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WHEN “THE FACTS” BECOME A TEXT REINTERPRETING WAR WITH SERBIAN WAR VETERANS

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Abstract: Rationalist theories of political violence proclaim rather than show what motivates war participation. This article tries to examine the limits of reconstructions of these motivations by analyzing interview material gathered from Serbian war veterans. Using “grounded theory” as a methodology, this research has revealed that the identification of motivations has to take into account social and historical contexts that play out as life-worlds and world-views. Real decision points are, however, hard to identify. Therefore, the article suggests a stronger focus on “carriers” (Trägerschichten) for the study of conflict dynamics.

Keywords: political violence, rationalist theory, grounded theory, war, Serbia.

QUAND LES « FAITS » DEVIENNENT TEXTE RÉINTERPRÉTATIONS DE LA GUERRE RÉALISÉES AVEC DES VÉTÉRANS SERBES

Résumé: Les théories rationalistes relatives à la violence politique affirment plus qu'elles ne démontrent les motivations qui se cachent derrière la participation aux actes de guerre. Cette contribution tente de mettre en évidence, à partir de l'analyse d'interviews menées auprès de vétérans serbes, que le pouvoir d'explication de telles reconstructions est limité. Le recours à des éléments issus de la « théorie ancrée » permet de montrer que la détermination des motivations qui sous-tendent l'action doit autant tenir compte des contextes historiques que sociaux. Les motifs réels qui ont impulsé l'action sont néanmoins difficiles à discerner. Pour conclure, cette contribution préconise de focaliser les recherches sur les composantes sociales agissantes (« Trägerschicht ») dans le conflit.

Mots-clés: violence politique, théorie de l'action rationaliste, théorie ancrée, guerre, Serbie.

**WENN „DIE FAKTEN“ ZUM TEXT WERDEN
KRIEGS-REINTERPRETATIONEN MIT SERBISCHEN KRIEGSVETERANEN**

Zusammenfassung: Rationalistische Theorien politischer Gewalt behaupten eher als dass sie zeigen würden, welche Motive hinter der Beteiligung an Kriegshandlungen stehen. Dieser Beitrag versucht, anhand der Analyse von Interviews mit serbischen Kriegsveteranen die begrenzte Erklärungskraft derartiger Rekonstruktionen von Handlungsmotiven aufzuzeigen. Durch die Anwendung von Elementen der „Grounded Theory“ kann gezeigt werden, dass die Bestimmung von Handlungsmotiven sowohl historische als auch soziale Kontexte zu berücksichtigen hat, die in Form von Lebenswelten und Weltanschauungen relevant werden. Reale Handlungsgründe sind dennoch schwer auszumachen. Der Beitrag plädiert vor diesem Hintergrund dafür, dass sich die Konfliktforschung stärker auf so genannte Trägerschichten fokussiert.

Schlagworte: politische Gewalt, Theorie rationalen Handelns, Grounded Theory, Krieg, Serbien.

Les travaux de science politique consacrés aux guerres et à la participation à la guerre sont actuellement dominés par des approches explicatives de type rationaliste. Ils déduisent leurs motivations d'axiomatiques utilitaristes plutôt que de les analyser à partir du matériel empirique. Cette perspective rationaliste s'est notamment imposée au paradigme des « microfondations of violence ».

Cette contribution opte pour une autre démarche en essayant de reconstruire à partir d'interviews semi-structurées de vétérans serbes les arguments relatifs aux motivations de leurs implications. Une telle démarche conduit à recourir à des travaux concernant d'autres objets en histoire et en ethnologie qui rendent compte de la grande variété des motifs qui sous-tendent la participation à la guerre. D'un point de vue méthodologique, cette contribution s'inspire, d'une part, des procédés établis en sociologie sous l'étiquette de « théorie ancrée » (grounded theory) et, d'autre part, des fondements épistémologiques de la sociologie compréhensive dont les racines remontent à Max Weber. Conformément au programme de la sociologie compréhensive, une explication en sciences sociales nécessite l'énonciation des règles d'observation du comportement tout autant que la reconstitution herméneutique des significations entendues d'un point de vue subjectif par les acteurs. La méthodologie de la « théorie ancrée » a pour particularité d'accepter que les questions varient au sein du processus de recherche dès lors qu'elles découlent de l'objet. Dans cette perspective, des interviews semi-structurées ont été réalisées en 2003 et en 2005 dans une banlieue de Belgrade marquée par l'industrie manufacturière ainsi que dans un quartier résidentiel de la capitale serbe. Les personnes interrogées ont été invitées à raconter leurs « cheminements vers la guerre » et la question de leur décision a été volontairement éludée afin d'éviter des rationalisations exagérées. Les interviews ont été menées en langue serbe et partiellement en langue allemande. Les passages en serbe ont nécessité l'intervention d'un interprète qui, le jour suivant, a relu la traduction de leurs retranscriptions.

Dans l'ensemble, les réponses des personnes interviewées remettent fortement en question les présupposés des approches explicatives de type rationaliste. Certes, le fait qu'elles comportent des rationalisations du vécu reste un problème susceptible de toucher toute enquête réalisée a posteriori, auquel s'ajoutent d'autres problèmes qui, dans les situations d'interviews individuelles, peuvent entraîner des distorsions, y compris dans le cas de thèmes moins sensibles. Malgré ces réserves, les réponses des personnes interviewées permettent de déduire des résultats qui peuvent être présentés à deux niveaux. Ils concernent, d'une part, leurs motivations présumées, et, d'autre-part, l'importance des facteurs situatifs dans la « décision » de s'y engager.

Les indications fournies par les personnes interviewées font essentiellement prévaloir les figures de l'honneur. À cet égard, l'honneur du guerrier aussi bien que l'honneur de la nation ont été principalement évoqués et l'insistance sur les références historiques a été, elle aussi, particulièrement frappante. Presque toutes les personnes interviewées ont fait allusion à une narration de la nation serbe qui mettait en relief la position intermédiaire du pays entre l'Europe (occidentale) et l'Empire ottoman, mais qui renvoyait également aux circonstances de la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Ces narrations autour de l'identité nationale s'entremêlaient dans de nombreuses réponses à celles qui concernaient l'histoire familiale. L'engagement des parents ou des grands-parents aux côtés des partisans de Tito pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale a

été, exception faite de la question de l'honneur masculin, le principal motif de participation à la guerre invoqué dans les témoignages, qui arguaient d'une obligation d'ordre affectif envers les collectifs locaux et familiaux, mais aussi envers la nation appréhendée comme une abstraction. Parmi les individus interviewés, certains ont prétendu qu'ils accomplissaient leur service militaire au moment où la guerre a éclaté, ou ont insisté sur leurs obligations à titre de militaire de carrière.

C'est surtout la référence fréquente aux collectifs qui prévalait dans les récits consacrés aux conditions de vie au moment du cheminement personnel vers la guerre. Le « monde de la vie » en Yougoslavie socialiste ne paraissait pas avoir autorisé de prises de décisions personnelles et anonymes. Au sein des cercles d'amis ou de collègues, dans la famille et parfois dans les clubs sportifs d'entreprise, les décisions individuelles s'inséraient visiblement toujours dans une réflexion simultanée sur les sanctions positives ou négatives attendues par l'entourage social. C'est spécifiquement cette « socialité de la décision » qui a été jusqu'à présent ignorée par la recherche.

Enfin, cette contribution met en valeur l'hétérogénéité des décisions et des situations dans lesquelles les personnes interviewées ont apparemment choisi leur propre « cheminement vers la guerre ». Il semble que la recherche en sciences sociales ne soit pas encore actuellement en mesure d'accomplir une théorisation satisfaisante des motivations qui ont suscité cette participation à la guerre. C'est pourquoi, dans un second temps, il s'agira de relever quelques défis majeurs dans la perspective de l'analyse comparée des résultats empiriques mis en relief. Tout d'abord, le problème de l'action collective, si souvent signalé par la recherche rationaliste, ne se pose absolument pas dans le cas analysé. Les attentes et les institutions sociales influent considérablement sur la nature des décisions à prendre. L'ampleur de telles attentes exogènes intervenant dans le processus remet globalement en question l'allégation qui postule l'existence d'une « décision individuelle » tant le degré de socialité inhérent au « cheminement vers la guerre » semble avoir été fort, du moins dans certains cas.

Parmi les leçons méthodologiques à tirer des travaux présentés ici, on retiendra en outre l'enjeu des contextes sociaux ainsi que le rôle décisif que jouent auprès des chercheurs les connaissances qui s'y réfèrent. La contribution traite de certaines méprises de la recherche qui reposaient sur une méconnaissance du « monde de la vie » en Serbie dans les années 1990. Les recherches consacrées aux motivations dans les situations de guerre, mais également dans le cadre d'autres questionnements, devront faire face à un défi essentiel : celui de ne pas hypostasier ni escamoter l'hétérogénéité des modes de vie, des processus de groupe et des schémas de perceptions caractérisés par leur historicité. Dans cette perspective, cet article appelle de ses vœux une sociologie politique du conflit, caractérisée par une démarche historique qui soit en mesure d'articuler l'histoire structurelle et la micro-histoire.

"If there were only rational action, social science would be an easy endeavor," as Max Weber once wrote. More than a hundred years later, the social sciences are still marked by controversies over issues of how much can be explained by theories of rational choice. The field of war studies is no exception in this regard. Rationalist approaches were always there, especially in the models inspired by game theory in the study of the Cold War. But it was only towards the end of the 1990s that such utilitarian approaches became prominent in the study of civil war. They had an enlightening function insofar as they counterbalanced culturalist interpretations of war and violence² that flourished at a time when political scientists discovered how much warfare had changed. Nowadays, when political scientists write about war, macro-quantitative studies in the behavioralist tradition and the use of utilitarian actor models prevail as can be seen in journals such as the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, the *Journal of Peace Research* or the flagship of US political science, the *American Political Science Review*. This stream of war studies in political science aims at a theory of war, imagined, I assume, to consist of generalized, nomothetic propositions.

At the other end of the spectrum we have what could be called, as in Max Weber's time, the idiographic ideal, less prominent in political science, but very prominent in historiography, sociology and political anthropology. Here, the ideal is to get as close as possible to things and to "understand" rather than to "explain". Scholars working in this tradition would probably reject the idea that a universal theory of war could ever be formulated. Instead, they see the aim in understanding processes and contexts, often in their distinctiveness. The supposition that war actors in contemporary Africa act according to the same rationality as German Wehrmacht soldiers in World War II, or the troops of the Roman Empire, would sound bizarre or even in the ears of these scholars. War cannot be understood in isolation from its context, this is also the central argument of a new generation of war studies in political science over the last ten to fifteen years³. Therefore, this sets tight restrictions on transhistorical generalization as well.

An external observer might think that both camps have a point. Allowing for generalizations, and at the same time taking contexts and particularities into account, is a middle way possible? This paper attempts to contribute to the elaboration of a theoretical understanding of war and a corresponding methodology based on interpretive sociology⁴. Rather than elaborate Weber's methodology at any length here, I want to show why a hermeneutical approach, an idiographic element, is indispensable in any study of war. Having said that, it is not fully clear how this can be done. The question of hermeneutics, of "understanding" (*Verstehen*), is methodologically very problematic. The second aim of this paper is therefore to offer a solution, if somewhat tenuous, to this question.

Using material generated during field research in Belgrade in 2003 and 2005, I want to show that a utilitarian logic of methodological individualism is neither the only way, and probably not the best method to account for war scientifically, The research carried out on the politics of paramilitary groups in Serbia⁵ has shown that these groups cannot simply

1. WEBER, 1906, here 1988, p. 227.

2. HUNTINGTON, 1993; ENZENSBERGER, 1995; KAPLAN, 1994.

3. GEFFRAY, 1990; RICHARDS, 1996; SCHLICHTE, 1998; JUNG ET AL. 2003; MARCHAL and MESSIANT, 2003; DEBOS, 2011.

4. WEBER, 1988.

5. SCHLICHTE, 2009b.

be summarized under the labels of either “partisans” in the sense of Carl Schmitt⁶, nor are they covered what guerilla theory has coined as the liberating fighter with an emancipatory agenda. Instead, former paramilitaries have been shown to be strong nationalists with a discourse that draws heavily on the framing of their nation as a victim of great power politics (see below). Group dynamics played an important role for the ways men became war participants, and often it seems difficult in retrospect to single out specific moments of decision. While these findings contradict the established view that armed actors make rational cost-benefit analysis and are particularly interested in material gains, it is rather the methodological basis of this research that I want to delve into here.

The methodology I applied is close to what is known as “grounded theory”, as a way of bringing to the fore what preconceived theories do not anticipate. Using this empirical material of semi-structured interviews with Serbian war veterans from the wars of the 1990s, this interpretative exercise will be centered on the question of war participation and the “decision” to join armed forces. I will proceed in three steps: In the first section I will summarize the criticism against rationalist theories in the field of war studies. In a second step, I want to use my own material from field research, gathered in 2003 and 2005, on war participation among Serbian war veterans in order to show that, from what we can establish in retrospect, motives for war participation cannot sufficiently be covered by the alternatives of “greed versus grievance”. However, as the main subject of this article is to see how we can improve our methodologies concerning violence in order to do justice to contexts, this material will be re-interpreted critically in order to find out more about the operations used in such interpretations. In a third section, I will try to draw some lessons from the interpretive exercise. These suggestions aim to move the methodological debate forward and combine it with a theoretical perspective that goes beyond rationalist reductionism.

In a way, the case of Serbia is as informative, as typical and, as particular as any other. The main aim of the second section is not only to show what interviewees answered to questions in semi-structured interviews, the purpose is rather to go deeper into the issue of the motivations behind war participation, and particularly the misconceptions and disillusionments of the researcher⁷. A few words on how the data was generated might be in order here. Of particular interest in that research were the so-called paramilitaries or “Serbian militias”, who played a prominent role in the wars in Croatia (Slavonia) and Bosnia between 1991 and 1995 and, as was reported, in the Kosovo War of 1999. While the central question was to see to what extent the right to use violence was delegated by the state and to what extent it was self-organized, the issue of motivation of individual participants played a role in the research process as well. From what can be gleaned from a total of 25 of such interviews, there were no discernible differences between regular soldiers and militia members. All interviews were based on a semi-structured questionnaire, and interviewees were asked questions that stimulated narratives about the entry into the war and the social environment at the time of joining forces. Most interviews took place with the help of a Serbian political science

6. SCHMITT, 1963.

7. This research was part of a group project on non-state war actors, funded by The Volkswagen-Foundation and carried out between 2001 and 2008.

student as translator. No time limits were set on the interviews, and each one lasted between one and three hours. The material was gathered using a methodology based on “grounded theory”⁸ which, in a nutshell, stipulates that to generate a theory one should start by asking a few open questions. All material gathered should be used during the investigation to refine the set of questions. This research strategy is therefore more able to get closer to the actual social content and “meaning” of social action.

Of course, what interviewees say about their reasons to go to war, often years later, does not necessarily reflect the situation at that time. In order to construct plausible theses here, a triangulation is needed. Interviews with war veterans were therefore just one part of the research, mainly intended to get a better view of the “subjective” side of war participation. Other materials used for this research included press reports in German, English, French and Serbo-Croatian, secondary literature and expert interviews with journalists, academics, diplomats and politicians in Belgrade and Berlin.

RATIONALISM AND ITS ALTERNATIVES – WHAT YOU THINK IS WHAT YOU GET

In a recent article on International Political Economy, Benjamin Cohen raised the question, “Are IPE journals becoming boring?”, suggesting that political scientists might be beset by an inferiority complex vis-à-vis economists⁹. The resulting dominance of macro-quantitative approaches aiming at formal models which are based on rationalist assumptions has led, as Cohen argues, to an increasing fragmentation of journal contents. What he misses is “something about the forest, not just individual trees”¹⁰, attributing the lack of synthesis to practices in political science journals that do not encourage more venturesome papers but prefer systematic inquiries backed by standard methodologies. This assessment will sound familiar to scholars in the field of war studies. The logic of a standard article in the field comprises the establishment of large-N datasets from written sources, often government statistics, a standard regression in order to assess the relation between two variables, and a brief discussion of the results. The vocabulary invariably reveals the underlying standard model of rational actors. “Costs” and “benefits”, “choice” and “strategy” are key indicators for that. The general notion of this research tradition is that statistically significant relations will ultimately lead to a body of general propositions that allow even the prediction of civil war¹¹.

While for quite some time this methodology was applied to aggregated data for macro-studies on war actors, in the field of war studies a turn towards “micro-mechanisms” and civil wars was observable since the late 1990s. This happened, according to prominent scholars, in order “to address problems of measurement and interpretation that cannot be easily resolved at the cross-national level”¹². In this recent trend, three issues have attracted most scholarly attention, namely the rationality of war participation and recruitment, the dynamics and location of violent clashes, and the disaggregation of

8. GLASER and STRAUSS, 1967; STRAUSS and CORBIN, 1997.

9. COHEN, 2010, p. 888.

10. COHEN, 2010, p. 889.

11. WARD et al., 2010.

12. KALYVAS et KOCHER, 2009, p. 335.

violence into types of actors, victims, perpetrators and types of conflict¹³. As mentioned above, numerous scholars, the author of this paper included, feel uncomfortable about this trend. In short, their growing dissatisfaction with the rationalist “subsumption” of social and political reality¹⁴ can be summarized under a few headings.

Ignored Contexts

One major dispute in the study of war, and of other social and political phenomena as well, is the issue of context dependency. Should we strive for universal models of explanation? Or would they be to no avail, as contexts differ so strongly that we need to take into account local circumstances in order to arrive at reasonable descriptions of ongoing events and dynamics? Critics suggest that causal models, reducing wars to numerical expressions, and often using questionable quantitative thresholds, miss more than they measure. The social processes that lead to the use of violence, as well as the interpretation and political meaning of violence, do not fit into numerical codes, but rather depend on moral and other, context-specific social relations. Institutions, their genesis, as well as social structures that go beyond simplifications like “GDP per capita”, are not taken into account and nor are discourses, rumors, ambiances, political organizations, historical experiences and collective memories, etc.

A Reductionist Anthropology

A second criticism addresses the reductionist rationalism in understanding human action in war. The war of *homines economici* is purely a war of calculating machines, people without history and few, if any, emotions. Such an understanding seems to underlie prominent research programs such as the “microfoundations of violence”. Here too, the role of emotions is not ignored, but they only are taken into account as mechanisms that shape preferences and identity. Critics point to personal accounts of war experiences which overwhelmingly show that violence in war is only partially determined by rational calculation, and often becomes “autotelic”¹⁵. The roles of fear, pride, shame, guilt and honor and other emotional states, affective ties, and incorporated reference frames that are not exclusively rationalist constructions have been stressed in numerous historical and anthropological studies based on interviews and conversations with war participants¹⁶ and in prominent sociological attempts to theorize violence¹⁷.

The Individualist Bias and the Lack of Synthesis

While it is widely acknowledged in other fields of social sciences that micro, meso and macro-level perspectives need to be combined to inform each other on possible causal and other relations, war studies in political science at least, are dominated by

13. KALYVAS et KOCHER, 2009.

14. KESSLER, 2011, p. 91.

15. REEMTSMA, 2008, BAŠIĆ, 2004.

16. e.g., HATZFELD, 2003; NEITZEL and WELZER, 2011; ELLIS, 1999; MCKENNA, 1999.

17. VON TROTHA, 1999; COLLINS, 2007; WIEVIORKA, 2009.

either macro or micro-quantitative studies. Interestingly, there is little to be found on the meso-level. Studies on the trajectories of armed groups and on the politics between different actors are either rare single case studies or so policy-oriented that their academic value is questionable. Institutions, groups' relations and dynamics, as well as local histories or wars as a permanent or normal condition are not discussed, nor are the production of obedience or patterns and pathways of military socialization, although evidence abounds that militarist dynamics seem to play an important role for the organization of violence and the escalation of social conflicts into violence. The lack of synthesis is often attributed to the dominance of an inductivist heuristic which does not allow for accumulated knowledge production, but delivers only single insights, one after the other, without ever being able to combine these insights to something that could be theory. The fifty years history of the "correlates of war" project at the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor) seems to be the extreme example of how little is achieved in terms of theory, if research is restricted to an inductive, macro-quantitative methodology.

The Forgotten Textualism

Coming from linguistics, but having found its way into history and sociology quite some time ago, textualism is a radical approach which has challenged classical historiography. However, in political science the issue has not been discussed yet. Its main argument is that it is illusory to assume that there were independent sources from which historians were able to create a narrative that would actually come close to what "really happened", whereas the usual practice of historians is just to produce another text. Instead of thinking of an independent reality of sources, historiography should rather reflect the rules and often unconscious mechanisms of how texts and meanings are created¹⁸. How to analyze written or spoken text and how then our academic accounts, again texts, are produced on this basis, is a social process that scholars have only paid attention to in part so far. It is this last claim that I find most interesting as it constitutes a challenge for more interpretive studies of war as well. How to take context into account without omitting generalization is a major theoretical and methodological challenge, not only in war studies. If we accept the necessity of interpretive steps in the study of war, as a Weberian understanding would; how do we know what the "subjectively meant meaning" (*subjektiv gemeinter Sinn*) actually was within a given social action?

Insights from literary studies add another aspect to this critical self-reflection. Any story or narrative has an implicit explanation. How we narrate a war depends on how we would explain it, and vice versa¹⁹. The case of "analytical narratives"²⁰ might be the best known example. However, other modes of writing history and telling stories have their implicit theories too. If this is true, the great danger of any interpretation is

18. BERKHOFER, 1995, p. 23.

19. KOSCHORKE, 2001, p. 39.

20. BATES et al., 1998.

what most “constructivist”²¹ scholars, or anybody else believing in the need for hermeneutical elements in social sciences, accuse advocates of rationalism doing. The frame of interpretation is pre-set by the theoretical understandings, and observers will not depart from their preconceived framework. Thus, what you get is what you think.

Is any investigation bound to replicate the categories and patterns of narration that it starts out with? How can we improve the chances of getting our representations closer to a reality “out there”? How do we know what “the facts” are? My own suggestion for finding an answer to this question is “grounded theory”, an approach that tries to minimize conceptual debates at the beginning of a research process. Its aim is to allow the material gathered maximum influence so that it shapes the outcome of a research process. I want to show that the views and experiences of actors themselves, are one essential source for this assessment, the other one being historical reconstruction²². Rather than start with a rigid framework and clear-cut theoretical understanding, the idea of “grounded theory” pursued here is to look and listen first. Apart from participant and non-participant observation, the main method of this approach is, of course, either narrative or semi-structured interviews. In the following section, I want to present a few results of my own research carried out in 2003 and 2005, in an industrial district of Serbia’s capital, Belgrade. I will then throw a critical glance back on this research in order to discuss methodological lessons.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM SERBIA?

This paper is not the appropriate place for dealing with the overall picture of wars in the former Yugoslavia and the particular dynamics of paramilitaries during Milošević’s regime²³. Instead, in the light of the foregoing methodological issues, I want to critically re-evaluate how preconceived understandings of the subject of investigation dissolve or change when faced with the material as such. “Grounded theory” and the often mystified method of “field research” do not, of course, guarantee that conceptions and understandings can be adapted to an independent “reality” of the actors. But interpretive methods, as I want to stress, are the only way of getting closer to an empirical reality that might not obey to the logic of preconceived theories.

Apart from rationalist approaches, especially the famous “greed or grievance” dichotomy of war participation motivation, my own preconceptions on why people would participate in war actions were based on the accounts of World War II, the “official” narrative and private stories of family relatives. My, partly implicit, assumption was

21. There is the misunderstanding that constructivists would deny the reality of a reality outside texts. This is not the understanding I am referring to here, as no constructivist would argue that there are only constructions and nothing else. The claim is always only that our notions and conceptions and ideas about X are contingent, specific, historically formed, but not that X is not “there”, independent of our experience (*Erfahrung*) (HACKING, 1999, p. 25).

22. Getting an understanding of what actors intended, felt or evaluated is one part of a good explanation in Weberian philosophy of science, named “adequacy of meaning” (*Sinnadäquanz*), while historical reconstruction is my name for what Weber calls “causal adequacy” (*Kausaladäquanz*), cf. WEBER, 1985, p. 5.

23. SCHLICHT, 2009a.

that most war veterans would present their war participation as a “no choice” situation, being forced into conscription by an authoritarian regime. In a similar way to post-1945 Germany, I assumed, Serbia was defeated and internationally held responsible for the bulk of human rights violations²⁴. In a semi-public conversation, with me as a “Westerner”²⁵, veterans would present their stories as having no choice under harsh circumstances in an authoritarian setting, blaming the leadership and a few maniacs for breaching humanitarian law. As it turned out, both these ideas and others were wrong. Only one of the randomly selected interviewees mentioned a no-choice situation, being a conscript in the barracks in March 1999, when NATO began its attacks in what in Western public is called “Kosovo war”, which my interviewees in Belgrade label as “NATO agresija”. The veterans of T., an industrial quarter of Belgrade, were highly organized, well aware of what a social scientist from “The West” might think of them, and, as a critical reading of interview transcripts showed, had a broad variety of narrating motivations for joining the armed forces in the wars of the 1990s. Based on the coding of my interview material, in the following, I will highlight three aspects of their attitudes that came to the fore during field research and the later interpretation of the material. I shall cluster themes according to the answers to the questions “Why did you join the armed forces?” and “What do you think about those who did not participate?” I will also offer short interpretations to selected statements²⁶.

The Honor of the Warrior

Already during my first research stay in March 2003, I came into contact, – via a student, – with a group of war veterans. Their secretary promised on the phone to put me in touch with regular soldiers as well as former militia members. At an initial meeting, three former combatants took off their shirts at one point of our conversation in order to show me the wounds and scars left on their bellies and backs from the war. In my later interpretation, this was a symbolic act for what then became a continuous thread in the interviews: heroizing lionizing and victimization were the dominant topoi of the veterans’ discourse. It came to the fore in all interviews, connected with a variety of

24. On other issues, I had no precise preconceptions, as the case of Serbian (and other Yugoslav militias) was – and is still – not well covered in political science research. Few data on troop numbers or organizational features scattered in handbooks on the war, newspaper reports and grey literature, and a number of quality journalists books constituted the little information that was at hand. Academic literature in English or German on the wars in Yugoslavia in 2002 was abundant, but restricted to few topics. It was focused on the onset of war and its background in the deep socio-economic crisis of post-Tito Yugoslavia (e.g., WOODWARD, 1995), or on consequences for international law (e.g., FALK, 1999) or on the atrocities and human rights violations in the wars (e.g., STIGLMAYER, 1994), while Serbian sociologist and political scientists dealt with the fissures and internal political competition (e.g., BRANKOVIĆ, 1995). Works that dealt on a more serious basis with the war actors and their rationales appeared only later (BAŠIĆ, 2005; GAGNON, 2004).

25. I put this into hyphens because the image of an homogeneous “West” is a construction by the interviewees like the collective of “Serbia”.

26. All interviews were carried out mostly in Serbo-Croatian, translated with the help of a Serbian political science student and former soldier. Partly, conversation was possible in German as a number of interviewees had worked in West Germany in the 1970s or 1980s. Only three interviews were recorded and cross-checked with other native speakers later. All other quotes are from hand-written notes, checked with the translator immediately after the respective interview.

issues. Statements on the honor of the armed forces concerned the quality of the troops (*"Those who went to war were not dull. They had an intelligence an above-average level of intelligence"*, A) as well as the size of the war events and effects it had on the Serbian society (*"Compared to what happened here, Vietnam was a small war"*, A).

The statements of interviewees often reflect a particular masculinity masculine discourse in which the protective role of males (*"If I hadn't gone to war, I would have felt like a worthless man"*, M; *"We say here 'the army makes a man out of you'"*, K) is expressed by their readiness to fight and their disappointment at not being able to do so during the war against NATO forces in 1999 (*"We wanted them [NATO troops, K.S.] to come across the border so that we could fight. But what can you do against bombing from ten thousand feet above you?"*, M; *"We were waiting for ground troops, to fight them"*, P; *"NATO troops were cowards, they were afraid of marching into our country with infantry"*, B; *"We wanted them to come. They should see what a Serbian hero is"*, B).

The Honor of the Nation

At the same time, Serbia is portrayed in the veterans' discourse as a victim of the machinations of greater forces, with little chance of turning its "fate" (*"I could not believe that 19 countries would attack one small country"*, B), while the Serbian people as a collective are portrayed as heroic (*"It is after all surprising to see what the Serbian people survived, keeping their spirit up"*, Z), peace-loving (*"Nobody likes war, especially we as a peaceful people"*, B) and politically tragically entangled (*"Serbia is always winning war in the field, but in politics and diplomacy, every war is lost"*, U). The defeat, in what is called "NATO agresija" by the veterans, and "Kosovo war" in Western discourse, is then seen as only as further proof of this historic role of the collective "we", Serbia as a nation (*"We were winners in our hearts, but losers in our souls"*, B). While internally, political competition is harsh and takes on violent forms as well, to the outside, a moral bond is presented that spans across partisanship (*"We did not all support Milošević, but we were patriots"*, M; *"The unity of the people was simply unbelievable. We were all standing on the bridges and shouting 'Fuck you' to the bombers"*, P).

Without being asked about human rights violations or questions of guilt, most of the veterans started to portray their country as having been in a purely defensive position (*"The Serbian army did not harm prisoners of war"*, A; *Serbian people never went to war as conquerors. They only defend themselves and their country"*, B; *"Serbs never started anything, they were just harsh in their revenge, they never started to kill anyone"*, K; *"Serbs never started an aggression"*, K).

Enemies and Alliances

While I attribute the tendency to portray "Serbia" as an honorable collective and a victim, I interpret a number of utterances by the veterans as attempts to ally with me, the Westerner, being well aware of the image that Serbian forces had in Western media²⁷. While a number of statements on Kosovo Albanians were clearly xenophobic

27. COHEN, 1995.

and racist (“*With the Shiptars, no arrangement is possible*”, “*They are ugly, lazy, simple and banal*”, A), the reasoning about the background of the war in Bosnia was rather embedded in a post-9/11 framework, as I felt, in order to link the discourse of “Serbian” war action with an anticipated anti-Muslim attitude in the West (“*The Serbs fought against Islam, although you [“the West”, K.S.] betrayed us all the time. This is our destiny*”, P).

On Non-Followers

The strong moral bond, discursively constructed around the “charismatic collective”²⁸ of “Serbia”, is connected, – or reinforced, one might think – by expression of a strong aversion towards young men who evaded conscription or defected from the armed forces during the wars of the 1990s. In some local settings, this was rather the rule than the exception, as in some units 80 per cent “*did not show up*” (Z). Judgments by former militia members about those avoiding military service were harsh (“*pussies*”, P), others showed more tolerance (“*Not all people are prepared to bear war*”, S) or gave almost sociological interpretations (“*Rich people could afford to bribe themselves out, poor people had to go to the war*”, “*War affects working class people more than the wealthy. It is a universal characteristic, throughout the world*”, U).

Institutions and Group Life

Groups were frequently mentioned in the explanation of war participation, particularly concerning the Kosovo War (“*Few in my unit were not from T., about 20 came from my sports center*”; “*Eleven of us went directly from the sports center, it was a collective decision*”, B). When war participation is the general rule, group-think and moral pressure might explain a lot more than simplified motives like “greed” or “grievance” (“*I do not know anyone who did not go. All my friends here were either called up or went as volunteers*”, B). Circles of colleagues, especially in the Yugoslav form of labor organization, and friends, influence and shape decisions which then are then often not conceived as individual choices.

In all interviews the attitudes and experiences of parents and other relatives were mentioned as an explanation for deciding to go to war: (“*Both of my parents fought for the partisans. In my family there was that tradition. My grandfather went to war, my mother, my father, so did I*”, A; “*I am from a patriarchal background where it is tradition to defend the country. In my family none waits for the army to call you up, you go by yourself*”, S; “*My parents were proud of having me in the army, they were 100 per cent Yugoslavs*”, K; “*All this is hard for you to understand, it is about centuries of hatred, about family traditions*”, P). What these statements, in my view, also transport convey is that “family traditions” are often enmeshed with the fate of the bigger collective, “Serbia”. It is also remarkable how often references to the violent past of the Second World War appeared. Interviewees used these references to present their own war participation as standing in a long tradition of national self-defense.

28. BOGNER, 2003.

Points of Decision? Decision Points?

The veterans gave quite different answers when asked about their motivation to go into battle. They ranged from half-refusal and hints on cultural particularities (“*You cannot understand this, it is in our blood*”, N), to daily routine (“*When the war started, nothing changed for me. I was in the army, I did my duties*”, U), nationalist engagement (“*I was not mobilized, I went as a volunteer. It was a religious war, and I wanted to defend the integrity (jedinstvo) of my country*”, A), routine and protection (“*To go to war was a normal thing. I went after the Croats attacked Borovo Selo [in May 1991, K.S.], M*), to legalist reasoning (“*I knew that the separation was against the supreme law of our state*”, S; “*In the first moment, I remembered my oath. ... It was about our sovereignty*”, B) to nationalist reasons (“*I went voluntarily to the barracks, purely out of patriotism*”, P) and the initiative to encourage others to participate (“*From March 1991 to July I was gathering men around me. All those who did not want to fight under the red star, joined the same force*”, P).

WHY GO TO WAR? LESSONS LEARNED

All empirical research on war participation has to face the same post-factum problem. It is methodologically impossible to reconstruct real motivations in terms of intentions “in actu”, that is those thoughts, feelings and conceptions that one might have when such a decision is taken. Often, it might even be questionable whether this happens at one single point in time or rather over a period, a process in which different and even contradicting impulses might rule. The responses of the Serbian veterans, in any case, were of course post-factum rationalizations as well. They cannot be taken as outright and direct representations of what was the case years ago, and this would be for a variety of reasons. Firstly, motivations might be remembered only in parts or not at all. Secondly, later rationalizations might have influenced the interpretation because of changes in surrounding discursive settings. Finally, situational factors shape what respondents answer. Having said that, there are three subjects on which I want to dwell briefly in order to give an outline of how far my previous understanding has changed during this research. These findings contrast in a number of regards with what is said in the literature about motivations for war participation from a rationalist perspective²⁹.

Groups and Families – Social Ties

For me, one of the most surprising insights I got drew from the interviews was the intimacy with which veterans interacted with each other. It was then that I had doubts whether utilitarian individualism is acceptable as a universal model for explaining war participation. While it is impossible to ascertain how much of this familiarity was due to later experiences, it made me think about socialization and group life as an aspect of war participation. Interestingly, some veterans had critical stances vis-à-vis others (“*People here have the inclination to play the boss, especially in war*”, U) and disagreed about the seriousness of others’ statements but this dissent was not visible when they interacted.

29. e.g., WEINSTEIN, 2005.

The Past Present

With the strong national narrative of the Yugoslav federation born out of the experiences of World War II and the heroic struggle of the partisans, it was in my eyes little wonder that the veterans often mentioned defending the unity of the country (*jedinstvo*) as the main motive for their decision to go to war (A, M). Generally, there was little distinction between Yugoslavia and Serbia when it came to the past before the year 2000 and after 1918. What I think all answers showed, albeit to different degrees and in slightly different shapes, were the linkages drawn between personal motivation and some form of collectivity, the most important of which were “Serbia” as an imagined community, family traditions and groups of friendships and colleagues, as in the case of the “sportski centar”. The entire framing of the wars of the 1990s defines the conflict as one between the heroic nation of “Serbia” against an overwhelming force, most visibly in the Kosovo War or “NATO agresija”. In causal terms the identification with these discursive figures³⁰ is not easy to disentangle. But certainly, prior war experiences, the past wars in which “Serbia” was involved, are here collectively interpreted as a “history” as well, nationally framed, and morally highly charged. It is, as historians remind us, not the past as such, but a historical narrative, a social construction³¹.

Heterogeneity

By categorizing statements and grouping them under headings, my text might have produced an exaggerated image of homogeneity. During one group interview, but also in subsequent conversations, differences came to the fore to a degree that interviewees argued polemically. The issue at stake was the political orientation of veterans, some of whom were rather left-wing Yugoslavia nostalgics, while others were more to the right of the political spectrum, i.e., adherents of the Serbian Radical Party, led till 2003 by a former militia leader who also got the majority of votes in T. when he ran in the presidentials against Milošević in 1997. War studies, it seems, often not only ignore the manifoldness of motivations of actors for taking part in a war and resorting to arms, they also often gloss over the variance of attitudes, the multitude of life-worlds of actors and of interactions between war participants as the motivation for war participation. This is of course a subject of discussion of war participants already during the a war. As this summary of Serbian veterans’ responses has shown, there are several logics at work in the reasoning behind war participation that cannot be reduced to the alternative of “greed” versus “grievance”. This corresponds with other studies on war participation that strongly emphasize other influences and social “factors”.

Going Back to the Existing Literature

None of these results appear in the literature on war participation. Reading such studies, one might get the impression that pre-conceived notions of scholars, based on theories not rendered explicitly, influence results to a large extent. In the literature, there

30. COLOVIĆ, 2002.

31. PLUMB, 1969. On the Serbian case SUNDHAUSSEN, 2007, preface.

is a broad range of motivations that scholars have reconstructed from letters of war participants or by interviewing them. Compulsory recruitment and group pressure are as present as fighting for “ideals”: An U.S. military study on fighting motivations in the Iraq war found that Iraqi soldiers were fighting out of fear of retribution by remnants of the old regime, whereas U.S. soldiers fought not only for each other, but also for ideological reasons such as liberation, freedom, and democracy³². A similar finding is presented on the motivations of soldiers in the American Civil War who fought for ideals, the principles of liberty, freedom, justice, patriotism, duty and honor, and religion. These motivations were, however, enmeshed with group cohesion, community and peer pressure, concepts of duty, honor and manhood³³. Shils and Janowitz found, that for the German Wehrmacht in Second World War, that bonds of primary groups were the main reason for the doggedness of these soldiers, even in the final phases of war when the Wehrmacht had already disintegrated. They explained that cohesion was rather due to “affection and esteem from both officers and comrades” rather than to political beliefs or coercion by officers³⁴. For contemporary civil wars, motivations and situations are again very diverse: Rachel Brett, reporting results based on interviews with 53 child soldiers from nine “developing countries”, points to the scarcity of other choices owing to the closure of schools, flight from domestic violence; and family pressures, but none gave the protection of other civilians as a motive³⁵. In rationalist contributions, these findings are simply ignored. In most recent rationalist contributions to the question of war participation, the collective action problem has become the main theoretical reference point³⁶. Their way out of that riddle is still rationalist: the two authors suggest that the collective action problem simply does not apply that often when non-participation is not cost-free, since non-rebels run serious risks in war zones, too.

Jeremy Weinstein and Macartan Humphrey criticize that motivations for war participation are often portrayed as a choice between “promise of resource rents” and “discontent with government policies”³⁷ and show for the case of Sierra Leone, – though with more general claims, – that different logics of participation may coexist in a single civil war. According to their findings, participation in a military faction does depend on an individual’s relative social and economic position, the costs and benefits of joining, and the social pressures from friends and community members, and that involuntary participation is a fundamental part of revolutionary mobilization³⁸. Political ideals or convictions, it seems, do not matter.

32. WONG et al., 2003.

33. MCPHERSON, 2007.

34. SHILS and JANOWITZ, 1948, p. 284. In the ongoing debate in Germany about the motivation of Wehrmacht officers and soldiers and their responsibility, this image of the politically “neutral” and “unknowing” army is currently dissolving (cf. NEITZEL, 2007; NEITZEL and WELZER, 2011). The debate started after an exhibition, presenting proofs of the Wehrmacht’s involvement in war crimes, had toured throughout Germany in the 1990s, attracting 900,000 visitors. NEITZEL and WELZER, 2011, show with material from intercepted conversations among Wehrmacht generals and soldiers how complex the motivation to use force and to kill can be (cf. also BAŠIĆ, 2004).

35. BRETT, 2003.

36. KALYVAS and KOCHER, 2007.

37. HUMPHREY and WEINSTEIN, 2008, p. 436.

38. HUMPHREY and WEINSTEIN, 2008, p. 452.

The interpretation of the Serbian veterans' responses contrasts with this picture in two regards. First, one might assume that even in those armed formations that do not have a morally justified cause in most observers' eyes, ideas and ideals might play an important role. The great emphasis that was put on collective identities such as "Serbia" does not fit well with what is said about motivation in contemporary war. One conclusion could be that patriotism, hard to distinguish from outright nationalism, is not the sole reserve of liberal democracies. And in turn, one might assume that forms of coercion and group pressure, ideals of manhood and masculinity, material interest, and a lack of attractive civilian career paths may play a role for the motivation behind joining armed forces in Western countries as well. The second inference drawn from this interpretation in a comparative perspective is that a "social" element in motivations is more widespread than utilitarian and individualist understandings might assume. After all, in each study on war participation, some sort of "group" apparently shaped and influenced the motivation insofar as post-hoc statements represent "true" pictures. Could that mean that methodological individualism is perhaps not the right level for theory building? Apparently, "group logics" are at work in almost all cases when motivation for war participation is investigated. Families, neighbors, friends, factions, and even nations are collectively shared concepts that seemingly can drive actions as actors believe in their reality. As such, these ideas perhaps play a much larger role than a methodology that focuses exclusively on individual choice is able to depict.

HOW TO TAKE CONTEXT INTO ACCOUNT

In this last section, I want to address two points. The first is a summary of the lessons from the above section in terms of methodology. Does the methodology I presented really tell us anything more about how we can take contexts into account without subsuming them to a theory we already have? The second point is a brief outlook on the methodology of war studies in the light of the discussion of "grounded theory" in the version applied here. How does this link up with other areas of social sciences, with other methodological and theoretical strands?

Qualitative Approaches, Merits and Pitfalls

In what regard did this "grounded theory" approach alter or enlarge my knowledge on the subject? Looking back at this process and my reflections, also documented in a research diary, I would identify at least five major observations: *First*, everybody is socially embedded in several ways. I had not taken into account the fact that all individuals are integrated within social settings, at work, among friends, and in families. In these circles, decisions about war participation, or non-participation, had to be justified. Apparently, there are different framings for this, depending on the historical trajectory of a given context.

Second, no context is homogeneous. Even among the former workers and paramilitaries in T. there was considerable dissent over a number of issues such as which force to join, what to think about the defeat, and what to think about the past generally. Even in this homogeneous milieu, similar or identical experiences do not lead to identical evaluations.

Thirdly, errors have a long life. I had not considered that all male adults had been through general military service, Yugoslavia being a highly militarized society. My missing this point might have been due to my earlier research on violent conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa, where general conscription never existed. It did exist, however, in my home country Germany in different historical phases, the last one being from 1955 up until July 2011. One might see this as a proof that I tended to “exoticize” the context.

Fourthly, in this kind of research the person carrying out the research unavoidably has an impact on the result. The reaction of some of the veterans to me as a person showed me how much personal characteristics matter in numerous regards. The veterans asked me whether I participated in “NATO agresija”, about possible connections with secret services, whether I had done military service and what my father had done during World War II. Direct contact and non-topical conversations clearly show the extent to which personal experiences, nationalities and stereotypes about them and historical or political relations probably affect both answers and interpretations.

The *fifth* and, for the argument developed here, most important insight was that events always have a “local meaning”, not in the sense of an uncontested general “ideology”, but that past experiences are interpreted and put into narratives that then are used to legitimize past actions and present attitudes. Family history and past war experiences in this case seem to play a major role for the direction of current attitudes, but even within families there are often divergent positions³⁹. Even non-military interviewees often immediately mentioned whether their parents or grandparents had been Partisans or Chetniks during Second World War, and their political views, often in connection with an explanation that they mention this in order to allow a better understanding of their statements.

How to Understand the Veterans? Reiterating the Method

In this text, I suggested an additional procedure for the study of war that stresses the importance of gathering first-hand material by qualitative methods, often labeled “field research”. While I am convinced of the promise of innovation through field research, there are a number of caveats as to why data gathered this way – also in the case described above – might not be as reliable and “first hand” as often supposed.

The first caveat arises from observations on field access. In most field research, scholars depend on others for access to informants and interviewees organized by key persons or brokers. While most researchers will attempt to get several points of access to the field in order to avoid partiality through snowballing, this does not rule out selection bias⁴⁰. All findings gathered this way need what is known in qualitative research as

39. BAŠIĆ, 2007.

40. The “random selection” of interviewees is, of course, never entirely accidental but follows the chains of contacts of intermediaries, in this case a student of political science and former soldier, an NGO-activist and a former university teacher. Like in many cases, it is not possible to assess the basic population of war veterans. It is estimated that in the 1990s around 400,000 citizens of what is now Serbia participated in the wars, but there are no official figures available. There are about 10,000 disabled according to the veterans own estimates of which 8000 are organized in the veterans club nation-wide.

“triangulation”, i.e., counterchecking using material that is not from the same source⁴¹. By taking such steps, it seems to me, scholars are able to reduce observer dependence on their “facts” without, however, fully overcoming it. Choice of phrases, the sequencing of questions, the personal behavior of the interviewer, what he or she tells others about him- or herself, their gender and nationality, their attentiveness in interpreting interview material, all this can be reduced by multiple readings of the same material by scholars with different backgrounds and by triangulation. A complete elimination of deviation caused by the observers is probably not possible. This, it seems to me, is a point that “grounded theory” has not yet reflected adequately. The “what you get is what you think anyway”-quandary is not yet fully resolved.

In order to see a bit more clearly where the remnants of this observer dependence lie, I will reiterate my steps here. What did I do in the above presentation and interpretation? I would distinguish at least four steps: 1) grouping responses to questions, neglecting other data that I had on the individual interviewees; 2) attempting to find medium-abstract categories under which the propositions could be subsumed (this step can be called “naming”); 3) using background theories and understandings of how societies work in order to link these categories with others, taking those ideas, concepts, theorems which I thought might “fit”, in the sense of “covering” the context and the observation, i.e., applying theory, and/or altering it, and 4) using the use of knowledge on the case, mainly drawn from secondary literature but also all kinds of other sources like conversations with colleagues and lay observers, observations on the streets, newspaper articles, and colleagues’ comments on my research diary, interview transcripts, and my first interpretations. Steps 2, 3 and 4 are the actual interpretation, whilst step 1 is already an interpretative act as I selected “core” sentences from the often longer responses.

What becomes obvious here is that the “brute facts” do not speak by themselves. What we need in order to “understand”, is knowledge on the context that we usually take from case literature, from conversations among scholars and all kinds of sources. Stereotypes in media shape these ideas of course as well. An interpretation of the veterans’ responses in the sense of just getting an idea of what they were referring to would not be possible without a knowledge of Yugoslav history⁴², the history of Serbian nationalism⁴³ and theories of nationalism. For an historical explanation of the radicalization of politics, scholars might invoke the crisis of Yugoslavia since the 1980s⁴⁴ and the political dynamics under Milošević⁴⁵. Why the veterans stress duties duty and express themselves in military terms becomes clear when the extreme degree of militarization of Yugoslav society⁴⁶ and the traditions and dogma of the Yugoslav army⁴⁷ are taken into account. The most important result of this methodological self-reflection is that the actual politics of the veterans, from their past behavior when entering war

41. CORBIN and STRAUSS, 1990; YIN, 1989.

42. ALLCOCK, 2000; CALIĆ, 2010.

43. SUNDHAUSEN, 2007.

44. WOODWARD, 1995.

45. HARTMANN, 1999; BECKER, 2008.

46. REMINGTON, 1997; BAŠIĆ, 2005.

47. HADŽIĆ, 2002.

up to their implicit strategies in the interviews, cannot be explained without recourse to their sociality. Meaning is socially produced, and it remains social whenever actors refer to others in their intentional acts. To understand the intentions of war actors, I am meanwhile convinced, is therefore something that cannot be deduced from a fixed list of theoretical axioms, but requires the study of material that goes beyond numerically codified answers to a questionnaire or public statistics. Finally, reasoning about causal relations – or rather probabilities with which things connect – cannot be done well on the basis of one case only. To that end, comparative studies deliver the most valuable insights. For the findings presented here, there are numerous cases comparable to and different from what could be drawn from the veterans' statements⁴⁸. In the light of such comparative perspectives, it thus becomes doubtful whether organizational forms of war actors can be explained by relying on rationalist understanding alone. Any such attempt seems rather to lead to an under-complex, materialist understanding that material resources determine forms of social organization of armed groups⁴⁹.

THE NEED FOR A TRUE POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY OF CONFLICT

I would like to end by specifying more precisely what, in my view, the theoretical challenge in the study of war is: What is really needed are comprehensive approaches which can relate structural history, group formations, the logics of organizations and individual actors' behavior. In my opinion, what is needed, is a political sociology of conflict that focuses on the historical formation of power relations and how they actually function⁵⁰. Instead of dividing the world analytically into sets of interactions of utilitarian individuals, a political sociology of war would focus on power relations and their institutionalization. Social conflict is not just an outcome of individual strategic action; actors themselves are social beings in the sense that their attitudes, modes of action and reasoning are heavily shaped by their social context. The structure of these social contexts needs to be taken into account if the analysis of conflicts does not end up in merely formal findings of often banal content. The formation of actors' habitus needs to be explained, as does the formation of structures through the interactions of involved actors. Such an analysis of social conflict needs to identify "carriers" (*Trägerschichten*), their actions and means of power means, in order to make causal inferences. While this may be achieved to a large extent through behaviorist methodology,

48. A discourse of victimhood and heroization can also be observed in other cases, like Fatah and ANC. Here as well, maximization of self-esteem is what ex-combatants strive for (BUCAILLE, 2011, p. 53). Betrayal by politicians is a discursive figure that occurs in these cases as well (BUCAILLE, 2011, p. 63). But not only in discourse, also in institutional regards is the story of the Serbian paramilitaries not that peculiar: Serbian militias and others in the former Yugoslavia are not the only cases where it gets extremely difficult to apply the usual categories of standard political science: the boundaries of the state are blurred, "sobels" in Sierra Leone is one other case, the occasional warfare of roaming young violence experts in the area of Chad and Central African Republic another one (DEBOS, 2011). Parts of it might be explained by the effects of obfuscation that periods of open violent politics seem to entail regularly (cf. BATAILLON, 1997).

49. e.g., WEINSTEIN, 2005.

50. Cf. my own attempts to adopt the sociology of Norbert Elias for this purpose, with its central concept of "figuration" (SCHLICHTE, 2009b), and for the case of Serbian militias see SCHLICHTE, 2009a.

interpretive methods are needed in order to understand the content of social relations and in order to check what role utilitarian calculation played for the actors' behavior. It would take into account how the historical emergence and the spread of stereotypes reinforces and transforms group boundaries and self-perceptions⁵¹.

A political sociology of conflict could work without the presupposition that actors form groups only according to their interests. Life-worlds and worldviews are not just outcomes of rational interaction and they are not fully contingent or free of contradictions⁵². Actors construct their world in an attempt to legitimize their positions and claims. The whole formation of identity is fluent, and even the classical Marxist position according to which "objective" classes would sooner or later discover their "real interest" and organize accordingly, has turned out to be too rationalist as an assumption⁵³. It makes much more sense to just think of just "probable classes" and to rather investigate "spaces of relationships", as exemplified here by the T district of Belgrade. Alliances between individuals and groups are then never necessary and never impossible. The likelihood of alliances being formed, be they between individuals or groups, probably depends rather on social habitus, on schemes deposited in language, and are products of previous symbolic struggles⁵⁴.

List of quoted interviewees:

A, 50y, worker in metal industry, Belgrade

M, 48y, unionist, Belgrade

S, 53y, sports coach, Belgrade

B, 44y, janitor, Belgrade

Z 42y, veteran association secretary, Belgrade

K, 32y, disabled by war, Belgrade

P, 37y, unemployed, Belgrade

U, 39y, army officer, Belgrade

All interviews quoted here took place in September/October of 2005.

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51. BOGNER, 2003; Elias and Scotson, 1965, here 1994.

52. JUNG et al., 2003.

53. BOURDIEU, 1985, p. 725.

54. BOURDIEU, 1985, p. 727.

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