

## Civil Wars: A History in Ideas

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**Author:** David Armitage

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Civil war plagues our times. As David Armitage notes in his brilliant work, *Civil Wars: A History in Ideas*, the idea of the ‘Long Peace’ after the Second World War is in many ways misleading as intrastate conflict has become far more common than in previous centuries. From the former Yugoslavia to the recent horrors in Syria, so many in recent years have experienced the pain of civil war. His work sheds light on the long history of the construction and reconstruction of the concept. Through it, Armitage reveals the dynamism of the concept, which has almost always been politicized. His book is much needed, but it is also only the beginning of the study of civil war. As Armitage rightly notes in the introduction, ‘other histories of civil war can and should be written’ (p. 22).

Throughout Armitage uses a methodology derived from his training at Cambridge. Armitage, like his mentor Quentin Skinner and the many others who have used Skinner’s method, seeks to understand the meaning of the concept civil war and the contexts in which writers deployed it. In a concluding statement that would not surprise anyone familiar with the Cambridge School, Armitage notes that ‘[t]he historian’s task’ is not to develop a new concept of civil war but instead to ‘ask where such competing conceptions came from, what they have meant, and how they arose from the experience of those who lived through what was called by that name or who have attempted to understand it in the past’ (p. 238). In particular, Armitage deploys a genealogy schematic to understand how thinkers imagined ‘Civil War’ across time and space. This too is derived from the Cambridge School, for while Armitage explicitly names Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morality* in the introduction, he also cites Skinner’s recent work on the genealogy of the state.

The difference between Armitage’s work and other contributions from the Cambridge School is the temporal ambition of the book, which traces the concept of civil war from Roman times to our own. This is thus the first substantive contribution to a methodology Armitage and Jo Guldi laid out in their 2014 *History Manifesto* (1), which encourages historians to write long-term histories of 500 years or more as a strategy to make history relevant again in the public sphere.

Others have tried similarly ambitious chronological scopes. Giorgio Agamben’s *State of Exception*, which Armitage analyzes in the last chapter of this book, comes to mind; as does Daniel Heller-Roazen’s *Enemy of All: Piracy and the Law of Nations*.(2) But neither of those scholars uses the ‘meaning and context’

approach to the analysis of texts that the Cambridge School demands. The uniqueness of *Civil Wars* is due to the combination of its methodological approach and its chronological scope.

The work is divided into three parts. In part one, Armitage argues that the invention and elaboration of the concept took place in the first century BCE. The second section handles the early modern period, where Armitage locates the transformation of civil war by philosophers and jurists in Western Europe. The final section explores the contested usages of civil war in modern times.

The first substantive chapter contrasts the Greek concept of *stasis* with the later Latin phrase *bellum civile* with the purpose of establishing the origins of civil war within the Roman, and not Greek, tradition. Armitage argues that *stasis* (violence between factions within a *polis*), while disruptive, was never understood to have the formal underpinnings of war. Standards, generals, camps and columns, were not present in the fight. *Stasis* was much more like lawlessness, a disease, to Thucydides, that afflicted *poleis* during extended wartimes. The Roman *bellum civile*, however, recognized the seemingly impossible: that citizens in a space designed for peace fought one another formally as one would normally have fought an external *hostis*. This began first and foremost with Sulla, who marched on Rome in 88 BCE, and then fought his rival Marius in the following years. For Armitage, historians described this war in two important ways: first, they noted that it was a war that took place ‘within a political community’ and, second, they noted that two contending parties competed for political legitimacy.

The second chapter covers how classical authors remembered the civil wars of the Roman period. While for some like Julius Caesar it was the ‘war that shall not be named’ many began to believe that civil war was a permanent structure within Roman politics. The term itself was first used by Cicero in 66 BCE, but Armitage spends most of his analysis on the historians and poets who tried to understand Rome’s constant resort to civil war, like Lucan, Sallust, Appian, Plutarch, and Tacitus. He ends with the great theologian Augustine’s analysis of Roman politics in his *City of God*. Armitage concludes by noting that three strands of analysis of civil war developed from these authors: a republican understanding of civil war as a necessary condition of being civilized, a monarchical understanding which claimed that monarchical rule was the only antidote to a cycle of civil wars, and a religious understanding of civil war which claimed that strife was a consequence of the sinfulness of the political community.

Armitage abandons the last of these categories in the ensuing chapters on the early modern period, which roughly cover the period from Grotius to the outbreak of the French Revolution. Here instead, Armitage focuses on jurists and political philosophers and the ways in which they transformed the concept of civil war. In this historian, he has found one of the most sympathetic of readers for this approach. Nevertheless, others will be disappointed that he ignores the many divines in the early modern period who interpreted civil strife through a religious lens. This neglect, however, is not surprising. The Cambridge School has always produced better tour guides of Rome than of Jerusalem.

More unfortunate from this author’s perspective is Armitage’s neglect of the Middle Ages. It is true, as Armitage notes, that Ben Jonson’s *Catiline* was more popular than Shakespeare’s history plays of England’s Middle Ages in the 17th century. But that does not mean early modern English politicians, jurists, and divines ignored their tumultuous medieval history. Armitage is right to assert the importance of the Roman tradition in the early modern period. That tradition, however, was often combined with readings of medieval and continental histories and legal texts.

Nevertheless, the two chapters on the early modern period are brilliant in what they do cover. Armitage is particularly at home in his discussion of Hobbes, who eventually attempted to eliminate civil war as a logical possibility in his famous *Leviathan* which argued for an absolute and unitary sovereignty. This was done after the Long Parliament convicted Charles I for treason in 1649 for waging war against his own people. Locke, although he differed from Hobbes in many respects, likewise rejected the Roman notion of civil war, while Algernon Sidney and Robert Filmer used the history of civil wars to debate the relative merits of republicanism and absolutism respectively.

Even in this brief chapter on the 17th century, Armitage manages to make important historiographical interventions. His discussion of Charles I's trial just might revitalize a topic that has been dominated by a debate, won by Clive Holmes, over whether the Purged Parliament wanted to kill the king. Further, his brief but cutting description of the Glorious Revolution as a bloodless transmission of 'authority from one faction to another' effectively rebuts the thesis of the book that shall not be named.<sup>(3)</sup> At least for this historian, the pages on the Glorious Revolution will provide a much-needed source of mirth for future rainy days.

In the second chapter of part two, Armitage complicates the distinction between civil war and revolution through an analysis of the American and French Revolutions. While civil war is often seen as backwards-looking and destructive, and revolution is understood to be uplifting and modern, Armitage notes that in actuality the two concepts cannot be so easily separated. The American conflict was a much better example of a secessionist civil war. It was one, further, that resembled the Swiss jurist Emer de Vattel's novel understanding of a civil war that took on an international character and should be governed by the laws of war. In this analysis, Armitage joins many recent historians who have argued that civil war is a much better description of the War of Independence than revolution. Through an analysis of the French Revolution, Armitage carefully charts how even in that supposedly most modern of moments, contemporary observers relied on scripts of civil war. This was especially true of opponents of the Revolution, like Edmund Burke, but even those more sympathetic to revolutionary causes like later revolutionary socialists saw civil war as a necessary component of revolution.

In the first chapter of part three, Armitage explores the tangled intellectual legacy of the American Civil War. After noting that as late as the mid 19th century, civil war remained under-regulated by European jurists, Armitage, in several brilliant close readings of American jurists and statesmen, notes how American statesmen wanted to both deny and accept the concept of civil war during the violent conflict between the Confederacy and the Union from 1861–5. Rejecting the Confederacy's claim to a secessionist civil war, President Abraham Lincoln became the great defender of state inviolability by denying all legitimacy to civil wars. Nevertheless, the military/legal establishment under his control often utilized the concept of civil war for humanitarian and expedient purposes. The most important actor was Francis Lieber, the famous author of *General Orders No 100*, whose tangled definition of civil war would still be studied by American commanders as late as 2001. Lieber argued that civil war was a war between two portions of a state but it could also be a war of rebellion – a claim that did little to ultimately disentangle civil war from wars of rebellion or insurrection even if, as Armitage notes, it helped support the legal actions the Union had taken since the opening of the conflict. On the one hand, Lieber perhaps helped civilize civil war by applying the laws of war to the conflict. On the other, he also gave room for future internal conflicts to be governed by more brutal domestic laws.

This same inability to separate civil war from other types of domestic conflict plagued philosophers, humanitarians, and jurists in the 20th century. In the aftermath of the Second World War jurists at Geneva once again tried to provide international legal protections for the 'victims of conflicts not of an international character' (p. 201). The resulting Common Article 3, however, allowed states 'ample discretion to decide whether or not conflicts crossed the threshold from rebellion to civil war' (p. 203). Subsequent international legal definitions were likewise flexible. While political theorists like John Rawls and, especially for Armitage, Michel Foucault, offered brilliant analyses of civil war, and social scientists like those working on the Correlates of War Project attempted to quantify instances of civil war, the term remained flexible enough

for there to be real disagreement between statesmen over whether the escalating conflict in Iraq in the mid-2000s was in fact a civil war. This, of course, is the point. As an ‘essentially contested concept’ from its birth, politicians could either assert or deny civil war when it suited their purposes (p. 226). In an increasingly global age, further, the concept has only become more elastic as politicians have described the ideological struggle between the United States and the USSR and, now, the War on Terror, as global civil wars.

Armitage is as comfortable analyzing Lucan as he is Hobbes or Foucault. His ability to range widely and dig deeply is admirable. It is illuminating to have the classical, the early modern, and the modern analyzed in the same book. The approach that Armitage advocates is also particularly good at showing change over time. Most importantly, he shows how both classical and early modern historians can apply their crafts in ways that will make their periods relevant again to modernists who in most instances would prefer not to bother with older periods of history.

There is more work to be done. A deeper comparison between Islamic understandings of civil strife and European notions of civil war needs to be conducted, especially given the horrifying conflicts that are currently taking place in Iraq and in Syria. A work that focuses on less canonical figures and more on those who directly experienced the pain of civil war would complement Armitage’s work nicely. Many others, in both print and in the pub, will critique this work for its selectivity, its brevity, and its chronological scope.

Those critiques will not come from this historian. Given his stature in the academy, Armitage could have easily continued to write learned monographs on focused subjects. Instead, in an attempt to revitalize the historical discipline, he has risked the scorn of his colleagues by trying new methods. Both the impulse to try new ways of writing history and the finished product should be applauded. Armitage’s approach might cause a revolution within the discipline. As he knows all too well, that revolution will be preceded by civil war.

## Notes

1. David Armitage and Jo Guldi, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge, 2014).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago, IL, 2005); Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Enemy of All: Piracy and the Law of Nations* (Cambridge, MA, 2009).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Steven Pincus, *1688: The First Modern Revolution* (New Haven, CT, 2009).[Back to \(3\)](#)

The author can find nothing to add to this very gratifying review.

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