of protracted competing territorial claims, the starting point of shared sovereignty does not capture collective understandings that shape the nature of conflict. This paper challenges ahistorical assumptions underlying dominant notions of territorial control by drawing attention to perceptions of belonging, legitimacy of armed actors, and stakes in the conflict in cases of contested statehood. These defining characteristics of conflict participants' relation to the territory matter for how they engage with armed actors who are physically present or dominant in their locales. Abkhaz mobilization despite Georgia's immediate capture of most of the territory of Abkhazia in 1992 demonstrates the argument, undermining expectations of current models of territorial control. The paper draws implications of this sociohistorical analysis for other self-determination struggles and civil wars more generally.

### **Toll and control: Rebel taxation in asymmetric conflict**

*Shalaka Thakur*

What can rebel taxation tell us about the nature of control in a conflict zone? In northeast India, along the Indo-Myanmar border, various non-state armed groups take taxes from civilians, businesses and sometimes even the Indian state. This taxation system is forged at the confluence coercive extraction, public legitimacy and symbolic power, these elements varying between and within different groups, geographies, and degrees of territorial control. Based on extensive fieldwork, with over 70 interviews with non-state armed groups and the people who pay them, this paper uses taxation as a lens through which to understand different types of control in spaces with competing sources of authority. In doing so, it contributes to our understanding of statehood, governance, and political order in conflict spaces.

### **Order-Knowledge-Control: A Framework for Comparative Counterinsurgency Studies**

*Alex Waterman & James Worrall*

The study of counterinsurgency (COIN) stalls when it reaches the idea of 'control.' It is frequently boiled down to successful coercive capabilities, generally through physical processes or the winning of the 'hearts and minds' of the population, with these in turn deeply intermeshed with territorial notions of control (such as popular notions of the 'ink spot' model). This focus on physical control – bounded with pre-existing assumptions about territorial control – neglects deeper, structural forms of control, alternative structures of domination which may well predate the counterinsurgency campaign itself. These are about existing forms of state power, but also themes such as class, power relationships, norms, violence, information and control of information. Furthermore, counterinsurgents themselves are not the only actors able to shape processes of control in the wider social and political order. Their efforts to generate control inevitably intersect with those of rebels, criminal actors, local politicians, civil society bodies, community organisations and structures, and the wider mass of civilian agency often bundled together as 'the population' in counterinsurgency theories.

Building on our previous engagements with the concept of order, the 'order turn' in the literature (Waterman and Worrall 2020) and our existing attempts to develop social scientific frameworks to understand the dynamics of COIN operations (Waterman 2021; Worrall 2014), we develop a triangular framework outlining the relationship between control and two related concepts – order and knowledge – to help better understand how counterinsurgents try to understand and shape order in a bid to generate forms of control. Faced with order's dynamic and evolving nature, if counterinsurgents are to achieve even a semblance of control in the most narrow sense then they need to generate knowledge of the complex, ever-moving parts that make up local order. We argue that by conceptualising how counterinsurgents attempt to understand and influence order in a bid to generate physical and structural control, fine-grained comparisons can be made between different 'types' of COIN.