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Civil wars as situations of radical social change Thinking ruptures, with and beyond Bourdieu

Adam Baczko and Gilles Dorronsoro

“My whole work has been to show how a state is constituted, but we could also, almost as well, have done the work starting from the dissolution of the state. Genesis and involution, as some biologists have said, have the same virtues of removing the appearance of commonplaceness: the dissolution of a state makes it possible to see everything that is implicit and taken for granted in the functioning of a state, such as frontiers and everything that is unitary. The dissolution of a state makes it possible to see how the construction of national unity is achieved against secessionist tendencies, which may be regional, but may also [arise] from [social] classes.”¹

How can a theorist of reproduction and the state help us understand brutal, unpredictable transformations and radical contestations of power? The central question running throughout Bourdieu’s work—notably in *The Inheritors*, *Distinction*, and *The Logic of Practice*—is that of domination, and more precisely, the alignment between social structures and schema of thought. His conceptual apparatus—articulating field, capital, and habitus—provides a framework for analyzing social reproduction and the stability of power structures. Extending the work of Marx and Weber, Bourdieu thus produced a sociology attuned to the processes of domination and accumulation. His research on France illuminated the mechanisms of (educational) transmission and of (class-based) distinction that favor the perpetuation of the social order.

But what is to be done with Bourdieu in civil wars—those contexts marked by radical contestation of the state and by rapid and violent transformations? Bourdieu did, in fact, develop concepts to address situations of rupture and misalignment—particularly the concept of hysteresis of the habitus. From the 1980s onward, the state became one of his principal objects of inquiry—seen as producer of categories of understanding, of field autonomy, and value of capital—within a long-term perspective focused on institutional genesis.² Nonetheless, Bourdieu rarely, and then always incidentally, addressed the question of social rupture. Even though war constituted the backdrop to his ethnographic work in the Kabyle regions, he barely mentions it in the preface to *The Logic of Practice* and never developed it as a scientific object.³ In *Homo Academicus*, Bourdieu sketched an explanation for May 1968 as a conjunction of sectoral crises and, in the citation above, suggested the theoretical interest of a reverse sociogenesis of the state.⁴ Still, he did not engage with theories of mobilization—a central current in the social sciences for thinking about social change.

Moreover, while Kabyle society served as the terrain upon which Bourdieu forged his key concepts, it was the France of the second half of the twentieth century—with the centrality of the state—that implicitly framed his analyses. Yet societies undergoing civil war differ significantly in the relative value of various species of capital and the degree of field autonomy. In some contexts, confessional or ethnic affiliations are highly objectivized, endowing identities with the qualities of collective capital. These identities are not merely principles of territorial or social affiliation, categories of ethnographic description, or modes of popular perception—they also indicate one’s

¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *On the State. Lectures at the College de France, 1989–1992* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014): 359.

² Bourdieu, *On the state*, op. cit.

³ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990): 3.

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

rank in accessing various resources within the framework of unequal competition or collaboration among groups.⁵

In a period of increasing measurability, a growing number of resources are objectivized, and thus subject to accumulation and conversion—requiring an expansion of Bourdieu’s initial typology of capital (cultural, economic, social). Furthermore, the relative weight of different forms of capital—as reflected in their conversion rates—varies from one society to another. In certain configurations, contrary to the supremacy of economic capital noted by Bourdieu, social capital conditions economic accumulation, as evidenced by the extensive literature on neopatrimonialism and clientelism.

While field specialization is nearly universal,⁶ there is no justification for assigning a particular degree of independence to fields vis-à-vis the rest of society.⁷ In non-democratic regimes, the transversal role of security institutions and state–party relations strongly influence the autonomy of fields. In communist regimes, the party’s all-encompassing control over society limits field autonomy, prompting Bourdieu to propose the concept of political capital.⁸ In Turkey, at certain moments, the fusion between the ruling party and the state produced a similar effect.⁹ In Syria, the proliferation of security services fulfilled this function¹⁰, while in Libya, the Gaddafi regime deliberately weakened institutions to such a degree that society functioned largely through informal mechanisms.¹¹ These examples illustrate a broader tendency, especially visible during civil war: the impossibility of assuming that a field corresponds systematically to a specific capital. This relationship between field and capital, moreover, was the subject of successive revisions in Bourdieu’s work over time.

These limitations aside, Bourdieusian sociology remains heuristic in that it offers conceptual tools for understanding the dynamics of civil wars as moments of competition between alternative social orders.¹² It lets us move beyond classical definitions drawn from political theory regarding the division of sovereignty, and to conceive, in comparative terms, the revolutionary dimensions of contemporary civil wars, their propensity to generate far-reaching social transformations. In the remainder of this chapter, we will examine both the contributions and the limitations of the Bourdieusian approach, drawing on our research conducted in Afghanistan, Syria, Turkey, and Mali, as well as on the work of colleagues who have carried out field investigations in other conflict settings. We will explore, in turn, how civil wars lead to the fragmentation of fields, to the abrupt reconfiguration of the value of capitals, to the misalignment of habitus, and to the redefinition of interpretive frameworks, with major implications for the reflexivity of social agents.

I. Division of Fields

The outbreak of civil wars fragments fields and institutions, as each belligerent develops its own administration within the territories under its control. Religious institutions may divide

⁵ Gilles Dorronsoro and Olivier Grojean (eds.), *Identity, Conflict and Politics in Turkey, Iran and Pakistan* (London: Hurst, 2017).

⁶ As indicated by the emphasis placed by Niklas Luhmann, Anthony Giddens, and Pierre Bourdieu in their respective work.

⁷ On the distinction between autonomy-as-independence and autonomy-as-specialization, see Bernard Lahire, *Monde pluriel : penser l'unité des sciences sociales* (Paris: Seuil, 2012), 63.

⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason. On the Theory of Action* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998): 14-18

⁹ Gilles Dorronsoro and Benjamin Gourisse “Une clé de lecture du politique en Turquie : les rapports État-partis,” *Politix* 107, no. 1 (2015).

¹⁰ Souhail Belhadj, *La Syrie de Bashar al-Assad : anatomie d'un système autoritaire* (Paris: Belin, 2013).

¹¹ Luis Martinez, *The Libyan Paradox* (New York: Columbia Press, 2007).

¹² Adam Baczko and Gilles Dorronsoro “For a Sociological Approach to Civil Wars,” *Revue française de science politique* 67, no. 2 (2017): 309–327.

along lines of ethnic solidarity or of the territorialization of conflict, as evidenced by schisms within the Orthodox churches in Ethiopia and Ukraine. Similarly, the Afghan legal field fragmented as early as 1978 with the onset of civil war, pitting a judiciary inspired by socialism—aligned with the Communist regime—against Islamic law upheld by the insurgency. The Western intervention of 2001 intensified this polarization, with state courts grounded in Western legal norms standing in opposition to Islamic tribunals established by the Taliban.¹³

Economic markets likewise undergo profound recomposition, particularly when international borders become more permeable than internal ones, thereby altering trade flows. In Syria, beginning in 2012–2013, the economy fractured into four distinct zones: those controlled respectively by the regime of Bashar al-Assad, by the revolutionary groups that emerged from the 2011 protests, by the Syrian branch of the PKK—the PYD—and by the Islamic State. Although exchanges between these territories persist, each market tended to become more autonomous and more closely integrated with the economies of neighboring countries than with other regions of Syria.¹⁴

The cultural field is not exempt from this dynamic, with the disappearance of cultural institutions in insurgent-controlled areas or the emergence of competing structures. Candice Raymond has shown that the Lebanese civil war led to the fragmentation of the academic field, with each faction developing its own university centers, cultural associations, and patronage networks. This splintering reshapes professional trajectories: affiliation with a specific institution determines access to particular publishing houses, newspapers or journals, and intellectual networks.¹⁵

The internal organization of fields is also deeply affected, particularly their autonomy vis-à-vis political and military authorities. The Afghan religious field of the 1980s exemplified this shift: the Communist regime incorporated the *ulema* into the state apparatus following the Soviet model, while the insurgency opened pathways to positions of power in the political, military, and legal spheres.¹⁶ In a similar fashion, the PKK fostered the emergence of a transnational Kurdish cultural field, characterized by intense politicization and a rupture with national cultural fields.¹⁷

Moreover, political polarization tends to resignify all social activities, explicitly assigning political significance to certain practices. For example, a religious practice may acquire a militant dimension insofar as it becomes embedded in the ethnic or confessional stakes of the conflict. This dynamic fosters an isomorphism between fields—a structural similarity—where the same criteria of affiliation or opposition determine positions within the field. Under this logic of extreme polarization, political affiliations become the dominant prism through which social positions are interpreted and legitimized. Bourdieu himself draws on the analogy of civil war in his analysis of May 1968, showing how an acute crisis replaces plural affiliations with sharply opposed camps: “*the crisis tends to substitute a division into clearly distinguished camps (according to the logic of a civil war) for progressive distribution between two poles, and for all the multiple, partly contradictory memberships which the separation of spaces and times allows to reconcile.*”¹⁸

This logic is particularly evident in the cultural field, where political cleavages directly influence the production and circulation of works. Cultural producers, far from mitigating conflict,

¹³ Adam Baczko, *The Taliban Courts in Afghanistan: Waging War by Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

¹⁴ Adam Baczko, Gilles Dorransoro and Arthur Quesnay, *Civil War in Syria: Mobilization and Companding Social Orders* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018): 239-255.

¹⁵ Candice Raymond, *Le métier d'historien au Liban. Sociobistoire d'une discipline indisciplinée* (Beyrouth, Presses de l'Ifpo, 2023).

¹⁶ Gilles Dorransoro, “Dynamiques entre champs religieux and politique. Le cas de l’Afghanistan”, *Purusartha*, 30, 2012.

¹⁷ Clémence Yüksel-Scalbert, “Le PKK and l’autonomie du champ culturel kurde” in Gilles Dorransoro, *Le gouvernement des Kurdes: gouvernement partisans et ordres sociaux alternatifs* (Paris: Karthala, 2023): 160ff.

¹⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo academicus*: 181.

often contribute to its radicalization. Laurent Bonnefoy illustrates this phenomenon in Yemen, where popular singers are mobilized by the various warring parties¹⁹, a dynamic equally visible among writers in Algeria.²⁰ Civil wars thus challenge the notion that culture serves to pacify social tensions; on the contrary, the radicalism of discourse is often a defining feature of cultural producers in such contexts.

However, the initial configuration of fields varies by context. In Syria, where the legal and academic fields already had low autonomy prior to 2011, the civil war did not fundamentally alter their functioning. In contrast, in Turkey, the repression that followed the 1980 coup d'état led to a significant loss of autonomy. In particular, the state of emergency enabled the implementation of extraordinary procedures that curtailed judicial independence. Successive states of exception—frequently declared in Kurdish regions—facilitated the harassment of elected officials through repeated judicial investigations. Conversely, in Colombia, the judicial field managed to preserve its autonomy, in part thanks to the privileged social status of judges, which let them offer a degree of resistance to political and criminal pressures.²¹ By asserting the autonomy of their professional domain, they mobilized one of the recurrent strategies for countering the politicization of fields during civil wars. This logic can also be observed among certain doctors and religious figures, who claim the neutrality of their work in an effort to transcend partisan divisions.

Finally, despite the violent competition in which they are engaged, the various social orders must be analyzed jointly due to the continued existence of economic interactions or limited forms of institutional recognition. In the legal domain, different authorities compete for the same public, and their respective claims to exercise exclusive authority over the entire national territory—or over part of it, in the case of secessionist insurgencies—sustain a shared space within which they operate relationally. Thus, legal specialists may collaborate pragmatically, divide up certain activities, use the same legal codes, share criteria that define legal competence, or recognize the same documents. In Afghanistan, for instance, judgments and property titles issued by the Kabul regime were recognized by Taliban courts under certain conditions. All legal actors involved in a civil war remain embedded in a system of interdependence insofar as they continue to compete for control over the legal field.²²

The systematic involvement of transnational actors in civil war strongly affects the structuring of fields. In Afghanistan, Iraq, Mali, and the Central African Republic, the influx of aid following Western interventions has been accompanied by the involvement of international institutions and development agencies in internal struggles within the legal, economic, and political fields. This dynamic has led to the emergence of a transnational bureaucratic field, in which national and international institutions interact in the formulation of public policy, often to the detriment of the autonomy and coherence of national institutions.²³ In Afghanistan, the government installed by the Western coalition was marked by its inability to coordinate the various components of the military intervention, which operated de facto—and at times de jure—with complete

¹⁹ Laurent Bonnefoy, *Yemen and the World: Beyond Insecurity*, (London: Hurst, 2018):155ff.

²⁰ Tristan Leperlier, *Algérie, les écrivains dans la décennie noire*, (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2018).

²¹ Jacobo Grajales, « Quand les juges s'en mêlent : le rôle de la justice dans la démobilisation des groupes paramilitaires en Colombie », *Critique internationale*, 70 (2016): 117-136.

²² Baczko, *The Taliban Courts in Afghanistan*.

²³ Adam Baczko and Gilles Dorransoro, “Les apories d’une rationalisation ponctuelle. La formation des organes de contrôle dans le champ bureaucratique transnational au Mali”, *Gouvernement et action publique*, 13, n° 1(2024): 7-27; Mathilde Tarif, “La dislocation bureaucratique: La crise and les effets de l’aide internationale sur l’État en République centrafricaine (2014-2021)”, *Revue française de science politique*, 74, n° 4, (2025): XXX-XXX. On the broader dynamics in aid-dependent regimes, see Graham Harrison, “Post-Conditionality Politics and Administrative Reform: Reflections on the Cases of Uganda and Tanzania”, *Development and Change*, 32, n° 4, (2001): 669.

independence.²⁴ In a similar vein, these interventions also promoted the formation of militias that became central actors in security arrangements, often with dire consequences.²⁵

Conversely, in certain fields that were already highly transnationalized prior to the war, internationalization may foster a degree of autonomization—particularly visible among intellectuals who benefit from policies of asylum, protection, and funding.²⁶ Tristan Leperlier and Candice Raymond have shown that, in Algeria during the Black Decade (1992–2002) and in wartime Lebanon (1975–1990), the intensification of transnational circulation enabled certain writers and historians to escape local political pressures.²⁷ Similarly, by soliciting financial support from transnational organizations, Croatian academics targeted by the Tadjman administration were able to resist its efforts to bring research institutions into line with state ideology.²⁸ Finally, the destruction of cultural institutions and the dispersion of intellectuals in exile can at times facilitate immediate integration into international circuits. Hosting programs for scholars in Europe and North America thus offer researchers and artists the means to continue their work outside the constraints imposed by war.

II. Drastic Shift in the Value of Capitals

Civil war crises provoke *significant and interrelated* shifts in the value of various species of capital. In particular, economic capital, social capital, and identity capital are deeply affected, as the state—normally the guarantor of what is perceived as the natural functioning of social life—has its role contested. First, armed conflict radically alters the value of economic capital, particularly due to often staggering inflation and the destruction of both private and public property. While some individuals accumulate wealth through looting, appropriation, or the diversion of aid, the majority see their income and assets collapse. Exile to neighboring countries or refugee camps generally entails a considerable loss of economic capital for displaced persons.

Second, social capital becomes a crucial resource in wartime due to the disintegration of many institutional structures. Even more than in peacetime, the ability to mobilize one's network is essential for survival, protection, or mobility.²⁹ Armed actors' control over territory leads to substantial variations in social capital, for example through the transformation of gender relations or the performative activation of segmentary ties (families, clans, ethnies). Social capital then fluctuates violently in two opposing directions. Most people experience a decline in their social capital—and consequently in their capacity to act. This dynamic may be especially pronounced when a social group is targeted, as were Muslim merchants in the Central African Republic.³⁰ Conversely, some groups embedded in activist milieus dramatically increase their social capital, as

²⁴ Gilles Dorransoro, *Le gouvernement transnational de l'Afghanistan. Une si prévisible défaite*, (Paris: Karthala, 2021).

²⁵ Arthur Quesnay, "Régimes miliciens and gouvernement transnational dans les guerres civiles", *Cultures & Conflits* 125, (2022): 7-20; Adam Baczko and Gilles Dorransoro, "Le régime milicien en Afghanistan: Anthropologie imaginaire, économie transnationale de la violence and fragmentation de l'État", *Cultures & Conflits* 125, no.1 (2022): 51-69; Denia Chebli, "Économie transnationale de la violence and autonomisation des milices au Nord du Mali", *Cultures & Conflits*, 125, n° 1, (2022): 95-113.

²⁶ Gisèle Sapiro, Tristan Leperlier and Mohamed Amine Brahimi, "Qu'est-ce qu'un champ intellectuel transnational?" *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 224, n° 4, (2018): 4-11.

²⁷ Leperlier, *Algérie, les écrivains dans la décennie noire*, op. cit.; Raymond, *Le métier d'historien au Liban*.

²⁸ Agustin Cosovschi, *Les sciences sociales face à la crise: Une histoire intellectuelle de la dissolution yougoslave (1980-1995)* (Paris : Karthala, 2022).

²⁹ Emmanuelle Veulland, "Guerre civile and régimes identitaires : l'ethnicisation du conflit en Équatoria-Occidental (Soudan du Sud)", *Critique internationale*, 95, n° 2 (2022):112-131.

³⁰ Mathilde Tarif, "On ne devient pas commerçant entre midi and 13 heures!". Les conditions sociales du succès économique après la crise en République centrafricaine," *Politique africaine*, 156, n° 4 (2019): 121-141.

with Syrian revolutionaries in the 2010s, Afghan religious figures beginning in the 1980s, or Ivorian trade unionists in the 2000s.³¹

Finally, identity capital is affected by the brutal denaturalization of hierarchies between groups: being Hazara in Afghanistan, Banyamulenge in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, or Sunni Arab in Iraq does not carry the same implications before and after the outbreak of civil war—and these implications vary by region.³² Identity-based ascriptions, often exacerbated by the belligerents, intensify the effects of these variations on both economic and social capital. For instance, ethnic affiliation can be used to justify challenges to land rights by new authorities, as occurred with the Kurdification of Kirkuk after 2003, where it led to the eviction of Arab populations which had obtained property titles under the Saddam Hussein regime.³³

The coexistence of multiple social orders means that a given species of capital acquires different use values depending on the territory. The boundaries between these social orders—materialized, for example, at a checkpoint—constitute sites where such differences become observable. Taking identity capital as an example, the very principle for ranking groups—by ethnicity or religion—may differ from one social order to the next. In Syria, the Islamic State had established a regime brutally dominated by Sunnis, while the Kurdish movement privileged Kurds and the regime in Damascus protected—or more precisely, instrumentalized—the Alawites. Thus, being Alawite facilitated access to institutions and employment in government-held areas, while it meant persecution in revolutionary zones, and near-certain death in territories controlled by the Islamic State.³⁴

In such contexts, the value of certain forms of capital depends more heavily on non-state or even foreign institutions. In large-scale interventions—such as in Afghanistan or Iraq—international actors are in a position to impose their own rules on significant segments of the labor market. Mastery of certain languages thereby becomes a major asset: Russian in 1980s Afghanistan, English in Afghanistan and Iraq in the 2000s, and French in Mali or the Central African Republic in the 2010s. Similarly, humanitarian efforts in support of certain minorities—such as Eastern Christians in Syria and Iraq or the Yazidis in Iraq—transform the value of identity capital. Recruitment policies of NGOs and international organizations, which seek to ensure balanced representation along ethnic, confessional, or gender lines, also contribute to these reconfigurations.

Civil wars likewise disrupt the circuits through which capitals are converted. The weakening of state-imposed (economic, legal) barriers—which typically prohibit or complicate transfers between fields—facilitates the conversion of certain forms of capital. In Afghanistan, for example, religious capital became convertible into political capital from the 1980s onward, explaining the presence of *ulema* in the leadership of most political parties. The emergence a decade later of the Taliban—a party whose political project seeks to enshrine the supremacy of the *ulema*—constituted

³¹ Adam Baczko, Gilles Dorransoro and Arthur Quesnay, “Le capital social révolutionnaire: l'exemple de la Syrie en 2011 et 2014”, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 211-212, n°1(2016): 24-35; Camille Popineau, “Guerre de palais entre rebelles. Le capital international pendant and après la guerre civile en Côte d'Ivoire,” *Revue française de science politique*, 74, n° 4 (2025): XXX-XXX

³² Robert L. Canfield, “New Trends among the Hazaras: From ‘The Amity of Wolves’ to ‘The Practice of Brotherhood’”, *Iranian Studies*, 37, n° 2 (2004): 241-262; Koen Vlassenroot, “Citizenship, Identity Formation & Conflict in South Kivu: The Case of the Banyamulenge”, *Review of African Political Economy*, 29, n° 93-94 (2002): 499-516.

³³ Arthur Quesnay, *La guerre civile irakienne : Ordres partisans et politiques identitaires à Kirkouk*, (Paris: Karthala, 2021).

³⁴ Baczko, Dorransoro and Quesnay, *Civil War in Syria*: 256-265.

the culmination of this dynamic³⁵, which is also visible in Somalia with the Union of Islamic Courts.³⁶

In addition, new circuits of conversion emerge. Through predation, taxation, or alliances with local economic elites, certain commanders of armed groups can convert this collective military capital into individual economic capital—an enrichment clearly observable among Colombian paramilitary leaders or the cadres of the Ivorian Forces Nouvelles.³⁷ Moreover, war generates the emergence of internal borders, resulting in disparities in the value of capitals. At the economic level, the combination of porous international borders with newly established internal barriers fosters the reconfiguration of trade circuits around resources such as oil, gas, narcotics, or food.³⁸ Likewise, the existence of differing identity regimes shapes migration and labor circuits, as in the case of Afghan Hazaras who move between Iran, Pakistan, and war-torn Afghanistan.³⁹

Under such conditions, social capital and access to positions of responsibility become key levers of economic accumulation, with proximity to armed groups facilitating the reaping of considerable profits. Jeroen Cuvelier has analyzed the case of John Kotiram, a Thai entrepreneur who secured logging and export concessions through his ties with RCD-Goma.⁴⁰ The social capital of an economic actor may also compensate for the absence of legal or security guarantees in transactions and movement, thereby reducing the uncertainty associated with the activities of armed groups. In the Central African Republic, thanks to their links with armed groups, some merchants based in the capital have managed to maintain—and even strengthen—their commercial positions during the war.⁴¹

Political and military elites are among the principal beneficiaries of this dynamic, enriching themselves directly or through their familial networks. The logics governing aid and sanctions in war zones create opportunities for diverting aid by both legal and illegal means. In Afghanistan, the political class became considerably wealthier through the embezzlement of aid and corruption; yet this captured only a quarter of the funds allocated to the country's reconstruction. Nearly three-quarters of these funds were siphoned off through entirely legal mechanisms—such as cascading subcontracting—facilitated by a lenient oversight and auditing system, to the benefit of Western private firms and their Afghan intermediaries.⁴² In Iraq, the export of oil from Kirkuk enabled the leadership of the KDP to reap colossal profits—on the order of hundreds of millions of dollars since the 1990s—through the complicity of Turkish entrepreneurs and multinational corporations that profited from oil sold below market price.⁴³ In Colombia, paramilitary leaders appropriated

³⁵ Gilles Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending: Afghanistan, 1979 to the Present*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

³⁶ Cedric Barnes and Harun Hassan, “The Rise and Fall of Mogadishu’s Islamic Courts”, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 1, n° 2 (2007): 151-160; Aisha Ahmad, “Taliban and the Islamic Courts Union: How They Changed the Game in Afghanistan and Somalia.”, *Policy Perspectives*, 6, n° 2 (2009): 55-72; Ken Menkhaus, “Governance without Government in Somalia: Spoilers, State Building, and the Politics of Coping”, *International Security*, 31, n° 3 (2007):74-106.

³⁷ Jacobo Grajales and Benjamin Lévy, “Socio-Economic Order and the Legacies of Armed Governance: The Aftermath of Paramilitary Rule in Colombia”, *Civil Wars* (2024); Jacobo Grajales and Toukpo Oscar, “Making Green Cocoa: Deforestation, the Legacy of War, and Agrarian Capitalism in Côte d’Ivoire”, *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 25, n° 1 (2025).

³⁸ Koen Vlassenroot and Timothy Raeymaekers, *Conflict and Social Transformation in Eastern DR Congo* (Eekhout: Academia Press, 2004); Baczkó, Dorronsoro and Quesnay, *Civil War in Syria*, 239-255.

³⁹ Alessandro Monsutti, *War and Migration: Social Networks and Economic Strategies of the Hazaras of Afghanistan* (London: Routledge, 2005).

⁴⁰ Jeroen Cuvelier, “Linking the Local to the Global: Legal Pluralism in DRC Conflict” in Koen Vlassenroot and Timothy Raeymaekers (eds.), *Conflict and Social Transformation in Eastern DR Congo* (Eekhout: Academia Press, 2004): 199-215.

⁴¹ Tarif, “On ne devient pas commerçant entre midi et 13 heures !”

⁴² Dorronsoro, *Le gouvernement transnational de l’Afghanistan*.

⁴³ Quesnay, *La guerre civile irakienne*.

vast tracts of land through violence, often with the complicity of local and national authorities, as well as agribusiness multinationals eager to acquire land for fruit and palm oil plantations.⁴⁴ This logic of land appropriation is a crucial element of accumulation in the civil war context,⁴⁵ manifesting the transnational dimensions of the convertibility of military capital into economic capital.⁴⁶

III. Misalignment of Habitus

How do civil wars transform agents' dispositions? If habitus “tends to generate all the 'reasonable', 'common-sense' behaviours which are possible within the limits of these regularities”⁴⁷, then the definition of what counts as “reasonable” or “common sense” becomes problematic in situations of civil war. Such contexts provoke misalignments between the dispositions to act and interpret generated by habitus and the social world—both as a result of structural transformations (migration, economic destruction, internationalization) and of unprecedented interactions between social classes, whether within an armed group or in a refugee camp.⁴⁸ In Syria, for example, the regions under insurgent control in 2012–2013 became sites of interaction between elites and popular classes, between rural and urban milieus—groups previously distinct from one another based on their social and communal affiliations as well as where they lived.⁴⁹ These dynamics may also be deliberately fostered by certain armed movements, such as the PKK, which integrates students, peasants, and working-class urban youth into its units.⁵⁰

More broadly, the denaturalization of social relations compels individuals to make conscious choices—from their daily movements to the claiming or concealment of identity.⁵¹ This forced reflexivity appears to be linked both to specific situations or positions and to individuals' initial resources. This applies particularly to groups whose identity or geographic location generates tension or instability. The reflexive disjuncture that Bourdieu observed among the downwardly mobile in pacified societies thus extends to broader categories: in a civil war, no one is entirely in their place.

Civil wars transform dispositions through socialization and the learning of new skills. The boundary between dispositions and competencies is porous, insofar as the acquisition of competencies—and the socialization that typically accompanies it—eventually gives rise to propensities to act, classify, and interpret. War thus leads combatants to gain various skillsets:

⁴⁴ Jacobo Grajales, *Agrarian Capitalism, War and Peace in Colombia: Beyond Dispossession* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021).

⁴⁵ Christopher Cramer and Paul Richards, “Violence and War in Agrarian Perspective”, *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 11, n° 3 (2011): 277-297; Adam Baczko, “Gouvernance internationalisée en situation de guerre civile: l'accaparement foncier en Afghanistan (2001-2015)”, *Critique internationale*, 75 (2017): 37-51.

⁴⁶ Jacobo Grajales, “Les illusions de la paix environnementale: sortie de conflit, forêts et capitalisme extractif au Liberia,” *Revue française de science politique*, 74, n° 4 (2025): XXX-XXX.

⁴⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990): 280.

⁴⁸ For an argument along these lines, see Carolyn Nordstrom, *A Different Kind of War Story* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997); for the case of mobilizations in Syria, see Adam Baczko, Gilles Dorronsoro and Arthur Quesnay, “Mobilisations As a Result of Deliberation and Polarising Crisis. The Peaceful Protests in Syria (2011)”, *Revue française de science politique*, 63, n° 5 (2013): 815.

⁴⁹ Adam Baczko, Gilles Dorronsoro and Arthur Quesnay, *Civil War in Syria, op. cit.*, 65-83; 118-132.

⁵⁰ Olivier Grojean, *La révolution kurde: Le PKK et la fabrique d'une utopie*, (Paris: La Découverte, 2017).

⁵¹ As Pierre Bourdieu perceptively noted, “The strategies of reproduction generated by the dispositions toward reproduction inherent in the habitus may be supplemented by conscious strategies, individual and sometimes collective, which—almost always inspired by a crisis in the established mode of reproduction—do not necessarily contribute to achieving the ends they pursue.”, “Stratégies de reproduction et modes de domination”, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 105 (1994):6. See also Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992):130.

handling and maintaining weapons, acquiring technical vocabulary, mastering tactics and strategy, and disciplining the body.⁵² They learn to conceal themselves in order to move or seek cover, to interpret projectiles as either incoming or outgoing by the sound they make. Activism likewise leads some to master communication tools (photography, video, social media), as illustrated by the novice journalists working in Syrian “media centers” from 2012 onward. These forms of learning involve the internalization of new schemes of thought that gradually become ingrained habits.

Yet these processes of learning in reality affect much broader segments of society. The entire population sees its sensory universe transformed by the sounds, smells, and images associated with war. The misalignment of dispositions to act in an unfamiliar context gives rise to practices of “social navigation,” as the habitus no longer functions for generating appropriate practices. The reduced functionality of the habitus leads to a proliferation of inquiries, more frequent collective deliberations, and forms of self-surrender to institutions—or even to routine—as a way of coping with uncertainty. Henrik Vigh has shown, in the case of young Bissau-Guineans, how his interlocutors manage by improvising with the limited reference points available to them, and why they fundamentally regard their decisions as bets.⁵³ Similarly, certain routines play a crucial role insofar as they eliminate the need to decide—for example, never (or always) running across a street targeted by snipers in Sarajevo.⁵⁴

The transformation of dispositions is particularly difficult to study in the context of civil war, given the dire lack of longitudinal studies that follow a group of individuals before and during the conflict. Nevertheless, certain tendencies can be observed through individual trajectories, self-narratives, and recorded practices. Initial dispositions may retain a degree of relevance, especially when structural upheavals are limited—for instance, in regions spared by combat or where pre-existing social hierarchies remain fundamentally unchallenged. In Côte d’Ivoire, inclusion in the insurgent bureaucracy required a degree of educational capital along with the aptitudes tied to such training, thus continuing the pre-war pattern and mirroring expectations on the government side.⁵⁵ In South Sudan, the insurgents’ adoption of dominant models of success from the government-held zone ensured the continued relevance of the dispositions to act among those who joined the insurgency.⁵⁶

Moreover, certain professional *ethos* may outlast the dissolution of institutions. The professional habitus of physicians, for example, retains its functionality even during the most chaotic phases of civil war. We can also posit a degree of transferability of schemes of thought in the case of ritual hunters—*dozos* in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Côte d’Ivoire, or *kamajors* in Liberia and Sierra Leone—whose dispositions acquired within their brotherhood during peacetime can be reactivated when they form militias.⁵⁷ Similarly, the discipline instilled through youth movements (sports associations, scouting) may serve as preparation for military life. In this sense, the militarization of Yugoslav society likely fostered mind sets that could be activated during the civil war.

⁵² Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *Combattre. Une anthropologie historique de la guerre moderne (XIXe-XXIe siècle)*, (Paris: Le Seuil, 2008).

⁵³ Henrik Vigh, *Navigating Terrains of War: Youth and Soldiering in Guinea-Bissau*, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006).

⁵⁴ Ivana Macek, *Sarajevo Under Siege: Anthropology in Wartime*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009)..

⁵⁵ Camille Popineau, “Prendre la craie. La mobilisation des enseignants rebelles dans le Nord de la Côte d’Ivoire (2002-2011)”, *Politique africaine*, 148, n° 4 (2017): 27–48..

⁵⁶ Emmanuelle Veuillet, *L’État du cheptel. Guerres Civiles, accumulation and régimes d’inégalités en Equatoria-Occidental, Soudan du Sud*, (PhD diss., Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2023)..

⁵⁷ Joseph Hellweg, “La chasse à l’instabilité : les dozos, l’État et la tentation de l’extralégalité en Côte d’Ivoire”, *Migrations Société*, 144, n° 6 (2012): 163–182; Tanguy Quidelleur, *De la chasse aux bandits à la guerre contre les “terroristes”*, (PhD diss., Université Paris Nanterre, 2023): 118ff ; Danny Hoffman, *The War Machines: Young Men and Violence in Sierra Leone and Liberia*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

Experienced, perpetrated, or witnessed, violence plays a crucial role in the transformation of dispositions.⁵⁸ Traumatic experiences can profoundly disrupt the psychic economy and, in turn, affect behavior even in the most ordinary situations. Beyond direct encounters with physical violence, ruptures in daily life may also be experienced as traumatic—for instance, previously unthinkable impoverishment, forced displacement, or immobility. As Lubkemann has shown in the case of the rural population of Machaze (Mozambique), the loss of future prospects or “life projects” due to forced immobility can result in deep psychological trauma.⁵⁹ These singular but foundational experiences reveal that the formation of dispositions is not based solely on repetition. Political or religious conversion can likewise provoke a sudden break with previous tastes and habits. However, such transformations are all the more likely to have lasting effects when an organization assumes responsibility for the individual and provides meaning to the experience.

Torture, which is ubiquitous in civil wars, must be analyzed as a political technology rather than a deviant practice.⁶⁰ In Syria, for example, the peaceful demonstrations of 2011–2012 led to the arrest and torture of hundreds of thousands of individuals. Similarly, in Turkey, such practices were systematic after the 1980 military coup and in the ongoing civil war affecting the eastern part of the country. Numerous studies have suggested that physical violence functions as a means of normalizing deviant, marginal, or politically oppositional individuals. Yet torture is not always aimed at securing political submission. In some cases, torture is invisible: it leaves no lasting physical marks and is not intended to extract information, to punish, or to secure ideological allegiance to institutions.⁶¹ Rather, it operates through the psychic trauma it inflicts—disrupting individual engagement and destroying social capital⁶²—much like rape, which manipulates cognitive schemata in a predictably destructive manner.

Finally, passage through “total institutions” such as prisons or refugee camps fosters secondary socialization that generates new dispositions.⁶³ Similarly, armed movements inculcate behavioral norms that produce a specific *hexis*—a bodily disposition—as well as a distinctive language and emotional distancing techniques to manage wartime suffering. The rationality embedded in such organizations thus generates a particular mode of calculation and perception among combatants. The speed of realignment in the event of shifting military balances is a telling indicator of the importance of anticipatory logics within strategic environments characterized by minimal room for maneuver. The cascading defections observed in Afghanistan—during the collapse of the Kabul regime in 1992 and again during the Taliban takeover in 2021—and in Syria with the regime’s collapse in 2024, should not be interpreted as a cultural trait: rather, they result from a game of strategic anticipation in which each actor contributes to precipitating a general reversal.

IV. The interpretation of situations

⁵⁸ Kimberly Theidon, *Intimate Enemies: Violence and Reconciliation in Peru*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012): 186ff.

⁵⁹ Stephen Lubkemann, *An Anthropology of the Social Condition in War*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁶⁰ Raphaëlle Branche, *La torture et l'Armée pendant la guerre d'Algérie, 1954-1962*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2001).

⁶¹ Gilles Dorronsoro, “La torture discrète: capital social, radicalisation and désengagement militant dans un régime sécuritaire », *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 8 (2008). Medical literature shows that a majority of torture survivors suffer from post-traumatic syndromes.

⁶² On the systematic targeting of social capital by counterinsurgency techniques, see Jeremy Swift, “War and Rural Development in Africa,” *IDS Bulletin* 27, n° 3 (1996): 1–5.

⁶³ Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1961).

Societies confronted with extraordinary events—such as civil wars—enter into a process of interpretation that constitutes a fundamental element of structural crisis. The meaning attributed to events shapes the assignment of causal responsibility, determines the resources that can be mobilized, structures legitimate discourse, and guides available repertoires of action. The interpretation of a situation in the context of civil war is, in part, a product of dispositions.⁶⁴ The history of struggles transmitted within militant organizations or the family milieu provides an interpretive framework. For example, the relationship of northern Mali's inhabitants to state institutions—above all, the army—draws on a legacy of mistrust and fear that influences how events are interpreted and fosters the circulation of rumors.⁶⁵ An institution may offer an interpretation of an event that is quite directly the result of the dispositions it produces—for instance, the interpretation by religious institutions of an insurrection as a jihad. In recent decades, civil wars in the Muslim world (Yemen, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, the Sahel countries) have shown the significant influence of religious institutions on interpreting situations, often at the expense of nationalist or socialist readings.

Afghanistan provides a striking illustration. Beginning in 1978, the revolt against the Communist government and then the Soviet invaders were requalified as jihad.⁶⁶ The religious frame of reference prevailed through a convergence of factors. Islam, omnipresent in daily life, constituted an essential identity marker: in rural areas, atheism was inconceivable and religious practice was widespread. Among the Pashtuns, Islam was closely tied to local values such as honor (*namous*), while among Uzbeks and Hazaras faith remained deep although practice was more relaxed. Furthermore, the historical memory of popular revolts against invaders (the British in the nineteenth century, the central state in 1929) was associated with religious resistance. The Iranian Islamic Revolution also served as a model that transcended its Shi'a origins and inspired politically committed intellectuals across the spectrum. During this initial phase, there was no contradiction among these multiple frames of reference.

The *ulemas* and the *mullabs* played a central role in disseminating this interpretation. United in opposition to the Communist regime, they formed an effective network for transmitting information. They played a key role during the rare coordinated uprisings, such as those in Logar or Ghazni. Mosques—which were usual spaces for village discussion and cooperation—served as mobilization centers, and the *mullabs'* sermons often precipitated collective action. Populations would gather at the mosque before marching on government outposts. Even after the emergence of *mujabideen* military bases, the mosque remained a structuring site of resistance in areas spared from active combat. In this early phase, the religious interpretation enabled the transcendence of certain communal divisions, although this initial unanimity quickly gave way to older cleavages, now reinterpreted in political terms.

As demonstrated by the mobilizations of 2011 in Syria, however, the attribution of meaning may also result from the convergence between the framing work of protest movements and that of international media—to the extent that they escape censorship. Shared emotions—fear, but also class hatred or, conversely, the sense of experiencing a moment of unity—play a role in how historical events are interpreted.⁶⁷ Moreover, the construction of a particular interpretation raises the question of which institution or social group is legitimate in saying the truth of a situation. The conflict of interpretations—and of the institutions that uphold them—is the norm in contemporary

⁶⁴ According to Bourdieu, there exists a determinative link between habitus and the interpretation of conjunctures: habitus generates the type of response it is objectively predisposed to produce, based on how it shapes the definition of the situation. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977): note 68, 227.

⁶⁵ Denia Chebli, “La révolte en héritage. Militantisme en famille and fragmentation au Nord-Mali (MNLA),” *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 234 n° 2 (2019): 453–481

⁶⁶ Dorronsoro, *Revolution unending*, op. cit.

⁶⁷ On the role of fear, see Timothy Tackett, *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

societies, for no social group (religious, intellectuals, or notables) holds a monopoly. The capacity to give meaning to events thus depends not only on an institution's degree of legitimacy but also on the existence of conduits within society that condition the dissemination of a given message. In a context where competing interpretations coexist, dispositions appear less decisive than the effects of deliberation, emotion, and media framing.

In daily life, individuals are also compelled to engage in intense interpretive activity—of situations, identities, terms, and objects—in order to anticipate the potentially grave consequences of ordinary actions such as sending one's children to school, going to the market, or arguing with a neighbor.⁶⁸ These individual inquiries are essentially reactive, and are oriented toward practical knowledge aimed at protection, avoidance, and survival. Moreover, such deliberations are not solitary: exchanges of arguments may alter perceptions and decisions, as we have shown in the Syrian case.⁶⁹ Youssef El-Chazli's work on the Egyptian Arab Spring similarly highlights the importance of debate and the uncertainty of decision-making processes among groups mobilized against the regime in moments of extreme instability.⁷⁰

Finally, interpretation may at times encounter situations so unprecedented that analogical reasoning—generated through the activation of cognitive schemata—cannot operate with ease. Yet empirical grounding is essential in the adoption of an interpretation, which must appear reasonable within the context and in light of observable events. A single experience is rarely decisive, as situations are often ambiguous, and only a salient event—a massacre, for example—may precipitate a shift in collective interpretation and resolve conflicts of meaning. Elisabeth Claverie has described the difficulty individuals face in interpreting the warning signs of a massacre in the former Yugoslavia.⁷¹ Similarly, interviews with Syrians and Iraqis fleeing areas taken over by the Islamic State revealed that they struggled to make sense of a movement that was exceptionally opaque and in fundamental rupture with the practices of other armed actors.⁷²

Conclusion

Approaching civil wars from a Bourdieusian **perspective foregrounds** the social dynamics that shape engagement, trajectories, interpretation, and practice. Far from being mere violent ruptures, these conflicts constitute revolutionary situations in which the logics of reproduction and transformation of social hierarchies and power relations are drastically reconfigured. The competition between different social orders fragments fields, recomposes logics of accumulation and circuits of capital conversion, and misaligns habitus—often rendered inoperative by the upheaval of context. The interpretation of events itself becomes a central stake, shaped by the social history of groups, their relationship to institutions, and the circulation of legitimate discourses. Far from being purely strategic, actors' choices are anchored in existing frames of perception, which are reactivated but also tested in the urgency of conflict.

In turn, the study of contemporary civil wars invites us to revisit certain Bourdieusian concepts. These conflicts reveal the centrality of objectivisation processes in the formation of species of capital, underlining the need to broaden their typology and to more clearly dissociate fields from capitals. They also underscore the importance of conceptualizing not only

⁶⁸ Quentin Deluermoz and Jérémie Foa (eds.), *Les épreuves de la guerre civile* (Paris: Presses de la Sorbonne, 2022).

⁶⁹ Adam Baczko, Gilles Dorronsoro and Arthur Quesnay, “Mobilisations as a Result of Deliberation and Polarising Crisis.”

⁷⁰ Youssef El-Chazli, “On the road to revolution How did ‘depoliticised’ Egyptians become revolutionaries?”, *Revue française de science politique* 62, nos. 5–6 (2012): 843–865.

⁷¹ Elisabeth Claverie, “Techniques de la menace,” *Terrain* 43 (2004): 15–30.

⁷² Adam Baczko, Gilles Dorronsoro, Arthur Quesnay and Maïï Youssef, “The Rationality of an Eschatological Movement: The Islamist State in Iraq and Syria”, *Program on Governance and Local Development Working Paper*, (University of Gothenburg, 2016).

accumulation, but also circuits of conversion—a question that Bourdieu often raised but never fully explored. In this regard, civil wars illuminate specific sites of capital conversion, such as Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs or end-of-conflict negotiations.⁷³ These arenas offer—albeit temporarily—the possibility for one form of capital to be transmuted into another, thereby opening opportunities for social mobility. Moreover, following William Sewell’s insights, civil wars underline the need of theorizing the modalities of social change through the tensions between habitus and shifting structures, and to account for the various forms of habitus misalignment in contexts of crisis.⁷⁴

Beyond their contribution to a sociology of civil war, these radical situations prompt a broader interrogation of Bourdieusian theory from the standpoint of a general sociology of our contemporary world. Occurring almost exclusively in societies of the Global South, they call for a theoretical decentering. We must rethink the relationship between economic accumulation and social capital within different social structures, where communal affiliations and forms of allegiance play a central role—thereby exposing certain blind spots in Bourdieu’s framework, often overly anchored in the French social formation. In addition, the abrupt denaturalization of the social in civil war contexts underscores the significance of transnational dynamics in processes that Bourdieu tended to relate to the state. While scholarship on transnational fields and capitals has flourished since the 2000s,⁷⁵ a Bourdieusian conceptualization of states and societies as continually shaped by international structures—structures that they in turn help to shape, in a reflexive manner akin to the relation between habitus and social structures—remains a collective project still to be undertaken.

⁷³ Denis Tull, *The Reconfiguration of Political Order in Africa: A Case Study of North Kivu (DR Congo)*, (Hamburg: Institut für Afrika-Kunde, 2005); Denia Chebli, “Cette paix qui divise: une analyse de la médiation au Mali par ses effets”, *Critique internationale*, 88, no. 3 (2020): 9–30.

⁷⁴ William H. Sewell, “A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation”, *American Journal of Sociology* 98, n° 1 (1992): 1–29.

⁷⁵ Yves Dezalay and Bryant Garth, *The internationalization of palace wars: lawyers, economists, and the contest to transform Latin American states*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Julian Go and Monika Krause (eds.), *Fielding Transnationalism*, *The Sociological Review* 64, n° 2 (2016); Gisèle Sapiro, “Field Theory from a Transnational Perspective” in Thomas Medvetz and Jeffrey J. Sallaz (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Pierre Bourdieu*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018): 161-182; Pierre Bourdieu, *Impérialismes. Circulation internationale des idées and luttes pour l’universel* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2023).