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Poverty and the Organization of Political Violence: A Review and Some Conjectures

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I provide an analytical review of the literature on poverty and political violence, focusing on civil war. I also consider the effects of economic inequality and education. Expectations from rational choice theories of civil war are that violence will rise as income per capita, education, and economic growth decline. This is due either to the declining opportunity cost of violence or to the decline in state capacity—two competing causal mechanisms. Theories of relative deprivation expect violence to rise as a result of higher inequality, but it is not clear how to measure relative deprivation. There is strong evidence that per capita income is robustly and negatively associated with civil war, and little evidence in support of relative deprivation theory. But there is not a very good fit between the theories and the empirical results. Inequality is hard to measure and may exert an indirect effect on the risk of civil war. Income is subject to many interpretations and we cannot easily use the statistical results on income to distinguish among causal mechanisms. In addition, preliminary evidence suggests no significant effect of income on within-country variation in civil war onset. Thus, only long-term differences across countries' income levels may explain cross-national differences in the onset of civil war. But, while income differences across countries may explain civil war, they do not explain all forms of violence, such as terrorism. I offer some conjectures that explain this puzzle: terrorism can be viewed as proto-civil war, fought by elites with more education and greater commitment to their cause than the average rebel in a civil war. To better understand civil war and the impact of poverty, we must weigh the effects of economic incentives against the effects of other explanations, such as ideology, ethnicity, coercion, or religion on different forms of violence.