BORDERS IN GLOBALIZATION
Determinants of Civil Conflict in Africa: Borders as Political Resources

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Contemporary spatial research on civil conflict in Africa has largely focused on borders and the state periphery as spaces of limited political and economic opportunity. These studies largely adopt approaches that present borderland citizens as operating in structurally desolate spaces of poor governance, economic opportunity and political inclusion. While spatial analyses are permitting unprecedented focus on borderland structures, causal mechanisms that explain how the geographic opportunities present from nearby international borders inform strategies of rebellion remain undeveloped. To explore this, this paper repositions the socio-economic processes in the borderlands as the central unit of analysis. In particular, this paper conceptualizes international borders as a political resource that is exploited by borderland groups to access unregulated ‘in’ and ‘out-flows’ of strategic capacity. This access to alternative strategic capacities is hypothesized to provide the opportunity for border citizens to challenge structural grievances and attempt alternative (if unlawful) governance structures within the borderlands. Lastly, this paper concludes with a spatial theory of conflict specific to Africa’s borderlands whereby relative distances from the state capital, in combination with weak state capacity, creates sites of competing power structures and ultimately violent civil conflict.
**Determinants of Civil Conflict in Africa: Borders as Political Resources**

Geographic dimensions to intrastate conflict have seen a resurgence of interest in recent conflict scholarship (Sarkees, Wayman, and Singer 2003; Collier 2003). Especially given the disaggregated nature of civil conflict, geocoded datasets and geographic information system (GIS) technologies are allowing scholars to utilize sites of conflict as a unit of analyses, rather than cumbersome country-level data to examine sub-national conflict phenomena. Of specific interest to contemporary analysts are the social-economic structures that influence opportunities for conflict mobilization (Collier and Hoeffler 2004; 1998; Blattman and Miguel 2010).

Motivated by economic analyses of the opportunity costs of participating in conflict, analyses have explored environmental factors such as easily extractable resources, physical terrain, infrastructure, and relative poverty (eg. Fearon and Laitin 2003; Collier, Hoeffler, and Söderbom 2004). Additionally, the distance of conflict events to the international border and the state capital are often included as spatial variables in these analyses (Buhaug 2010; Buhaug and Rød 2006; Buhaug and Lujala 2005).

Paradoxical to the findings of correlative significance of the border however, the causal mechanisms of this variable and its influence on the onset of conflict remain under-theorized. Indeed, the structural conditions present in the physical space on both sides of the border, or the borderlands have been explored, but in the underlying context of domestic center-periphery relations. These center-periphery conceptions have established assumptions of a political ‘emptiness,’ where the border zone represents a ‘not-yet-civilized’ region awaiting effective state governance (Korf and Raeymaekers 2013, 10). Moreover, the conceptualization of borderlands as spaces devoid of politics has informed the position of borderlands as spaces of grievances with heightened possibilities for conflict. These assumptions, however, permit the neglect of
strategy selection for conflict in borderlands – which is typically violent. Instead, this paper argues that the international border is a resource that positively contributes to the opportunity costs for rebels to engage in violence. By breaking borderlands out of the conflict grievance literature and positioning it in the conflict opportunity literature, this paper develops a theory of violent conflict in Africa’s borderlands.

By centering borders and borderlands as the unit of analysis, this paper infuses political life into these spaces to explore the dynamics that provide opportunities for actors to develop alternative governance structures at the states periphery. In this paper, the international border is conceived as an environmental structure that influences the social and economic behaviour of nearby inhabitants. At the same time, the border represents a political resource that has the potential to be utilized by actors to access alternative capacities with which to construct governing regimes in competition with the domestic government. With this, this paper argues a spatial theory of violent conflict in Africa; that where relative powers between the state and borderland institutions of power are uncertain, the more probably a violent conflict will manifest itself.

The paper proceeds as follows: first, this paper contextually explores the political anthropology of borders in Africa and the structural conditions common throughout Africa’s borderlands. Next previous scholarly engagement with conflict and the borderlands are explored and the underlying center-periphery assumptions of contemporary conflict analyses are established. The second section shifts the focus of analysis to a theoretical exploration of specific behaviours in Africa’s borderlands that exploit the border as a political resource. This includes discussion of borderland informal economies and borderland criminal structures. Lastly, Ted Gurr’s (1970) theory of relative deprivation is employed to generate a theory of the development
of alternative political institutions unique to Africa’s borderlands. This paper ultimately concludes with an explanatory theory that connects structural research of conflict in borderlands with causal opportunity mechanisms in order to determine a theoretically informed approach to further disaggregated conflict analysis.

**Borders and the Juridical State in Africa – A Political Anthropology**

Borders and borderlands on the continent of Africa represent a distinct space unified by historical legacies of foreign super-imposition (McCaulley and Posner 2015). To better explain this distinctiveness, it is useful to employ geographer, Richard Hartshorne’s (1931) typologies of international borders. Specifically, he posits that borders can be categorized into *natural*, *subsequent*, and *superimposed* borders. *Natural* borders follow the physical features of the landscape, such as rivers, mountain ridges, oceans, deserts and other recognizable features. *Subsequent* borders were demarcated according to existing patterns of difference and typically follow the limits and boundaries of modern states so far discussed. Lastly, Hartshorne’s concept of *superimposed* borders were those that were imposed by an outside power on a region under their control with little regard to physical or socio-ethnic patterns. It is in the exploration of the legacy of the superimposition of Africa’s borders and the resulting dynamics in the associated borderlands that make up the primary interest of this theoretical discussion.

The ‘colonial project’ in Africa forms the contextual background for a large body of border literature analyzing superimposed borders (Vorrath 2010; Newman 2006; Ramutsindela 1999; Asiwaju 1993) Pre-colonial Africa did not have permanent, precisely delineated boundaries and demonstrated polities that could have overlapping degrees of authority and allegiances between communities, in contrast to European states where governments sought to be the sole source of political authority within rigidly defined territories (Thomson 2010).
According to Thomson (2010) colonial subdivision of the continent therefore followed “exogenous or ahistorical” logics external to Africa (9). Ethnographers John and Jean Comaroff (1992) explain, “Europeans, in short, sought to impose on Africans ‘a particular way of seeing and being” (235). A number of authors have highlighted that the compartmentalization and bordering of territory seldom reflected the realities of neither communities nor physical geographic features (Griffiths 1996; Paul Nugent and A.I Asiwaju 1996). Ieuen Griffiths (1996) highlights an especially emblematic component of colonialism’s disregard for ethnic consultation in border delimitation; 26% of Africa’s colonially imposed borders follow rules of latitude and longitude and bisect nearly 131 ethnic territories across the continent. Unsurprisingly, many critical authors posit that African colonial boundaries were not intended to promote the economic and national unity of Africans both within and between states (Ramutsindela 1999; Coleman 1994; Herbst 1992).

In Jackson and Rosberg (1982) words, despite this, the post-colonial state in Africa still ‘persists.’ Further, the international border regime in Africa has seen extremely few boundary changes since liberation (Timothy 2000). It was the borders that were initially imposed by Western imperialists that became the reference for articulating anticolonial demands for self-determination and independent statehood (Korman 1996; Jackson and Rosberg 1982). Additionally, the international legal principle of uti possidetis and the right to keep the spoils of liberation steadily strengthened with decolonization in the 1960’s (Lalonde 2002). The principle holds that the juridical territory of newly independent states shall be the right of those liberating powers. The Organization of African Unity’s 1963 decision that the “borders of African states, on the day of their independence, constitute a tangible reality” solidified this principle in Africa and extended the international border regime across newly independent states regardless of the
state’s capacity to exercise absolute territorial control (Ayissi 2009; Englebert, Tarango, and Carter 2002; Herbst 1989). Further, authors point to strengthening international norms against a second ‘Berlin conference’ to redraw the political map of Africa, claiming sustained participation in the international boundary dispute mechanism at the International Court of Justice (Ramutsindela 1999).

Still, the state apparatus in Africa has emerged as the legitimate international actor and participant in the international legal regime. Here, the heterogeneity of state sovereignty over juridical territory reveals the unique political-territorial dynamics in the African post-colonial state (Sassen, 2015). Specifically, the historical legacies of mercantile extraction left an inheritance of core-periphery relationships for newly independent states. This is to suggest that those on the social, economic, and geographic periphery were minimally included in the newly independent state. Exemplifying this dynamic, Christopher Clapham (1999) forwards the claim that borderlands have witnessed a retreat by African states from the frontier towards the most important areas of export production – the capital. Made worse by International Monetary Fund structural adjustment programs and globalizing forces, Mark Duffield (2001) has argued that international political pressures changed the “architecture of the nation state, forcing cutbacks in domestic welfare expenditure, privatization of public goods and services, and leading to growing income disparities and polarised life chances” (46). In this strained environment, Thandika Mkandawire (2001) claims that African state governance has moved away from national delivery of political goods and towards a neo-patrimonial organization that redirects local resources and loyalties towards those groups that hold direct state power.

Peripheral territories, by virtue of colonial peripheral-core dynamics however are rarely included in state neo-patrimonialist structures and offer little resources to contribute to central
state power. Confirmed by Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson’s (2012) theories of prosperity and poverty, African elites’ post-independence appropriation of extractive institutions suggests that ‘frontier spaces’ are deprioritized as a source of wealth. Clapham (1999) adds that the transnational economic activity in borderlands renders national currency as a mechanism of wealth extraction ineffective; generating little incentive for state involvement. As such, the state apparatus in Africa has typically limited it’s involvement in periphery areas resulting in the poor development of governance, social and economic infrastructures.

**Center-Periphery Grievance Assumptions in Disaggregated Conflict Analyses**

The territorial limitations of state governance at the geographic periphery of the African state are typically included in conflict analyses as a structural constraint that institutes grievance for borderland citizens. Ted Gurr’s (1970) work on conflict stimuli posits that the “innate disposition to strike out” are stimulated by the discrepancy between the ‘ought’ and the ‘is.’ In spatially disaggregated conflict analysis, the structural conditions at the periphery relative to the ‘center’ are purported to aggravate conflict. This paper does not take issue with the validity of the structural grievance hypotheses, however, opportunity costs, which drive the causal mechanisms for ‘how men rebel’ and make up the other half of the ‘greed vs. grievance’ debate has been largely ignored in analyses of borderlands conflict.

With the availability of data on the geographic positions of conflict events, scholars have the opportunity to study the spatial correlation of conflict with geographically distributed structural conditions. However, as de Mesquita (1985) warns, “too often we confuse empiricism with theory construction” (128). Calling on the scholarly adage, I argue ‘correlation is not causation’ and the causal component of why violent conflict typically occurs at the border is
under-developed. To illustrate the point, Figure 1.0 provides a rudimentary heat map of approximately 118,000 conflict events from the years 1997-2015 and accounting for approximately 600,000 fatalities.

**Figure 1.0**

Briefly, statistical summaries of the distance to the nearest border for the Armed Location and Event Data (ACLED) show a significant skewness of conflict events closer to international borders. Figure 1.1 iterates this point as a histogram of the ACLED data to demonstrate the frequency of events decrease the less proximate they are to the border. This observation is confirmed in the quantitative inductive literature.

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2 Discussing variations and robustness in the data is not relevant at this time, however theses results have generally been correlated by Buhaug and Rød’s (2006) study. For the purposes of continuing discussion, it is enough to describe that, on average, violent conflict in states typically occurs closer to the border.
Buhaug and Rød’s (2006) quantitative spatial analysis, for example, suggests the structural grievance hypothesis for territorial civil wars; that they “essentially relate to local conditions… among these are the center vs. periphery.” (Buhaug and Rød 2006, 332). Theoretical discussion behind the causal opportunity mechanisms such as ‘distance to capital’ and ‘distance to the international border’, however is absent. Indeed, this is not the objective of their study. Instead, they state,

The exploratory nature of this study means that we do not develop new theory or draw on one particular theoretical stand. Rather, the aim of this investigation is to explore whether certain geographical factors popularly associated with insurgency are able to explain the onset of domestic conflict on a sub-national scale (Buhaug and Rød 2006, 317).

Yet Buhaug’s study of structural grievances are frequently used in further quantitative research as the theoretical justification for adding distance variables (eg. Blattman and Miguel 2010; ØStby, Nordås, and Rød 2009; Theisen 2008; Gleditsch 2007). A similar issue is present in the qualitative literature. Jonathan Herbst provides a theory of grievance, stating that a weak state’s limited capacity to ‘broadcast power’ across the entirety of its territory (Herbst 2000) is a
stimulus for the onset of civil war. He reasons that, given that most states in Africa are larger than the global average, have significant geological features, and have generally limited capacity, it follows that conflict occurs more often. While these correlative findings are significant for identifying structural constraints that motivate individuals to rebel in Africa, the causal determinates that translate grievance into violent conflict appear absent in the literature.

The critique that has been levelled against the conflict analysis literature is not novel and makes up the ‘greed’ (more contemporaneously conceived as ‘opportunities) half of the ‘greed and grievance’ debate. This literature more directly explores the rational-choice strategies employed by rebel groups that determine strategies of violence over civil protest for example (Cunningham 2013). Essentially, if individuals believe that they can ascertain results for themselves by specific means at their, they will engage in environmentally determined rebellion against the state. For example, advocates of the “‘greed” proposition claim that rebels have economic, rather than a political objectives, and argue that countries with an abundance of precious stones, minerals, and drugs are more likely to experience conflict because rebelling against the state contains better financial opportunities than participating in lawful state activity (Buhaug and Rød 2006; Lujala, Gleditsch, & Gilmore 2005; Collier and Hoeffler 1998) It is in this vein of rational-choice causal mechanisms that this paper intends to explore the political opportunity dynamics of the borderlands that ultimately informs the opportunity cost equation for violent conflict.

**Africa’s Borders as a Political Resource for Civil Conflict**

Borderlands represent multi-dimensional spatial spaces of scale (Jessop, Brenner, and Jones 2008; Newman and Paasi 1998; Sack 1986). Traditionally, one of these dimensions of scale follows the rational-legal literature, which conceptualized the international border as a
politico-legal entity of the state (Sumner 2005; Castellino, Allen, and Gilbert 2003; Lalonde 2002; Ratner 1996). Specifically, international borders in this literature are conceptualized as the legal line that simultaneously separates and joins state’s sovereign territories (Wilson and Donnan 1998, 9). Further, international borders play an integral role in the international regime born from WWII solidified the norm of non-intervention and the inalienable right of states to territorial sovereignty (Coplin 1965). The international border, therefore marked the defensive inviolable line of interstate relations (Zureik and Salter 2013; Bigo 2006; Ackleson 2003; Agnew and Crobridge 2002). Peter Andreas (2003) describes the contemporary border regime as a continuum of barrier ‘defensiveness,’ typically conceived as a spaces to selectively deny territorial access to “clandestine transnational actors”.

Similarly, the rational-legal interpretation of the international border also institutes the border as an economic ‘barrier’ to external market forces (Vilsteren and Wever 2005; Houtum and Van Der Velde 2004; van Houtum 1998). It is at the border that products pass into across to different economic geographies, either through the explicit tariffs or alternative market mechanics such as currencies, or competing ethnolinguistic, social, or business networks (Nitsch and Wolf 2013, Schulze and Wolf 2009; Combes, Lafourcade, and Mayer 2005; Rauch 1999). As such the international border regime serves to screen external market effects from the national economy and is used as a means of protection for a territorialised economy (Houtum 2002). Additionally, borders are sites of permeability where the ‘optimal’ permeability of a border is decided. Van Schendel and Abraham (2005) argue, that economic permeability exists within a strict hierarchy where the border, “constructs conceptual barriers between illicit bad-guy activity (trafficking, smuggling) and state-authorized good guy activities (trade, migration)” (9).
The rational-legal literature of international borders has been criticized for its reliance on the assumptions of a homogenously powerful territorial (European) state (Reid-Henry 2010; Newman 2006; Agnew 1994). While still an important dimension of life in the borderlands, the ‘roll-back’ of the state from the periphery, previously described, limits the application of this literature to the exploration of political processes in the borderlands. Alternative to the conception of international boundaries as features of separation, borderlands literature positions borders as spaces of “diverse patterns of trans-boundary interaction may take place, ranging from confrontation and exclusion to cooperation, integration and inclusion” (Agnew, Mitchell, and Toal 2008, 127; Sohn 2014; Blake 2000; Nugent and Asiwaju 1996). With this lens of analysis, local socio-economic processes in borderlands become the subject of study, specifically the roles the international border plays in providing socio-economic opportunities.

The limited capacity of the post-colonial state at the periphery affects the traditional ability of states to enforce the “international borders [as a] key sites of regulation and struggles about belonging and citizenship” (Shwenken and Rus-Satter 2014, 24). As such, strategies for exploiting the international border involve taking advantage of deregulated state processes for local benefits. Cross border markets, especially, have traditionally prospered from the exploitation of market differentials on either site of an unregulated border. The Centre for Population, Poverty and Public Policy Studies in Luxembourg identifies the development of this transnational market dynamic in West Africa, “Over the last decades, border markets located on such routes have developed into hubs for the circulation of people and goods, a status that sets them apart from other markets” (Luxembourg Institute of Socio-Economic Research 2011). Figure 2.0 illustrates the geographic distribution of transnational market networks in West Africa. Amy Niang (2013) examines the activity of one of these markets located at the
intersection of the Guinea-Guinea Bissau-Senegal border; suggesting that the absence of Senegalese border monitoring has allowed for the market exchanging “over 1,000 tons of products worth about 250 million CFA francs (US$450,000)” (44).

Figure 2.0 - Border Market Networks in West Africa

In a similar vein to unregulated border markets, the unregulated nature of the border to enforce spaces of the ‘us’ and the ‘other’ has allowed transnational kinship networks to develop and operate on both sides of the border. (Barth 1969).

Ieuen Griffiths’ (2005) explains how the border often plays a limited role in hampering the transnational ethnic networks that straddle the border;

little attention is paid to the boundary in the course of their everyday lives. People regularly cross the border, marry spouses and reside across the border for long periods. They attend all manner of ceremonies, social occasions and family celebrations… These activities do not normally concern governments and… are seldom hampered. (83)

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Additionally, Griffiths points to the common state practice in Africa to place customs posts several kilometers behind the international border so as not to disrupt innocent transnational activities. Further, he concludes that the length of international borders and the distribution of ethno-linguistic groups, such as the Hutu’s and Tutsi’s, are too complex for “any simple, simplistic, linear divide.” In West Africa, Aderanti Adepoju (2005) posits that border deregulation has been a select strategy of West African states with economies too small to absorb their citizens to allow labour migrants to easily transit to the popular West African economy of the day. As a result, ethnic support networks have developed on both sides of the border.

So far, discussion has focused on establishing borders as spaces of distinct local processes and networks not necessarily governed by the state. This paper will now pursue an analysis of these processes in the context of opportunity costs for conflict in the borderlands. Particularly, the borderlands are conceived as a unique intersection of spaces that permits access to unregulated flows of resources. These resources will be analyzed as they are conceived in Gleditsch’s (2007) quantitative study; transnational ethnic networks; transnational political networks; and transnational economic networks. In this way, the border itself represents a distinct resource, as a geographic proximity to the borderlands permits access to further capacities beyond the surveillance of the national territory of the aggrieved.

Unregulated boundaries in Africa largely permit local access to distinct networks that decrease the opportunity costs for violent conflict. Before discussing the borders as a resource for accessing alternative networks, it is necessary to briefly summarize common inflows of capacity that affect the opportunity cost of violent conflict. Most directly related is the transfer of easily transportable small arms across poorly controlled borders. Matt Schroeder and Guy Lamb (2006) describe that,
UN experts investigating arms embargo violations in Somalia documented the delivery of arms to Somali militias by Ethiopian truck convoys. Similarly, Liberia’s Charles Taylor transported many of the weapons he provided to the RUF across the border in trucks. Rogue soldiers, rebels, refugees and others also walk across borders with one or two small arms at a time (71).

Nelson Alusala (2010) describes how panya routes, or informal footpaths across borders, are in most instances “of no concern to border security officials and hence remain unmanned” (18). In East Africa, these routes form common smuggling routes for the transfer of illicit resources. He adds that “Even if it were possible, it would take enormous time and long queues to search all those bicycles and mamas carrying sacks of potatoes and grains for their own consumption” (22). As such, unregulated borders provide few barriers for the inflow of materials necessary for armed insurgency. Adding to the reduction of opportunity costs for violent conflict, suppliers of insurgency resources are also frequently situated near the border.

The non-conformity of borders with Africa’s ethnic communities has generated many significant transnational ethnic communities. Existing research has demonstrated that ethnic kin in neighbouring states have often played an important role in mobilizing and financing insurgencies (Petersen 2012; Saideman 1997, 2002; Davis & Moore 1997). To use the language of the conflict analysis literature, international borders permit opportunities for horizontal escalation of conflict, or the transnationalization of conflict. Specifically, the outflow of information to ethnic kin across the border can be designed to produce processes of social polarization that galvanize support for the aggrieved borderland community. Timur Kuran (1987) identifies the manipulation of ethnic solidarity for the purpose of generating support across borders. Across the border, in the domestically unregulated extra-territorial space, Kuran describes the opportunity for political entrepreneurs to misrepresent grievances and social
realities. Specific to this discussion, state capacities at the border limit *ethnic presence falsification*, or the falsification of exclusionary claims.

Barbara Harff and Ted Gurr (1998) describe typologies of ‘accelerators’ that typify escalation processes in different types of ethno political conflict and genocides (emphasis added):

1. Formation of coalitions among regime opponents;
2. Clashes between regime supporters and communal groups;
3. Increase in external support for communal groups;
4. Empty threats of external involvement against the government.

Carment and Schnabel (2004) identify small-scale localized killings in Rwanda, Burundi, and Zaire as prefiguring the later genocide. The 1990’s saw these conflicts slowly horizontally escalate as ethnic groups increasingly supported ethnic violence until ethnic conflicts became fused together “into a much larger, more violent network of closely interlinked conflicts” (35).

Further, supporting ethnic groups across the border can provide quantitatively more and qualitative different resources than those directly available to the aggrieved ethnic group. The difficulty of a government to monitor and limit the logistical support of rebellions in countries outside its own territory makes locating bases and safe havens just across the border an advantageous strategy for perpetuating conflict. In effect, while a seemingly negligent distance for local ethnic communities, for a state, the other side of the border has a distance of its own. What’s more is that international political cooperation with the harbouring safe haven is often required for effective military counteraction.⁴

Unregulated flows at the border also permit rebel groups to appeal to transnational political networks. Here conflict analysis literature identifies the autocracies of neighbouring

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⁴ An example of international cooperation to fight cross border insurgencies is Nigerian-Cameroon cooperation against Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria.
states as democratically unconstrained political networks liable to support cross-border violent insurgency (Gleditsch 2009; Tures 2001; Schultz 1998). Clapham (1999) identifies Charles Taylor’s (as President of Liberia) cross-border warlordism in Sierra Leone and Jonas Savimbi’s South African support for Namibian-Angolan raids as examples of border rebels accessing transnational political networks. Further, transnational political networks do not necessarily always source from territorially contiguous polities.

The Second Congo War in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) provides a notable case that turns the discussion from transnational political networks to transnational networks. Chris Dietrich (2000) identifies the use of ‘military commercialism’ whereby a state deploys its military in support of an actor in exchange for access to profits. Nearly all outside parties operating in the Second Congo War engaged in military commercialist support of border communities; strategically driven by targets of economic plunder. Rwanda and Uganda specifically engaged the North East region to gain access to agricultural products, minerals, forest products, livestock and cash. Similarly, Angola supported DRC government forces in exchange for oil products and Zimbabwean support was purchased in exchange for access to timber profits (Turner 2007). Capitalizing on the economic opportunities in the DRC, state and non-state participants supported border communities in exchange for the systematic national plunder of the barely sovereign DRC state; ultimately resulting in complete state failure in 2003. In this example, transnational political networks sustained violence – much of it in remote border regions – in excess of 5.4 million lives to date (McGreal 2008).

Lastly, international borders permit access to unregulated transnational economic networks. Here, the ‘lootable resources’ thesis of the conflict literature is applied (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). The lootable resources thesis has been included as a component of Collier’s
‘conflict traps’ and plagues large areas of Africa. Michael Klare (2001) describes; “In the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire), several internal factions and foreign powers have been fighting for control over the lucrative gold and copper fields of the south and west” (24). Collier adds “diamonds funded the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) rebel group during Angola’s long civil war, as well as the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone” (Collier 2009). Common to these examples, border porousness is exploited by smugglers to transport illicit resources outside the regulatory space of the state. Subsequently, profits (such as small arms discussed earlier) can be smuggled back as a resource for border communities. As such, the international border represents a significant logistical resource for evading state and accessing the economic networks of illicit profit.

Conflict strategy has so far been conceptualized as an equation of opportunity costs of participating in a rebellion. The expected gains from rebellion and viability of individual participation has been discussed a significant factor for conflict strategy in consociation with grievance. In other words, while poverty and exclusion may lower individual’s threshold for tolerating grievance, opportunity dictates strategy. This paper has so far argued that the border represents a resource for access to unregulated flows of resources. These flows have been explored in the context of dynamics that galvanize external support and benefits from ethnic, political and transnational networks. Ultimately, the ease with which borderland communities can access the means for violence permits the generation of alternative sovereignty structures with which to challenge the state – which will be discussed in the next section.

A Spatial Theory of Conflict in Africa’s Borderlands

Much post-structuralist attention has focused on political-sociological processes of ‘place creation;’ (Pred 1983) that conceptions of place are “in a very large measure a result of
individuals] concrete participation in the reproduction and modification of local and macro-level social structures” (Agnew 2014, 5). Situating this discussion in critical geographic literature, the processes enabled by the international border permit alternative sovereignty structures with which to challenge the state. Robert Sack (1983) offers a definition of territory which ties in notions of sovereignty processes, “the attempt by an individual or group to affect, influence, or control people, phenomenon, and relationships by delimiting and asserting control over a geographic area” (19). The role of borders for borderland citizens to access capacities alternative to the domestic state represents a distinct political resource with which to construct political structures which operationalize and rectify their territorial marginalization. In other words, the unregulated nature of extra-territorial space permits marginalized borderland citizens the resources to renegotiate the sovereignty of the state.

This theoretical discussion posits that the spatial geography of power in the post-colonial African state in competition with alternative structures of sovereignty determine where violent conflict occurs. Here, Kenneth Boulding’s principle of the Loss of Strength Gradient is a useful conceptual tool to theorize the spatial ‘broadcast’ of power. Boulding (1962) summarizes the LSG simply, “the further from home any nation has to operate…the less strength it can put in the field” (79). While Boulding was explicitly referring to territorially based military projection, the concept is conceptualized to hold for the sovereign’s ability to manage the external threats of death and violence (Pusterla 2015, 88). Essentially the cross-over of Boulding’s model to processes of sovereignty, is in the Weberian ability of the state to monopolize legitimate violence over territory, where distance has a negative effect on the projection of power (Weber 1995, 3).

The usefulness of Boulding’s model comes from the spatial theory of where conflict occurs. Where capacity exceeds the opponent, the greater capacity establishes territorial control.
Where there is uncertainty, and competition, violent conflict will manifest itself (Gurr 1970, 235). Figure 2.0 graphically illustrates how state A would exercise absolute power over a state B and figure 2.1 illustrates the formation of territorial conflict (Sakaguchi 2011, 86).

In these graphical representations of Boulding’s model, A-H and B-K is capacity and the lines extending from the height of these points is the diminishing scale of capacity over distance. In figure 3.0, the capacity of the state A-H absolutely exceeds the potential strength of the potential sovereignty structures at the border, represented by B-K, throughout the entire territory. In figure 3.1 the distance of A-H from B-K creates has a diminishing effect of power projection such that the potential sovereignty structure of B-K can territorially rival A-H. Where power is equal, violent conflict manifests.

The opportunities available from the geographic proximity to unregulated borders permit the potential construction of sovereignty structures that can rival the state. Further, the viability of such sovereignty structures, as a result of distance from the state-based core of power, increases the benefits available to rebel groups. An example of this phenomenon is the influence of alluvial diamonds in the DRC’s borderland region in North Kivu. Limited delivery of political goods from the capital 1500 kms away diminishes the threshold of compliance with state
structures. Further, nearby easily lootable diamonds provide an opportunity to improve borderland citizen’s economic situation. However, what separates potential criminal activity from organized structures of sovereignty are rebel groups such as M23’s, the Lord’s Resistance Army’s, and the Kantangan Mai Mai’s utilization of the border to access networks of kinship, political support, and economic support in Rwanda (Makong 2012). With this, they can enforce monopolies of violence that ultimately challenge the state. Where the state and rebel group’s projections of power are equal, violent conflict breaks out.

**Conclusion**

This theoretical discussion has focused on the processes of conflict affected by borderlands. While previous literature has primarily explored the grievances of the state periphery, this paper explored the role international borders have in influencing the opportunity costs that determine how grievances are operationalized. The unregulated nature of transnational societal, political, and economic flows at the border creates a space of informality that present tautological difficulties for official state penetration. Further, in combination with weak state capacity, the access to extra-territorial capacities permit the development of alternative sovereignty structures in the borderlands. Where state and rebel groups’ sovereignty structures clash, violent conflict is theorized to occur.

Identifying borders as distinct political resources that indirectly facilitate violence is intended to draw attention to the marginalization of periphery territories in post-colonial African states. Conceptualizing the spatial distribution of conflict in this way can assist in identifying areas where the marginal cost of the state’s projecting power over that territory exceeds the potential benefit of monopolizing violence in that additional area. Put this way, it’s possible to identify territories that have been ‘left behind’ by the structures of the state – and where the
international community must address this. Additionally, this conceptualization provides a level of agency for borderland territories’, by presenting unique border processes that hypothetically could be incorporated into the state power structure. Lastly, this theoretical discussion has provided motivation for further research into the role of international borders as a political resource for civil conflict in Africa.
Works Cited


