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# Ideology in Armed Groups

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> "I do not think as a person any longer. One feels the party [Partido Comunista del Perú–Sendero Luminoso] as oneself, I am the party ... and everything we do and think is part of the party"
>
> —Shining Path militant, interviewed in 1986 by Rita Márquez, quoted in Degregori (2012, 35).

While ideologies have been an understudied issue in the research program on political violence, there has been a revived interest in the subject during recent years. Researchers have moved beyond general claims about whether ideologies matter or not, and have developed theories about which particular types of ideologies matter, and for which outcomes they are likely to matter most (e.g., Costalli and Ruggeri 2015; Thaler 2012; Wood and Thomas 2017). Building on this important work, we discuss an emerging body of research on armed group ideology and advocate a research agenda that endorses a more nuanced approach to the conceptualization of ideology and a more concentrated effort to study intra- and inter-organizational variation, which includes the institutional implications and underpinnings of ideology in armed groups.[1]

In what follows, we first demonstrate that, while research on political violence has started to uncover consequential differences in the contents of particular ideologies, the full spectrum of variation is still poorly understood. We argue in particular that there are incentives to move beyond the broad typologies that dominate the literature. Based on a discussion that maps out two important dimensions of variation—the external intrusiveness and internal institutionalization of ideology—we argue that research on ideology and political violence has tended to focus on extreme cases of "strong ideology," while neglecting the implications of "weak ideology" as a result. Subsequently, we explore the relationship between ideology and emotion, suggesting that ideology may help transform certain emotions, and that group-based emotions can be mobilized to promote particular ideas. Finally, we conclude by discussing some of the issues that arise when studying ideology as a causal variable, and the promise of incorporating ideology in a more nuanced way.

## DIMENSIONS OF VARIATION

We understand armed group ideology "as a set of more or less systematic ideas that identify a constituency, the challenges the group confronts, the objectives to pursue on behalf of that group, and a (perhaps vague) program of action" (Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood 2014, 214). Having established this basic understanding, what are the variants and dimensions of ideology that help us to understand its role and effects?

The most obvious variation is the programmatic orientation—such as Marxism,[2] Djihadism, or Ethnic Nationalism. While the programmatic differences between ideological schools are meaningful and consequential (Balcells and Kalyvas 2015; Toft and Zhukov 2015), a focus on broad typologies also fosters the temptation to overlook variations within these categories—variations that are of crucial importance depending on the outcome we aim to explain (see also Moro 2017, this issue, and Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood 2014). The National Liberation Army (ELN) and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in Colombia or the Shining Path (PCP-SL) and the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA) in Peru are just a few examples of Marxist insurgent groups operating in similar environments, yet with striking divergences in their ideological doctrines—with significant implications for group internal organization, institutional setup, and behavior towards civilians. Other differences arise from combinations or the lack thereof between these often contrasted ideological types, such as Marxism and Ethnic Nationalism, which may or may not overlap, again with dramatic implications (Balcells and Kalyvas 2015), most obviously regarding the constituencies on whose behalf particular actors claim to fight. The different constituencies and modes of governance embraced by the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN IM) and the Naxalite CPI (Maoist) in India are cases in point (Suykens 2015).

In what other ways do programmatic typologies fall short of capturing consequential variation in armed group ideologies? One is a dimension we call the "external intrusiveness" of ideology (see also Weintraub, DeBruin, and Schubiger 2015): How broadly and deeply ideological content aims to penetrate other social structures. The ideologies of armed groups and radical movements differ not only in their orientation and content, but also in the extent and level of detail with which particular institutions and strategies are modeled and prescribed (Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood 2014, 214). The level of external intrusiveness of such ideological prescripts is perhaps best visible in the extent to which particular armed groups aim to govern details of the everyday private, political, and economic lives of civilians (Arjona 2014; 2016). The revolutionary or non-revolutionary character of a group has been identified as a possible explanation of its aspired reach (Kalyvas 2015b), as have programmatic orientations such as Marxism (Balcells and Kalyvas 2015; Huang 2016; Mampilly 2011). However, whether a group is revolutionary or not, and to which ideological school it subscribes, still leaves ample variation in ideological intrusiveness—and its implications for armed group governance, violence, and mobilization—unexplained.


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In addition to the external intrusiveness, there is also considerable variation in the internal institutionalization of ideology, without which the study of ideology is incomplete. Here, we refer to the degree to which armed group institutions internally disseminate ideology (in particular through institutions for recruitment, socialization, and indoctrination), ideologically saturate the life of combatants, and transform and align their values and beliefs with those of the group (Hoover Green 2011; 2016; Gutiérrez Sanín 2012; Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood 2014; Wood 2012; Zelina 2016). The institutional manifestations of ideology often penetrate the everyday life of combatants, continually connecting individual experiences to the goals and principles of the group. One ELN fighter described his experience as the following: "Time was reduced to a mentality in which it was necessary to think 24/7 about revolution [...] There was no time for other thoughts, neither for love, recreation or leisure" (Correa 1997, 176-77, quoted in: Sánchez Sierra 2011, 129). Importantly, even in armed groups that are known to place a high emphasis on intensive ideological indoctrination across all ranks—such as the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), the PCP-SL, or the FARC—substantial variation in indoctrination length and practices is documented between localities and subunits (Hoover Green 2011; Ugarriza and Weintraub 2015; Weinstein 2007).

Indeed, the extent to which both internal institutionalization and external intrusiveness are ideologically prescribed may differ markedly from the extent to which they are realized in practice. Ideological tenets as embraced by the core leadership of an organization may, for example, be encoded in written form in internal rules and regulations, but their implementation may be hindered by the hardships of warfare. While such discrepancies are indeed to be expected given the numerous external constraints armed organizations and their subunits face (such as state repression, pre-existing institutions, and resources), more research is needed to understand the varying degrees of success with which ideologically driven aspirations are met. How do doctrines, principles, and ideas trickle down from the leadership of an organization to subgroups and individual cadres, and how is this transmission reinforced and sustained? When do armed groups' aspirations to penetrate civilian and other institutions succeed, and when do they fail? These questions are vital if we are interested in how high-risk collective action is triggered and sustained, and in explaining other important outcomes such as armed group cohesion (Schubiger 2014), governance (Arjona 2014; 2016) or violence (Hoover Green 2011; Ugarriza and Weintraub 2015; Wood 2009; 2012).

We suggest that scholars interested in ideology should more often consider cases with seemingly weak manifestations of ideology. Research on armed-group ideology tends to focus on those cases where ideologies seem both intrusive and firmly institutionalized within armed organizations, and where ideological beliefs are ostensibly well internalized across all ranks.[3] Acknowledging that there is ample variation in the intrusiveness and institutionalization of ideology, however, leads us to advocate an increased attention to the apparent weakness or absence of ideology to counter the truncation of studied cases on one extreme end of the spectrum. Exploring the "weaker" end of the spectrum might teach us much more about the meaning, variation, and consequences of ideology than what is currently known. Here we locate groups such as certain vigilante organizations with more conservative, defensive, or parochial agendas (Osorio, Schubiger and Weintraub 2016) or street gangs and other criminal organizations with seemingly non-ideological character (Kalyvas 2015a).[4]

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In short, we advocate to broaden the spectrum of empirical manifestations of ideology that we study in our field. Such an expanded focus may also help identify alternative and complementary explanations, which do not privilege the analytical value of ideology alone.

### Ideology and Emotions

Similar to the focus on armed group institutions, research on the relationship between ideology and emotions is likely to help clarify connections between the meso and micro levels that are currently still poorly understood.

Emotions can be defined as "reactions to cognitive evaluations of an individual's environment" (Sabucedo et al. 2011, 28). Social scientists suggest that "even the most fleeting emotions are firmly rooted in moral and cognitive beliefs that are relatively stable and predictable" (Jasper 1998, 421). In other words, there is a close relationship between emotion, cognition, and belief, or ideology (e.g., Ugarriza and Craig 2013). Ideology offers a moral compass and a system of emotional management, especially under conditions that place extreme demands on individuals. It may help armed group members develop high levels of trust and pro-social behavior towards fellow combatants, who may have been strangers until recently. Moreover, leaders can purposefully mobilize emotions to instill particular values and ideas during

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indoctrination, and may use ideology to channel emotions in a particular way. FMLN leaders, for example, "discouraged personal vengeance" among members and rather tried to "mold grievances" in a productive manner that would support the group's overall goals (Wood 2003, 204). Indoctrination is also critical for the creation of secondary cohesion—the cognitive and emotional identification of armed group members with the overall goals of the organization, rather than just immediate group members of the same platoon or squad (Schubiger 2013; 2014; Siebold 2007; Wood 2009).[5]

*If the association between ideology and emotion is as strong as we suspect, what are the implications? Do groups that exercise an ideology based on hate, rather than fear, yield violence in a different way?*

If the association between ideology and emotion is as strong as we suspect, what are the implications? Do groups that exercise an ideology based on hate, rather than fear, yield violence in a different way? Research suggests that emotions are related to individual-level attitudes towards out-group members in consequential ways (Halperin 2014). Behavior and attitudes at the group level, too, may at least partially relate to particular emotions, and to how these emotions are mobilized and framed. Petersen (2002) for example, suggests that in a context of ethnically salient social divisions, the prevalence of specific emotions such as resentment or fear may explain why violence is directed at specific groups rather than others. Future research should explore these relationships between ideology and emotion more in-depth.

### Ideology as a Causal Variable?

As a transmission belt that channels individual emotions and motivations, tying them to an overarching cause, ideology can potentially play an important role in triggering, fostering, and sustaining wartime collective action (Costalli and Ruggeri 2015; Wood 2001; 2003). As argued above, this potential to promote collective action depends not only on ideological content and programmatic orientation, but also on whether ideas can, in fact, be mobilized and embedded into institutions that help armed movements thrive (Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood 2014).

One major challenge in the study of ideology as a causal variable is the fact that ideology is itself endogenous to many processes that occur during and prior to the outbreak of armed conflict, and to the strategies and preferences of actors themselves. Ideology, in other words, serves more complicated roles than just being a "tool" or main independent variable (Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood 2014), and we would argue that the exploration of its moderating and mediating effects is one of the most promising avenues for future research. Indeed, ideology might in many instances be more fruitfully studied as a part of a relationship rather than on its own. At the individual level, ideology can, for example, condition how particular experiences are perceived. Oppenheim et al. (2015) show, based on a survey of ex-combatants in Colombia, that whether individuals join armed groups for ideological as opposed to other reasons conditions the impact of wartime experiences on individual combatants' propensity to demobilize or defect. Schubiger (2013; 2014) argues that state violence against insurgent groups' suspected civilian constituencies contributes to recruitment surges yet also the weakening of the groups' institutions for screening and indoctrination, thereby undermining secondary cohesion and increasing the targeted organizations' vulnerability to internal splits. Notably, in both Oppenheim et al. (2015) and Schubiger (2013; 2014) it is not the type or exact content of ideology that is doing the causal work.

To conclude, ideology, as a set of values, norms, and beliefs that connects individuals to a movement or organization as a whole, is not only important as an explanatory variable or strategic tool, but may also mediate and moderate many relationships we care about in the study of political violence. To explore these relationships, we suggest that the focus on broad typologies should be expanded to include more nuanced differences and a closer attention to intra- and inter-organizational variation, and that the relationship between ideology and emotion deserves further study as well.

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### NOTES

1. Unlike most other papers in this symposium, our contribution is concerned with the role of ideology during armed conflict, rather than the onset of violent mobilization.
2. By "Marxist," scholars of armed conflict typically refer to leftist ideologies more generally, thus including various strands such as Marxism-Leninism and Maoism. We refer to this use of the terminology here. "Djihadist" likewise is an umbrella term to refer to Islamist ideologies of various origins and orientations.
3. One exception is Zelina (2016), who presents a typology of ideological strength, suggesting that how strongly ideological beliefs are implemented and embraced across ranks is as important as what these beliefs are.
4. Such an expanded empirical focus is compatible with both research programs discussed by Gutierrez-Sanin and Wood (2014): the "weak research program" exploring the instrumental value and adoption of ideology and the "strong research program" that investigates ideology-based normative and emotional commitments.
5. To the best of our knowledge, Wood (2009) was the first to bring the concept of secondary group cohesion from the military sociology literature (Siebold 2007) to the study of non-state armed groups.

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