

Long Read Review: The Impossible Grammar of Civil War by Ed Jones

Ed Jones explores two books from **Bill Kissane** and **David Armitage** that reflect on the history of civil war, including the conceptual challenge it poses as a term that is – in the words of the latter – ‘an unstable, fissile compound’.

If you are interested in this book review, you may like to listen to a recording of the LSE Literary Festival 2017 lecture by Bill Kissane and Anthony Loyd, [‘Nations Torn Asunder’](#), recorded 23 February 2017,

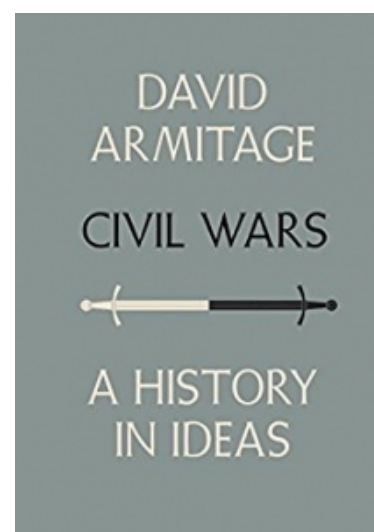
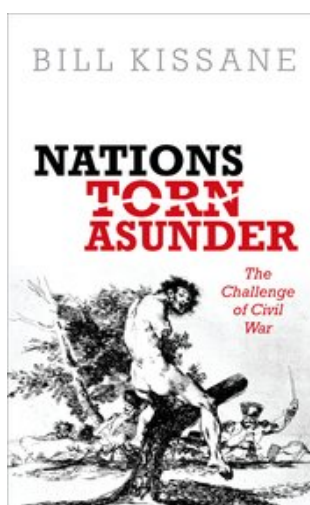
The Impossible Grammar of Civil War

Find these books:  

Nations Torn Asunder: The Challenge of Civil War. Bill Kissane. Oxford University Press. 2016.

Civil War: A History in Ideas. David Armitage. Yale University Press. 2017.

1973 saw the publication of Moses Finley’s *The Ancient Economy*. With this book, Finley triggered an important debate in the field of classical antiquity when he suggested that the ancient world did not respond to the logic of mainstream economic models. Greeks and Romans had an entirely different set of social relations and lacked the terminology to discuss modern economics. Instead, Greeks and Romans used a whole different toolkit of concepts and ideas to define their worldviews.



This debate, as with many in academia, was never truly solved. Its intractability points to the difficulty of defining a concept like ‘the economy’ through time. Conceptual history can contribute to the historical exploration of legal and social mind-sets. But in order to do so, conceptual history must be rigorous. The history of concepts requires close attention to changing contexts, shifting reference points, surmounting eurocentrism or suffering its limitations, and often finds in untranslatability maddening dead-ends.

Tracing the history of singular concepts is, therefore, difficult enough. The complexity of exploring the history of composite terms is exponentially greater, in particular ones formed through the combination of loaded terms such as ‘civil’ and ‘war’. To trace the genealogy of ‘civil war’, a historian might have to investigate changing definitions of the civil, perceptions of contextually-influential wars and their legacies and uses of the composite term across a defined time and space. This complex study might not be enough, for it would fail to account for the fact that different nations have different emotional attachments to the concept. At one point, David Armitage defines civil war as an ‘unstable, fissile compound’. Armitage’s *Civil War: A History in Ideas* and Bill Kissane’s *Nations Torn Asunder: The Challenge of Civil War* show this to be a vast oversimplification.

Narratives of Civil War: History and Historiography



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Armitage and Kissane's works elucidate the difficulty of navigating the history of the concept of civil war. Armitage sets out to follow its trajectory from antiquity to the modern day. Kissane's purpose, on the other hand, is to review approaches in the social sciences towards the idea of civil war since 1945.

Armitage traces the legacy of Rome's recurrent traumatic engagement with civil war. The first Roman legacy 'that lasted until the eighteenth century and beyond' is the seeming impossibility of imagining the civil without conjuring up internal conflict. Civilisation requires cities and states, and the natural fate of these political formations is 'to be riven by civil strife'. A second legacy is legitimacy. Civil wars beget the impossible question – is the insurgent force or the established power the legitimate state? These questions were echoed in debates about sovereignty in the works of Hugo Grotius, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. Following the historian Reinhart Koselleck, Armitage suggests that the French Revolution revolutionised the concept of civil war as it reframed it as a revolution – future-oriented, driven by 'high ideals and transformative hopes'. Not everyone believed this message, however, and some wondered whether in the case of a complete upset of a nation's order, foreign intervention was justified.

This was the focus of the debate of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries – how to 'civilise civil war' and make it subject to the international liberal order. The liberal order expanded the reach of the civil – the community was now global, and therefore civil wars appeared to be an affront to the global effort towards progress. In this context, the Roman question of legitimacy came back with a vengeance as international institutions tried to come up with a standard criteria for intervention. As institutions attempted to solve this dilemma, the academic world throughout the twentieth century held civil war to be a 'Cinderella subject'. For those such as Michel Foucault and contemporary theorists, civil war came to be a metaphor for broader power struggles. Today, it has come to define a type of state of exception, failing to provide a substantive answer as to where the right to power lies when one declares a 'just war' on one's own people.

Kissane's *Nations Torn Asunder* explores how the academic world post-1945 has dealt with these dilemmas. At the heart of his book lies the question of whether civil war is the product of nature or of nurture and context. Kissane first chooses to explore patterns of civil war. This is a somewhat problematic approach, but Kissane can be forgiven insofar as he appears to be summarising the field's methodology rather than his own. Kissane also addresses modernity's close relationship with violence: how decolonisation and the formation of new states seemed to lead to a rise in civil wars. Kissane concludes that most studies have been organised along the lines of intra-state vs inter-state conflicts, and that recently decolonised states appeared particularly prone to civil war.

Kissane explores structural theories that suggest a weak state's structure is to blame for civil war as well as process-based accounts that see it as the product of a variety of actors, events, patterns and cycles. The consequences are enduring moral and physical harm, but also a vulnerability to 'predatory neighbours'. Kissane then explores the literature on reconstruction and reconciliation. In the epilogue, Kissane returns to his original question. Civil war is deemed a combination of both nature and nurture. Social science has 'probably gone as far as it can go [...] to define civil war', while art and literature 'have better insights into the experience they [civil wars] generally bring'.

For Kissane, *The Economist*, *The Chamber's Dictionary*, Ernest Hemingway and Salvador Dalí are all sources of inspiration to explore working definitions of civil war. However, these sources do not contribute towards further insights into the topic; rather, they lead to a lack of clarity. They also appear to deviate away from the nature-nurture debate and from a review of modern studies on civil war. For example, Kissane observes that:

the poet Seamus Heaney once remarked that after the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 the whole world had become "a big Ulster" (*Irish Times* September 7 2013). This was not the first time that a form of conflict has stood as a metaphor for the violence of an era. Exaggeration has always played a major role in the study of conflict.

He then concludes: 'what follows will reveal whether civil war should stand as a faithful metaphor for the history of the past century'.

Armitage's work is consistent, and his goal is clear. It traces the legacy of Rome's recurrent traumatic engagement with civil war. For any other scholar, this might be a limitation. For Armitage, this contextualisation is a strength. The focus on Rome's legacy allows Armitage to avoid convoluted terms, and to write a history of the influence of Rome's civil wars throughout history. His study is therefore Eurocentric. This limits its value, but it does provide a clear sense of focus and direction for those hoping to study the Western tradition of political thought and its blind spots.

In Kissane's account, the Eurocentrism is more problematic insofar as he is trying to draw on the aftermath of decolonisation. His use of pre-twentieth-century history is also less systematic: often Kissane's primary goal of reviewing contemporary studies gives way to his exploration of whether civil wars are the result of nature or nurture. Nature-nurture debates can lead to the type of oversimplification that appears when Kissane points to the existence of paradoxes where there are none: 'note the paradox: we live in a world dominated by talk of democracy, human rights, progress and internationalism, but the past century has been unprecedented in the scope and intensity of its violence.' It is unclear whose world that is, and how the proliferation of western 'talk' of liberalism has anything to do with twentieth-century violence.

Civilising Wars and Civil Wars



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From the point of view of conceptual history, an overarching problem is how much weight studies hoping to examine civil war should place on its definition. Without a working definition, can one truly explore the history of the term? Armitage solves this problem by focusing solely on Roman civil war. Kissane's most clear contribution to the debate is to add that 'in order for a military conflict to become a civil war, attitudes to political authority must become affected by the prospect of fragmentation'. Yet, the issue remains as to whether in writing a history of civil wars, one looks at the ways people have drawn on the concept to explore political dynamics, or whether one can take a look at societies that lacked, or chose not to use, the term civil war, in order to then assess the consequences of said conflicts. In other words, are these histories of the use of the term civil war, or are they histories of how people understood what *today* amounts to a civil war?

The answer is not entirely clear. Both Armitage and Kissane start from the ever-suspect premise of newness – nobody has written a history of civil wars, and a study is needed in a world where the term has come to be used to describe the global state of affairs. But the two works take different approaches to the Roman term 'civil' as a valid starting point. Before the Roman definition, the Greeks already had a term to describe strife in the community in the form of 'stasis'. In Ancient Greece, [stasis meant](#) both 'standing' and 'taking a stand'. [Finley explored the idea](#) when he stated:

I believe that there must be deep significance in the fact that a word which has the original sense of "station" or "position" and which, in abstract logic, could have an equally neutral sense when used in a political context, in practice does nothing of the kind, but immediately takes on the nastiest overtones [...] Whatever the explanation, it lies not in philology but in Greek society itself.

Can the Ancient Greek struggle with stasis therefore help us understand civil war?

Armitage wrestles with the concept of stasis, and concludes that the lack of a common citizenship and the absence of legal and political unity meant 'for the Greeks a war in the polis would have been like the polis being at war with itself': inconceivable. Kissane reaches the same conclusion: 'the ancient Greeks did not invent the term civil war; the adjective "civil" did not exist in their city states' [...] it was left to the Romans to coin the term.' However, Kissane subsequently treats stasis as synonymous with civil war. Kissane draws on the anachronistic concept of stasis more than a dozen times, and suggests a (translated) Thucydides showed how 'civil war encourages people to pursue only their self-interests'. It remains unclear then whether 'stasis' was indeed an early form of civil war, or whether civil wars can predate the very use of the term.

What happens when societies do not use the term civil war to record their civil strife? If the Greek idea of stasis is not the same as the Roman idea of civil war, does it contribute any less to informing ideas of civil war today? And how do these distinctions inform today's divisions between the west and the rest?

One source of division appears to be the distinction between civil wars and revolutions. Koselleck explored the way revolution came to be defined in relation to civil war, and both Armitage and Kissane address his argument but fail to flesh it out as they venture to examine modern uses of the term civil war. Following the French Revolution, revolution came to be used as a way to establish progress and unity; civil war came to define division. Neither Kissane nor Armitage deem it relevant to explore the afterlife of this distinction. If revolution is a thinly-veiled name for civil war, surely the term's modern relationship with civil war must be studied? The failure to do so might perpetuate a trend that sees the world as divided between countries that were perpetually destroyed by civil wars and nations that are still reaping the fruits of revolution.

The way we define civil war matters. In the attempt to capture the nuanced dimensions of conflicts and revolutions, historians might pay closer attention to the way the world is divided up by these definitions.

Ed Jones is a graduate of the LSE and a PhD Candidate in History at the University of Cambridge, with a focus on early modern Spain. [Read more by Ed Jones.](#)

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.