By Jan Velinger

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This week saw the start of the 6th Summer Seminar on Nationalism, Religion and Violence co-organised by Charles University and Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, in Prague.

The event began with a keynote lecture by Oxford University’s Stathis Kalyvas, entitled “The Landscape of Political Violence” focusing on everything from classic warfare to asymmetrical conflict.

Afterwards, the political scientist discussed details.

“The lecture I presented at Charles University is based on analysis I hope to eventually publish in book form, where the basic idea is to try and connect together different forms of political violence (that otherwise tend to be analysed separately) and to show how they co-evolve and influence each other over time. Sometimes, some forms of political violence end up causing others, but sometimes they lead to an overall reduction.”

One of the examples you discussed was how, contrary to broader expectations, there was not an escalation of civil war conflicts around the globe following the end of the Cold War…

“Yes. Following the end of the Cold War, we saw a drop in the number of new civil wars breaking out but that only lasted for some time. During the Cold War, there were three basic reasons for the proliferation of civil wars: one was that at the time there was the bipolar competition between the Soviet Union and the United States that led to many proxy wars. Not because the US or the Soviet Union could create local wars out of thin air but simply that there were local actors who were willing to take advantage of patronage...
from each side to try and further their own ends and escalate conflicts for their own reasons. A lot of those conflicts, for example, were secessionist wars.

“So that is one reason. Another is that the Second World War caused a number of civil wars to erupt that were never actually concluded. So WWII ended but a lot of the dynamics it had set in motion continued and led to civil wars.

“And the third process was the process of decolonisation, whereby countries first sought independence, to throw off the shackles of the colonial empire. They fought wars against their colonisers but then new wars erupted in the newly-created states, as there was a lot of contention among local groups about the kinds of states that they wanted. As a result, those kinds of conflicts were on the rise during the Cold War.”

There was a lull after 1989…

“That’s right. It is only more recently, in the last 15 years, that the trend was reversed with civil wars beginning primarily in Muslim-majority countries in North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia. And these are wars that were, one way or another, are associated with the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the war in Afghanistan. And there are a set of regional problems and factors that explain why these regions are going against the trend around the rest of the globe.”

The U.S. invasion was the trigger that set a lot of what we have seen in motion; at the time, the Bush administration planned a kind of top-down implementation of democracy that did not pan out the way they expected. One of the things that came across in your lecture is just how impossible it is to predict the impact that kind of a military action can have. Whether ill or well-thought out, that kind of action can have repercussions beyond any anyone expected…

“Absolutely. There are a lot of unintended consequences and they are impossible to predict in advance. One of the things that the invasion of Iraq did was to allow Iran to gain a lot of influence that then led to a counter-mobilisation against Iran primarily located in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, which has fuelled a lot of the conflict.

“Another was the politicisation of and the re-emergence of the rift or cleavage between the Shia and the Sunni. We shouldn’t forget that that became the fault line within Iraq. Not that it didn’t exist before, but it hadn’t been as violent, especially the period in Baghdad that saw mass killings and abductions and mass population movement. That really reinforced the narrative of those claiming that this was the fundamental divide in the Muslim world and that is a lot of the rhetoric associated with many conflicts continuing now in Syria, in Yemen and other places.”

Do any of the events that unfolded fall within your definition of genocide as an ‘attempted annihilation of a group of people’?

“I am very, very careful about the use of that word because I think it describes the most extreme situations when the singular goal is to exterminate a group of people but there’s no question that we have seen massacres of all kinds. And there are a few instances that are borderline: there is discussion about the case of the Yazidis as targeted by ISIS. But even though there have been tremendous amounts of violence across the region, I do not think that there is a case to be made that genocide took place.”

<blockquote class="rightfloat"> <p>“One way or another, many of the conflicts we see in parts of the Middle East and elsewhere have roots in the U.S. invasion of Iraq 15 years ago.”</p> </blockquote>

One of the points that you discussed was the asymmetry inherent in many of today’s conflicts between the main actors and that what we do not see as much of are classic wars, which you call interstate wars. So you have players who are not as strong as the state apparatus but are trying to strike at the heart of it. Again, there are examples in the Middle East, where there are attempts to sow chaos, to cause mayhem and death. On a certain level, it is difficult to see what the different groups can realistically achieve: on the one hand an insurgency can be ideological, it is also in many ways utopic (from their perspective)...

“And in most instances, these kinds of things fail. Simply because the power differential between the state being challenged and small groups that would challenge it is so enormous. Based on a purely rational calculation, one would argue that there was no reason for anyone to try this way to challenge the state.

“But others argue that those kinds of movements are fuelled when all other avenues of contestation are closed: if you cannot protest, if you cannot organise a political party, you may choose the armed route as the ‘only’ option. That is one explanation. It makes sense for a number of groups in a number of events we have observed.

“There is also a pathway I would describe as voluntary revolutionaries. There are still small radical groups that think that by creating chaos and mayhem they actually will open the way to a new and different world. Historically, most of those kinds of actions fail, but the few that succeed have an enormous impact. Everyone remembers Lenin and everyone remembers Fidel Castro. But Castro’s main lieutenant Che Guevara became so blinded by his success that when he tried to replicate it or export it elsewhere he failed – and was killed.
“So it is almost like a lottery. Sometimes revolutionaries luck out. Going back to the Russian Revolution, it is incredible what kind of coincidences and conjuncture of events had to come together for him to succeed. It makes it clear that it was not only impossible to predict but also to imagine that it would have ever been successful!

“Revolutionaries are a bit like people who gamble except they gamble with their lives. They figure that if they even have just a one percent chance of winning, it is still worth it.”

<blockquote class="rightfloat"> "In Europe, a part of the populace feels that it is losing control. This was a huge part of the success of the Brexit campaign for the UK to leave the EU.”</blockquote>

Another focus of your presentation was Europe at present and changes we have seen over the last number of years. We have seen the rise of populism and a shift in the political discourse: migration is held up as a bogeyman by politicians all too willing to take advantage, and we have seen very real steps taken by governments, enacting new legislation and so on. Hungary and Poland were discussed… At what crossroads do you think that we stand at this moment?

For example, Paul Shapiro, the director of the Mandel Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, discussed the trajectory of the Czech Republic over the last 20 years… In the past, you had personalities like Václav Havel here who spoke out, who were vocal and had an influence. But it seems that there has been a shift to a different segment within the populace now and we have seen the emergence of a different kind of politician as well.

“And it is not just in Europe. If we go back to the 2016 election of Donald Trump in the U.S., one of the most successful electoral planks was immigration and the construction of ‘the wall’. At his rallies, crowds erupted in sustained cheering whenever the wall was called for.

“1 think at the bottom of this is a sense of malaise, if I can call it that, is a sense for some people that they are ‘losing control’. Regaining control was very much the topic of the whole Brexit campaign in the UK. We have many different interpretations of what the main factors are. Is it a stagnation in real wages, inequality, or migration? Then there is a puzzle of there being strong anti-migrant sentiments even in countries of Central and Eastern Europe that have accepted barely any. And what about the role of technology?

“We see how the revolution in mass communication made it possible for people who would otherwise be marginal to have an influence and to be heard. Donald Trump would have been unthinkable in the setting of traditional American politics. Both his appearances on TV and his use of social media gave him tremendous power that was completely instrumental.

“So I think the world is changing and the speed at which it is changing is what gives some, especially the older generation, a sense of malaise or uneasiness about the future. Some of them find a refuge in populist politics as a means of gaining back control. It is an illusion: there is no way to stop what is going on in the world, and in part it is generational: once younger people come more to the fore, I think things will stabilize a bit until the next cycle. We shouldn’t forget that it these are cycles. It is not a linear process: very often we describe the world as moving forward towards some kind of apocalyptic outcome.”

So you reject the doom and gloom…

“I was doing a recent research project which caused me to go back and re-examine much of what was going on in the 1970s and it is all about this discourse of doom: stagflation, the oil crisis, the imminent disappearance of Europe, it is the same language. This was a time when you had very strong communist parties in Italy and France, in the first half of the 1970s we still had dictatorships in Western Europe (Portugal, Spain, Greece) and we had the Cold War.

“In the 1980s, the anxiety that the world would end in nuclear annihilation and so on. Back in the 1960s, it was the Vietnam War and later left-wing extremist terrorism, the Red Brigade and Baader Meinhof in Italy and Germany.

<blockquote class="rightfloat"> "I think it is a mistake to view this period as exceptional. If you look back at the rhetoric of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, from the Vietnam War to the nuclear threat, the discourse of doom was the same.”</blockquote>

“So the idea that we live in an exceptional time in which everything is ‘going wrong’ is partly due to our short memories but also the consequence that the 1990s, for Western Europe and the western world, were an exceptional and unusually successful period.

“Another way of looking at it is that most of us have a strong stability bias: we tend to believe that the world is fundamentally stable and that whenever we observe shocks these are ‘abnormal’. But the opposite is true: the world is primarily an unstable environment and we strive all the time to stabilize situations. The fact that we manage to do so fairly often, that we were able to tackle the major financial crisis that we saw in 2008 which was much deeper than the Great Depression but was managed much more successfully, shows that we’ve learned some things. We have been able to absorb some of the shocks.
“At the same time, we are victims of ours own success: the speeding up of innovation and technology can be bewildering. Ultimately, if we can see the world as fundamentally changing then we can try and prepare for problems that instability brings. It is not right to think that we are at a unique moment when everything is set to collapse and apocalypse is around the corner. I don’t think that’s the right perception.”

Nationalism, Religion and Violence in Europe 2018
The sixth Summer Seminar, hosted by Charles University, is focusing on four interconnected themes. Each will be discussed over two consecutive days, including lectures, discussions and fieldwork. In all, the Seminar will take place over 10 days and will cover 60 working hours including fieldwork trips. For more information click here.