'Ethnic conflict' in Colombia?
The impact of the unit of analysis and the area of study on recognition of wars as ‘Ethnic’

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Abstract

Reflecting on methodology means thinking about the decisions a researcher makes when approaching the subject of study, the questions posed and the concepts embraced. The use of any methods should not overlook the epistemological and ontological assumptions underlying the selection of a particular methodology, though this is not often explicitly considered. Therefore within these considerations, the definition of the unit of analysis and the area of study of a research must be made explicit. Answering questions about where a research takes place and what or who is being analyzed is necessary for any good research.

The current research on ‘ethnic conflicts’ seems to illustrate the effect of the lack of reflection on the previous questions and their implications for rigorous research. Therefore reflections about the validity of their findings and the explicit assessment of their methodological assumptions (such as the unit of analysis and the area of study) are scarce.

The chapter discusses this through presenting the problems and advantages of using or not using ethnicity as a unit of analysis and of using or not using specific regions as areas of study in researching civil war. The discussion is illustrated throughout with reflections on how the notion of “ethnic conflict” relates to the on-going Colombian conflict. In particular it uses the province of ‘El Cauca’ as an area of study to assess the validity of analysis of the conflict as an ethnic conflict (where the area of study is local and the unit of analysis a particular group), as opposed to the descriptions of the Colombian conflict more commonly given in literature that do not mention ethnicity, taking the country as a whole as the area of study and the most salient armed groups in the country as the unit of analysis).
1. Introduction

This chapter will seek to address some of the theoretical and methodological claims, debates and critiques of research on ethnicity and civil war, or rather, on ‘ethnic conflict’, as they appear in the current research that uses quantitative methods (Cederman, Weidmann, & Gleditsch, 2011) (Cederman, Rod, & Weidman, 2006).

One of the problems in dealing with ‘ethnic conflicts’ lies in the fact that researchers often take the concept of ‘ethnicity’ for granted, not acknowledging how these definitions impact on their analysis. This chapter explores the implications of taking ‘ethnicity’ as a unit of analysis in the quantitative studies of civil wars, and the impact of this on our findings once we change the area of study of our research.

To put forward the case for my argument, I analyze one specific aspect of the Colombian conflict, pointing out how our understanding of the Colombian civil war could change if we change the unit of analysis and the area of study. Taking ethnicity as a unit of analysis will be crucial regarding whether what we see happening is named an ‘ethnic conflict’ or not. To conduct such an analysis I analyze some of the dynamics of the Colombian violence and reflect on the possibility of understanding this as an ‘ethnic conflict’ (i.e. an ethnically-explained civil war) and on the role ethnicity plays in this particular violent conflict.

To accomplish this I will reflect on research done on the Colombian conflict that applies mathematical models, assessing the unit of analysis used, assessing whether and how ethnicity appears therein, and how this affects the claims made on the nature of the conflict in Colombia.

The paper is structured as follows. Firstly I discuss the notion of ethnicity and ethnic conflict, presenting some of the claims and critiques from the literature on the role of ethnicity in civil war. Then I reflect on the use of mathematical models for assessing conflict and civil war. Then I consider the possibility of the existence of an ‘ethnic war’ in Colombia, showing how narratives made at national level can differ from regional level narratives and how this is related to the unit of analysis we choose. Finally, the document claims that these differences and the “unit of analysis effect” are related to ontological and epistemological interpretations of ‘civil war’ and ‘ethnic conflict’ that are often not made explicit.
2. *Ethnicity as a Mirage: Do we want to see ethnicity so badly that we make it real?*

The study of the relationship between ethnicity and violent conflict is approached from three broad schools of thought: the primordialist, the instrumentalist and the constructivist. Each approach deals with three elements at the same time: the definition of ethnicity, the causes of conflict, and the role ethnicity plays in specific violent conflicts. Each of them comes with different questions, methods and data.

The problems and difficulties with much of the literature about ethnic conflicts can be seen as a by-product of the difficulty of embracing intangible and pliable concepts such as ‘ethnicity’ and ‘ethnic identity’ in relation to violent conflict or war. This is one of the reasons why research has given mixed evidence (some of the works proving and others disproving) the impact of ethnicity in relationship with violent conflict (Østby, Urdal, Tadjoeddin, & Murshed, 2011) (Bramoeller & Jones, 2010, p. 1).

Part of the problem with the study of ethnicity and how it relates to civil war is the difficulty of analyzing how ethnicity relates to the general category of war or violent conflict (Bramoeller & Jones, 2010, p. 2). This is the case since every conflict affects and will be affected by the identity of affected groups residing in conflict areas. The particularities of local contexts will always influence the relationship between ethnicity and violence, and the course of violent conflict and war, in some way. However, the existence of a relationship between identities and events does not mean that identity causes an event. I argue that identities/categories do not cause events - analytical categories do not go to war, but can be used to understand war. Units of analysis do not go to war, people and organizations do.

As identity can be hardly linked as a causal factor in conflict, efforts to find the archetypical model of ‘ethnic conflict’ that explain the role of ethnicity in violent conflicts could be in vain. Although there may be evidence of a nexus between ethnicity, economic and social inequality and political violence, statistical data have hardly produced evidence for a robust relationship in this respect. Rather, most evidence is contradictory and inconclusive (Besancon, 2005, p. 394). The questions remain: is this evidence inconclusive because of the methods chosen, the data sources relied upon, the methodologies used, or the concepts employed? Are gaps between definitions and empirical evidence unavoidable for war-torn environments? Since scientific data and research results have been proven to differ, one possible step towards a deeper insight about the relationship between ethnicity and violent conflict could be to analyze the concepts and the methods used in research. If research is inconclusive, the problem may lie in the methodological decisions made and the “experiment design”; the problem may be located in the scientists and their methods, rather than in the object of study.

One of the problems certainly lies with our very understanding of what ethnicity means. ‘Ethnicity’ tends to be treated in the primordialist and instrumentalist conflict literature as if it were a real, bounded, self-activating social entity, a group with defined boundaries and members (Tilly, 2006, p. 524). Varied claims are made in relation to ethnic groups ranging from legitimate political representation, to social, cultural and economic grievances on the part of
disadvantaged groups subjected to the predatory agendas of states and small cartels of elites (Wolf, 2006). Understandings of how ethnicity can be mobilized among different target groups remain quite rudimentary, with ethnic identity sometimes being viewed as a basis for bitter conflict, and at other times as no more than an attractive tourism marketing resource (Comaroff, 1991, p. 663).

It is clear from research that horizontal inequality can have an ‘ethnic’ dimension (Murshed & Gates, 2005, p. 122). This insight can prove useful in understanding structural scarcity and long-term effects of social segmentation within a society. Ethnicity can thus be an interesting unit of analysis for analyzing how development models can create inequality, and thus trigger wars or violent conflicts. Yet ethnicity by itself cannot be said to lead to war (Wolf, 2006).

Ethnic and related identity categories interact in changing environments, and therefore these social processes can shift significantly from one decade to another. This imposes major analytical challenges on the research of conflict as such analysis implies the study of changing categories, contexts and actors in a dynamic and complex interaction (Tilly, 2006, p. 187).

This challenge is evidenced in the struggle of academia to recognize, interpret and understand the relationship between ethnicity and violent conflicts after the fall of the ‘iron curtain’. New theoretical distinctions were created wherein the use of ethnicity and ethnic identities became significant, especially since the appearance of Mary Kaldor’s (1999) work on ‘new’ and ‘old wars’, where the ‘new wars’ are characterized as ‘identity wars’, and seen as essentially different from the old, presumably ideology-based, wars.

Authors such as Kalyvas (2001) strongly criticize these arguments on the basis that the actions of rebel groups have always been quasi-criminal in their efforts to undermine the strength of a state. The fall of the iron curtain changed the understanding of the legitimacy of actions that could now be understood as criminal, but which were previously labeled as “revolutionary” or “counter-revolutionary”. The implosion of the Soviet Union opened the space for contestation to a myriad of nationalities and groups that had been under the yoke of the Soviet war machine, and reduced support to states that depended heavily on foreign support. The fragmentation of the Soviet State presented the challenge to analysts of how to understand the emergence of new conflicts that embraced ethnic or nationalistic agendas.
3. Mathematical models, Ethnicity and violence in conflict studies: in search of a unit (y) of analysis?

"If you torture the data long enough, it will confess to anything."
Unknown

As mentioned before, the main claim of this paper is that the selection of particular units of analysis in relationship to the area of study biases what we can/will ‘observe’, resulting in different findings and answers to the questions posed.

In the particular case of research on ‘ethnic conflict’ I suggest that this bias is, among other things, a byproduct of the methods and methodologies embraced in research, but not made explicit in some cases. This can be illustrated by analyzing the case of mathematical models used to research the existence of ethnic conflicts.

First of all a clarification is needed: mathematical modeling can refer to anything that implies the use of mathematical equations in order to understand the relationship between certain variables. For example, Newton’s law of universal gravitation is indeed a mathematical model. In this sense mathematical modeling can comprise an infinitude of applications that make use of mathematical equations to understand the existence of ethnic conflicts. Therefore this section can be understood as a general assessment of the use of mathematical models that research country conflict dynamics through an aggregated analysis.

Mathematical modeling of social phenomena has, by definition, always implied abstraction and simplification in order to focus on the understanding of the relationships we want to study (Forrester, 2003). In this case, the equations used try to understand interactions; the dynamics of these conflicts are represented by interactions between a given set of variables, for example the understanding of the state and an “ethnic group” will be modelled through variables such as the gross domestic product, the presence of natural resources, the amount of people belonging to different religions, etc. (Gurr & Moore, 1997, p. 1081).

These interactions are understood through equations that “link” these concepts such as the state and “ethnic group”. Most of these analyses have embraced a state-centered approach, where the variables used to understand the existence of conflict are analyzed at a national level (Fearon & Laitin, 2003) (Collier, Hoeffler, & Soderbom, 2008) (Bates, 2008) (Cohen, Brown, & Organski, 1981) (Kalyvas & Balcells, 2010). However, it is necessary to bear in mind that the modelling process sometimes takes for granted the leap of faith between the concepts we study and the belief that variables represent these concepts we try to study. Is the state the gross domestic product? Any serious political scientist would frown to this question.

Because of this a paradox is presented, as the variety of political, economic and social factors that can play a role in a continuous process (such as civil war) would have infinite combinations of variables to be modeled.
Having said this, it is important to note that, as opposed to clinical experiments, researchers in the social sciences are and will be left with the absence of proper experiment conditions, but with plenty of decisions to make in trying to use science to understand the volatile reality of conflict and violence.

**On war, ethnicity and datasets**

Civil war analyses based on a state centered approach (aggregated data on a national level) have difficulties addressing local conflict dynamics. As the case of Colombia will illustrate in sections 4 and 5, particular information about a given area can be lost in the exercise of calculating an average value of a data at a national level (Østby, Urdal, Tadjoeddin, & Murshed, 2011).

Several data sources have been employed to approach the realities of ethnicities, the comprehension of what ethnic groups are, how are they are mobilized and what causes ethnic conflicts. These data sources include the use of health surveys datasets to analyze horizontal inequalities and the use of religious affiliation as proxies for ethnicity (Østby, Urdal, Tadjoeddin, & Murshed, 2011, p. 379). Language is also used as a proxy for ethnicity. In some cases datasets are based on scanned versions of existing maps of ethnic groups, such as the Atlas Narodov Mira¹, as well as geo-referenced datasets (Cederman, Rod, & Weidman, 2006). Also datasets analyzing the political representativeness of “ethnic groups” and the allocation of power and resources are used to measure the polarization within the countries (Montalvo & Teynal-Querol, 2004).

In order to be able to compare and analyze the possibility of the existence of patterns, datasets aggregate information from different countries, and different years in relationship to the variables under scrutiny. A problem that emerges as a byproduct of the aggregation of information from different countries is the assumption of homogeneity (that data and mechanisms operate in similar ways in different contexts. Lumping together different cases in one mathematical model (Badiuzzaman, Cameron, & Murshed, 2011) based on the aggregation of national data can have several limitations and consequences. Aggregated studies conceal a great deal of information about inter/intra group inequality (Murshed & Gates, 2005), and negate the possibility of understanding/considering particular geographical areas, such as ‘El Cauca’ (Østby, Urdal, Tadjoeddin, & Murshed, 2011, p. 378). It makes little sense to try to prove or disprove highly general theories using inherently different cases in different contexts as evidence (Medina, 2008) (Cramer, 2003) (Murshed, 2011).

Literature on ‘ethnic conflict’ studies has shifted from aggregated gross national data, towards different units of analysis and areas of study, to assess the particularities of conflicts within a geographical (regional) or ethnic perspective (Wimmer, Cederman, & Min, 2009). This shift

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¹ See http://worldmap.harvard.edu/data/geonode:Naradov_Mira_GREG
reflects recognition of the difficulties and the limitations of the existing datasets, and is a step in the right direction.

Image One. Map of Colombia showing the location of the province of El Cauca (Right) and the demographical location of different “ethnic groups” (Left). The spelling mistakes on the categories from the picture in the left are from the original datasets, as the labels should be Afrocolombians and Colombians.

Sources:

Another problem of the aggregation of data is the loss of inter-group variance, which may be relevant in explaining cases where ethnic conflict does and does not emerge. Regarding the case of Colombia, existing datasets (such as the MAR project, or the GeoEPR-ETH Version 2.0 dataset3) seem to consider indigenous groups in Colombia as a cohesive and unique group operating at a national level; whereas the reality is that Colombia has more than 100 different indigenous groups. Other datasets (Uppsala4 or the PRIO projects5) do not even acknowledge the presence and experience of groups that fought an armed struggle that could be framed within an “ethnic” category, such as the MAQL6. Therefore, unless we interrogate and validate the information we are using, we should not expect to be able to recognize consistent patterns.

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2 See http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/mar/data.asp
3 See http://www.icr.ethz.ch/data
4 See http://www.ucdp.uu.se/gpdatabase/search.php
5 See http://www.prio.no/CSCW/Datasets/
6 Movimiento Armado Quintin Lame (Quintin Lame Armed Movement), from now on this document, MAQL
in information that does not correspond to reality; expecting the models to make sense of un-validated datasets is disingenuous. The power of datasets is and will be limited to the conceptual knowledge of the researchers about the areas they are scrutinizing.

Looking back at the unit of analysis and the area of study

It is common to observe the presence of models in which findings about war and peace are reached apart from consideration of the particular histories and contexts. We should thus question the quality of the conclusions from any analysis that separates the study of civil wars from their own essence and nature (the political and social conditions that trigger confrontation), as conflict is and will be politically and historically rooted (Mahoney, 2000, p. 84). This is particularly clear in the cases of ethnic conflicts, as shown by the research by Toft (2010).

Ultimately good mathematics and great models cannot correct insufficient databases, weak conceptualizations, and bad science. Therefore to advance in the study of ethnicity and conflict is necessary to stop, assess our epistemological and ontological assumptions, and check our concepts before moving forward. If the experiment is failing we must check our methodology.

Having examined of the use of mathematical modeling in relationship with ‘ethnic conflicts’, I now turn to seeing what happens to the analysis of conflicts of today once they are perceived as ‘ethnic conflicts’. I propose to conduct a theoretical experiment and to examine the use of some mathematical models in the study of the Colombian conflict, looking at both the national level and one particular regional conflict within Colombia. I examine the unit of analysis in those studies and to what extent the concept of ethnicity is used.
4. Colombia is not an “Ethnic Conflict”: The absence of ethnicity at a national level

Taking Colombia as a case of ‘ethnic conflict’ goes against more or less everything that is written about the Colombian conflict. But this is precisely why I decided to undertake this exercise: to test to what extent our analytical tools can make us blind to, or aware of, the realities of a particular conflict. Furthermore, the Colombian conflict offers the possibility of making a distinction between different conflicts – and units of their analysis - on national and regional / local levels.

The conflict narratives of both Colombia and El Cauca are a case in point. The MAQL, that fought an insurgency in the decade of the 1980’s in the province of El Cauca, is a somewhat forgotten and unstudied case within Colombian civil war literature and offers an interesting example of the emergence of an armed group within a territory that has 21% of the total indigenous population in Colombia, but which has never ever been labeled as an ethnic conflict. But can our methodological decisions help us produce the ‘evidence’ that can point to the existence of an ethnic conflict?

The Colombian conflict has been considered a classic guerrilla warfare conflict (Rangel, 2001) where rebels were seeking control of the state apparatus (IEPRI, 2006) and in some cases control of the local institutions (Duncan, 2005).

The history of the Colombian conflict and its emergence can be traced to the impact of colonialism (Palacios, 1995) (Bushnell, 1996). In spite of the fact that independence was achieved in 1819, the century that followed was a century where small civil wars were fought between liberals and conservatives for the consolidation of power within the country (Palacios, 1995).

The tensions and violence lasted up to the midpoint of the 20th century. Throughout this time violence was used as part of political platforms and helped to consolidate political power and land ownership in several regions of the country (Richani, 2002). The boundaries of legality/illegality were framed within those violent political struggles.

Literature often gives salience to a particular episode of this century - an event that occurred between 1948-1953, labelled as ‘la Violencia’7. This was an episode in which almost 2% of the population of the country died in violence that erupted after the death of a liberal leader (Palacios, 1995). However, the practices and logics of violence obeyed the forms and customs used more than fifty years before this episode (Sanchez & Meertens, 1984). The eventual result of this bloodbath and extended use of violence was a lack of trust in state institutions.

During the period from 1953 to 1958 some of the guerrilla groups demobilized. By 1958 an agreement was made by Colombian elites to alternate power between liberals and

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7 “La violencia” was a period after the assassination of the Liberal leader Jorge Eliecer Gaitan, in which Liberals and Conservatives (the ruling party)
conservatives; this functioned to close spaces for any other (non-elite) political power in the country ((IEPRI), 2006). This shut down political options for the establishment of new political groups and explains, in part, the emergence of the main guerrilla groups in the decades of the 60’s and the 70’s (the FARC\(^8\) and the ELN\(^9\)).

In the 70’s and the 80’s the appearance of drug trafficking altered the relationships of power at a national and regional level, creating space for illegal entrepreneurs, paramilitaries, and armed factions who belonged to drug barons and private armies that were known as self-defence forces (Duncan, 2005). This complicated the panorama of the Colombian conflict even more, indicating that there have existed several simultaneous and interwoven conflicts. In this period, a new armed group, the M19\(^{10}\) movement emerged.

The election of President Turbay in 1978 resulted in a government policy against guerrilla forces (but not against right wing militants, private armies or paramilitaries) in response to the rise of the guerrilla groups in the country. The subsequent employment of security apparatus and increased militarization was characterized by human right abuses, use of torture, and disappearances\(^{11}\) (Palacios, 1995).

The decade of the 80’s brought a new attempt from the state to reach a peace agreement with the guerrilla forces, but this encountered a series of obstacles related to the growth of paramilitarism and drug trafficking within the country. The process failed because of the opposition to the peace process by right wing and paramilitary groups (Dudley, 2008).

The decade of the 80’s also saw the emergence of small, regionally based guerrilla groups that never achieved a national influence, groups such as the MAQL and others. These groups emerged as an expression of regional grievances, where armed mobilization became a valid option in the face of lack of state presence. The end of the decade was promising: the M19, the EPL\(^{12}\) and the MAQL demobilized within a framework of constitutional reform in the early 90’s that fostered the demobilization of some guerrilla groups\(^{13}\).

From 1991 to 1994 the government sought the military defeat of the guerrillas: the intention was to defeat those groups not committed to peace. Despite these efforts, results appeared to be limited: drug traffickers appeared to be gaining the upper hand, even with the death of the infamous Pablo Escobar and the reclusion of leaders from other cartels. During this decade, the leftist guerrilla group FARC and the right wing paramilitaries increased their incomes through kidnapping and the taxation of (or revenues from) drug related activities. The lack of state

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8 Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia)
9 Ejército Popular de Liberación (Popular Liberation Army)
10 M19 stands for the 19th of April movement, in allusion to the 19th of April of 1970 elections, that were labeled as fraudulent,
11 One of the more controversial measures implemented with this policy was that those accused of extortion and/or insurgency would be tried by the military, in martial courts.
12 Ejército Popular de Liberación (Popular Liberation Army)
13 The MAQL, the M19 the EPL and the PRT.
presence in some areas allowed them to increase their military power and effectively replace the state in some areas of the country (Leal, 2006).

Despite the fact that both left- and right-wing armed groups (paramilitaries and guerrillas) were growing in size, public opinion reflected a feeling of being cornered by the leftist guerrillas and thus sympathetic with the right-wing paramilitary groups. It is within this context that Colombian civil society demanded a reduction of hostilities and another peace process became possible. The peace process started in 1998 but failed after four years.

From 2002 to 2010 subsequent governments waved the flag of all-out war (Diaz & Murshed, 2013). This proved to increase security within the country, which implied a weakening of the FARC, accompanied by the death of some of his top leaders. The nation also witnessed a dubious peace process with the paramilitaries, as government argued that the peace processes emerged as a byproduct of the government’s military strength. According to the government, paramilitaries ceased to exist after the peace process of Ralito (Pardo, 2007), but new groups emerged in some areas of the country, such as the BACRIM\(^\text{14}\) that appeared after the paramilitaries were demobilized. These BACRIM adopted the same practices as paramilitaries and differed only in name; the process resembled a re-branding exercise, or the collapse and replacement of a franchise.

At the same time guerrillas employed a change of strategy, using particular provinces as ‘safe heavens’ in order to withstand the government offensive. One of these provinces is the department of El Cauca.

But before reflecting on the conflict in El Cauca, I first turn to examine how analysis of all the national-level processes discussed above have been conducted using quantitative methods of mathematical modeling.

Most of the literature on the Colombian conflict that uses mathematical models has researched the conflict in relationship to particular research questions. These questions have ranged from the reason for the presence of armed groups (Sanchez F., 2008), the impact of the internal conflict on the economy (Rubio, 1997), the emergence of paramilitary groups and its relationship with natural resources (Duncan, 2006), the reasons for teenagers and children to join the armed groups (Springer, 2012), the link between governability and conflict (Mason A., 2000), the difference between war and criminality (Gutierrez Sanin, 2004), the relationship between the conflict and the state (Gutierrez Sanin, 2009), to the role of drugs trafficking in the conflict (Vargas Mesa). Having said this, it is important to notice that in none of the current research has ethnicity been addressed as an issue that causes conflict or that can explain the emergence of conflict; elements such as class, poverty and marginalization of citizens are used as elements to understand the presence of armed groups, in conjunction with political and historical features (Palacios, 1995). The research that is focused in Colombia as an area of study

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\(^{14}\) Bandas Criminales- (Criminal Bands)
seems to consistently consider the role of politics and historical elements, as opposed to cross country studies (Collier, Hoeffler, & Soderbom, 2008).

In all of these studies in Colombia the unit of analysis is the individual or the aggrupation, but ethnicity or ‘ethnic identity’ is not used as such to explain the existence of the conflict. It is the author’s understanding that there are not any mathematical models that deals with the analysis of ethnicity in relationship to the analysis of the emergence of Colombian conflict or armed groups. However, the issue of identity groups or ethnic groups is used to analyze the impact of the conflict in particular groups or populations (Centro Nacional de Memoria Historica, 2013).

The research that deals with ethnicity and identity in relationship to the Colombian conflict does it in a different way as opposed mathematical models approaches to the Colombian conflict. The research that engages with ethnicity and identity does not use mathematical models, and rather develops an analysis of the historical and political contexts in which the MAQL group emerged and acted, and of their relationship with particular indigenous groups in relationship to the violence of the conflict in Colombia (Espinosa, 2007) and ‘El Cauca’ (Benavides, 2009). It may be possible that, given that the ethnic groups in Colombia are not a salient element of the demographics of Colombia given their small share of the population, they are simply overlooked, except for historians, political scientists and anthropologists.
5. Regional histories, narratives of conflict and the meanings of ethnicity: El Cauca province

El Cauca is a province in the South West of Colombia (see image two), with a population of around a million and a half inhabitants. El Cauca has a long history of struggles for indigenous rights, and of the presence of armed groups.

Within this department, 35.7% of the population in the municipalities where conflict is prevalent in El Cauca recognizes themselves as indigenous and 54.2% as afro-descendent (Prada, 2009, p. 19). In addition, 21% of the whole indigenous population of Colombia are concentrated in 14 municipalities of the department of El Cauca (out of a total of 41 municipalities in the Department) (Peñaranda, 2010). As table 1 shows, the department comprises six different ethnic groups with different traditions, cultures and languages.

This presents a scenario where identity-related agendas emerge and are salient elements of the local and regional politics in relationship with the Colombian State and the conflict. This province had the first indigenous guerrilla group in Colombia (the MAQL) (Benavides, 2009) and the indigenous population is constantly endangered and at the receiving end of the violence from different armed groups (Paramilitaries, guerrillas and government forces) (Consejo de Derechos Humanos, 2010).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Population</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nasa or paeces</td>
<td>120,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guambianos</td>
<td>16,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kokonucos</td>
<td>7,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yanaconas</td>
<td>25,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Totoró</td>
<td>5,000</td>
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<td>Eperara-siapidaras</td>
<td>2,600</td>
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In recent years the region has become strategically important for the main guerrilla group in Colombia - the FARC - in the face of the government offensive against the left wing guerrillas (see image two). The region is also known for the presence of different armed groups thorough the years – the FARC, Paramilitaries, and BACRIMs, the ELN, M19, ELN, EPL, Jaime Bateman15, the “grupo Democracia”, el PRT16, MAQL and the JEGA17 (Prada, 2009, p. 17) (Peñaranda, 2010, p. 33). For example, the most renowned guerrilla group – the FARC – conducted its first military operation in this province, in 1961 (Prada, 2009, p. 63), even before it was recognized nationally

15 A splinter from the FARC in the decade of the 80’s.
16 Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores de Colombia (Workers Revolutionary Party of Colombia)
17 Jorge Eliecer Gaitan
as an armed group. Other groups also made their presence visible in this province - such as the M19, which had peace negotiations with the government in the decade of the 80’s using this province as one of its main bases during the peace negotiations.

Historically, these struggles have not been associated with indigenous struggles, except for the case of the MAQL. My question here is – can the case of the MAQL struggle and this violence be seen as ‘ethnic conflict’? This question comes from the simple fact that Colombian government speaks of ‘indigenous groups’ as ‘ethnic minorities’; and at the same time recognizes different ethnic groups within the broad category of ‘indigenous’ (Hudson, 2010). Also the MAQL, for example, defined a political agenda around indigenous people’s rights.

In Colombia the dispersion and the separation indigenous groups within the Colombian territory by vast distances from big population centres makes them less visible. In the times before the colony the population was 100% indigenous; the indigenous population now stands at merely 2% of the national population, something that illustrates the extent of the genocide and destruction of indigenous groups throughout the years. The indigenous might be seemed as something of the past and distant and not belonging to the present and “modernity”. Therefore the recognition and definition of them as a group was largely absent before the constitution of 1991; after this new constitution they acquired particular legal and political tools such as jurisdictional tools and a constitutional framework that recognized the rights of indigenous groups and afro-descendants, that allowed them a stronger participation and involvement within the Colombian state (Benavides, 2009). However, the literature seems not to use the term of ethnic group, and rather refers to them as indigenous groups and indigenous minorities. Might it be the case that in Colombia, and even in Latin-America, identity is not framed as ethnic, but rather as indigenous?

Equally, if it is true that indigenous struggles have “moved from class-based claims to a politics where identity claims have been central in their agenda and part of their strategies to negotiate with the state” as a result of the constitutional changes of 1991 (Benavides, 2009, p. 3), why do we not call the violent manifestations of those previous struggles in the decade of the 80’s an ‘ethnic conflict’? I first reflect on some aspects of the regional indigenous conflicts and then turn to reflecting on the above questions.
Historians have offered a broad account of violence and resistance of indigenous populations in the province, showing the roots of the current conflict in the area before the appearance of the guerrillas in Colombia. Historically the claims for self-determination (not independence) and for respect for indigenous rights date back to the beginning of the 20th century with the uprising of 1916-1919 led by the indigenous leader Quintín Lame (Peñaranda, 2010). Despite the failure of the uprising to achieve its goals, it set a precedent and historical referent of indigenous resistance and struggles. The indigenous struggles were also informed by legitimate claims for land and for the right to land that had belonged to the indigenous communities for centuries, and which was usurped by colonizers and landowners.

Another milestone for those struggles was the formation of the CRIC (Regional Indigenous Council of the Cauca- Consejo Regional Indigena del Cauca- funded in 1971), a political organization aiming at the agglutination of indigenous groups within the province. This marked the independence of indigenous political organizations from the main political groups of the country (Peñaranda, 2010, p. 31).

The CRIC struggled for cultural and territorial autonomy of the indigenous guards, as well as to recover stolen lands for the communities and for the defense of the human rights of
indigenous communities. These claims were framed within the notion of territory, tradition and customs (Consejo Regional Indigena del Cauca, 2013), and therefore can be understood as ethnic claims defined by the identity of a particular group.

The emergence of the MAQL presented what could be labeled as an indigenous guerrilla group that operated in the department of el Cauca. Its agenda looked to defend the indigenous communities of the province from attacks by landowners, other guerrilla movements, the military, and other armed groups in the area, as well as to retake stolen territories of indigenous communities by landowners in the region. The group – which was named after the indigenous leader Quintin Lame, did not make separatist claims; it rather emerged as an organization in defense of the rights of the indigenous peoples of the province (Peñaranda, 2010).

The armed conflict of indigenous militants did not last long. Late in 1980’s the members of the MAQL stopped their struggle. In 1991, this group demobilized as part of a broader negotiation with guerrillas that gave the country a new constitution, and gave more rights to indigenous people, such as a seat in the senate and the right to self-determination (Prada, 2009).

The demobilization of the MAQL did not change some of the realities of the province: the illegal economy continued in the region (as a strategic corridor for illicit trafficking) (Prada, 2009), and other armed groups such as paramilitaries and guerrillas maintained their presence in the area. The amount of combats between armed groups in el Cauca between 1988 and 2009 amounts to 6% of the total clashes in the Colombian conflict; the province also represents 5% of the total battle deaths caused by the Colombian conflict in this period of time (Restrepo, Spagat, & Vargas, 2006).

However the mobilization of indigenous groups along ethnic claims has not stopped - it has transformed from violent to pacific after the demobilization of the MAQL. One example of this is the marches of 2008 led by the CRIC. The marches were a result of grievances related to land, human rights, and social and economic policies of the government at national level regarding the indigenous population, as well as the signature of a free trade agreement with the United States (Semana, 2008) (El Espectador, 2008).

The marches mobilized around 20.000 to 50.000 indigenous people, who marched from the west of the country to the capital Bogota (587 km), demanding the dismantling of law initiatives related to the land of their communities, recognition of the death of more than 1.253 indigenous people since 2002 (to 2007) and of the displacement of more than 54.000 indigenous people in the Province of El Cauca (El Espectador, 2008). The marchers also demanded the rejection of the Colombian government’s plans to install US military bases within the country (Radio Santa Fe, 2008), as well as a response to the impact of mining and industrial

18 Manuel Quintín Lame (1880-1967) was an indigenous rebel from the early 20th century who tried led an indigenous movement that attempted to retake the lands stolen from indigenous groups by landowners.
projects, as well as armed actors, in their territories (Semana, 2008). The agenda comprised elements related to national issues as well as regional grievances.

The mobilization of the indigenous people of the El Cauca could be interpreted as reaction to grievances in a community that has often set precedents of pacifist resistance to conflict. This pacific resistance is informed by the tradition of the MAQL and the resistance led by Quintin Lame (Leon, 2004).

Literature does not refer to the violent manifestations of those previous struggles in the decade of the 80’s as an ‘ethnic conflict’. This is because the conflict was never labelled as such; it was rather labelled as ‘indigenous’, an ‘indigenous struggle’, an ‘indigenous guerrilla group’, or even an ‘indigenous upheaval’. However, if we understand ‘indigenous’ as a category that refers to real or perceived elements that define the identity of a particular group, then the evidence presented in this section points to the presence of ethnic violence and the possibility of an ethnic conflict having occurred in Colombia during the decade of the 80’s. Therefore the violence of the MAQL in the province of “El Cauca” can be seen as a conflict along ethnic lines, not directed towards other “ethnic groups”, but rather pursued in defence of the group’s own ethnicity and identity against a myriad of actors acting in collision in El Cauca. Furthermore, this phenomenon has transcended the use of violence towards the mobilization of these indigenous groups through peaceful means, still defending an indigenous agenda - an ethnic agenda in the middle of a civil war.
6. Towards a Conclusion – Yet not a closure

The question to which I return now is ‘how can we understand the violent aspects of the struggles of the indigenous groups in Colombia?’ Clearly, there was an armed conflict: violence was used, people have been killed, and the state and specific population groups were involved. Could we use the ‘civil war’ framework? It seems not, as the data for the number of battle related deaths do not appear in the recognized databases on civil war and conflict (such as the MAR\textsuperscript{19}, PRIO\textsuperscript{20} or Uppsala\textsuperscript{21} databases), and this kind of violence does not seem to fit the ‘common’ definition of civil war\textsuperscript{22} (Reid Sarkees).

It seems that the best option within the methodological options offered by contemporary conflict studies – one that takes into account the identity-based armed struggles – is offered by the concept of ‘ethnicity’. If we understand ‘indigenous communities’ as ‘ethnic groups’ - and take them as a unit of analysis as in the case of the indigenous groups of El Cauca and the MAQL- much of their struggles could be also seen as ‘ethnic conflict’. Much of their struggles center on the issues of identities and identity-based historical, social and political rights - the political agenda of the MAQL, the history of the region and their political organization such as the CRIC prove this. Their opponents in those struggles are both the state and other groups that encroached on their land and denied them a number of rights, including their self-chosen way of participating in the society.

However this understanding changes if we analyze the case of the violence in Colombia using a different unit of analysis and area of study, and focus the attention on the most ‘salient’ groups researched in relationship to Colombia’s violence (FARC, paramilitaries, ELN) as opposed to the small guerrilla groups such as the MAQL, in relationship to a different area of study, such as the province of El Cauca.

The question then is – why is conflict in Colombia typically described in one way (the former) rather than another (the latter)? One could of course note that violent struggles of armed indigenous groups are a matter of the past, and that the violence of guerrillas, drug traffickers and paramilitaries frame the realities – and the perceptions - of violence today. Thus, indigenous identities are not a party to the violence in Colombia today – even when indigenous communities have been at the receiving end of that violence, and in some cases members of their communities have been recruited by both the armed groups and the government.

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19 See http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/mar/data.asp
20 See http://www.ucdp.uu.se/gpdatabase/search.php
21 See http://www.prio.no/CSCW/Datasets/
22 Their definition of war hinged on two primary criteria:
   1. The threshold of battle -related fatalities of troops in combat, and the status of the war participants, 1000 battle -related fatalities within a twelve month period.
   2. The status of the war participants, wars had to have participants on both sides that had organizations able to conduct combat (armed forces). Between a state and a group within its borders.
Furthermore, the indigenous groups of ‘El Cauca’ have protested against war and have attempted to separate themselves from the conflict on multiple occasions (Leon, 2004).

Is this lack of representativeness in the literature about the Colombian conflict a consequence of the racism/oblivion to which indigenous communities have been subject since the colony? Is it more legitimate to pay attention to a guerrilla group as opposed to native-revolutionary agendas? Is this a consequence of the fact that the total indigenous population of Colombia is just 2% of the total population, so that any upsurge by them would have not challenged the state to the extent that it would be compelled to recognize them as a threat? Or is this because the indigenous groups sought to achieve political settlements, rather than pursue the escalation of the conflict and a separatist agenda?

Thus indigenous struggles, and especially their armed struggles (such as that of the MAQL), could easily be seen as an ‘ethnic conflict’, ‘ethnic war’ or an ‘ethnic struggle’, while they could not be seen as an ‘ethnic conflict’ as well. This proves the sensitivity of our claims and findings to the nature of our methodological decisions, and how being aware of this may change the outcomes of our research once we change our area of study and our unit of analysis.

Consequently, we have to ask: Are the different explanations for the national and regional conflicts just a byproduct of academic tools of analysis and theoretical perspectives? Why are some of those perspectives more visible than others? And what do we get when we adopt a perspective that is seldom taken? What does this imply for conflict studies and the claims we make in our research?

This study suggests that those studies that embrace an aggregated perspective in the study of civil war that does not consider ethnicity as a unit of analysis will tend to overlook groups that have ethnic/indigenist claims and agendas, even despite their making explicit indigenous and ethnic claims. By contrast, regional and more localized studies are better placed to consider ethnicity as unit of study.

The chances of observing a phenomenon and finding evidence for it are dependent on the categories and units of analysis we use. This is true for mathematical models as well as for qualitative analysis. This article can be seen as illustrative of selection bias, and of the way we drive our research- and our findings - in particular direction as a consequence of our methodological choices.
References


