

# The geography of war: navigating through the governable spaces of violence

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## Summary

This paper argues that the social figurations of violence cannot be detached from their spatio-temporal topographies, i.e. the *geography* of war. Or, in other words, we need to differentiate between the rationale of governable orders (as social “space”) and their manifestation in a specific place and time as governable space (as territorialisation of social space). Governable space thereby is the topography of overlapping, entangled governable orders with different logics imposed by violent and powerful actors. They create an interplay of rules and orders that actors in civil war navigate in. Building on work from Michael Watts, Henrik Vigh and Doreen Massey, we develop a framework to analyse the geography of war and illustrate our argument with empirical examples from Sri Lanka, Nepal, Ethiopia and Sierra Leone.

## Introduction

In the mid-1990s, a number of anthropologists started to interpret violence in civil wars through a rationalist, economic lens: Georg Elwert wrote about “markets of violence”, whereas David Keen analysed the economic functions of violence in civil wars.<sup>i</sup> These and other writings following in their footprints tend to emphasise the economic rationality of warlords and war entrepreneurs, the economic incentives that leads them to pursue violence and the opportunities to loot resources.<sup>ii</sup> These writings came as a kind of revelation after debates on “ethnic conflict”<sup>iii</sup> and the experience of mindless mass violence, such as the Rwandan genocide, had come to a dead end in the academic sphere,

while sparking literary writing on a “coming anarchy” and “molecular wars” devoid of ideological commitment.<sup>iv</sup>

Elwert’s and Keen’s reading of the economic logic inherent in many contemporary protracted civil wars have, indeed, been important contributions as they fostered a growing consensus that violent conflict could not be equated with irrational destruction and social anomy. It is rather, as Keen put it, a “rational kind of madness”.<sup>v</sup> In contrast to Valentine Daniel’s proposition of violence as a counter-point to culture, this group of scholars agreed on the point that violence was never totally idiosyncratic, completely sense - or meaningless to the actor or the victim.<sup>vi</sup> Approximately at the same time, a number of economists, most notably Paul Collier, started to explain the outbreak of civil wars with the opportunity to loot resources. Not social or political grievances provided the incentives to topple an existing regime, but the opportunity to monopolise resource rents.<sup>vii</sup> However, while both literatures emphasized economic rationales as driving forces of violence, there remained some obfuscation about what events, structures and processes were actually triggered by the incentives to loot: were these driving forces that explain the outbreak of war (the initial Collier) or resources as a source to finance ongoing warfare (the later Collier).<sup>viii</sup>

Arguably, a purely economic reading of violence in civil wars bears the danger of potential reductionism. Rational choice models conceptually dis-embedded warlords and their actions from the social and political norms, rules and orders in which they operate and from the global political economy within which war economies operate.<sup>ix</sup> Both, Keen and Elwert have conceded this and provided more nuanced analyses of the social embeddedness of violence and the psycho-analytical roots of youth violence.<sup>x</sup> While much of the above literature dealt primarily with the perpetrators of violence – soldiers, rebels, militias and their motives, strategies and economies, Carolyn Nordstrom further pointed our attention to the creativity of “ordinary” people and their everyday practices within situations of war and violence.<sup>xi</sup> She suggested that “people at the frontline” were not only victims, but social actors with agency and creativity who construct “social order out of chaos”.<sup>xii</sup> Indeed, living with the logic of violence in “geographies of terror and fear” or “cultures of terror” has become an everyday experience for many people caught up in civil war or ambivalent political configurations of “no peace, no war”.<sup>xiii</sup>

While we therefore sympathise with these anthropologies of violence in civil war, we also find a central dimension missing in their accounts. As other conflict researchers before them, anthropologists of violence, while documenting and conceptualising the social figurations and logics of violence as socially embedded, have tended to “de-spatialise” violence and de-territorialise violent acts. While they explore the social, political or economic *rationale* or the social figurations of violence, they pay much less attention to its *spatio-temporal* figurations, i.e. *when* and *where* violence emerges in what form and *how such events are connected* to things happening elsewhere on a different spatial scale or, in other words, why certain forms of violence are exercised “in some places and at some times, and not at others”.<sup>xiv</sup> We find this lack of geography for example in the writings of Georg Elwert, who describes the economic *rationale* of markets of violence as a kind of abstract logic, but does not really demonstrate their territorial grounding and the spatio-temporal dynamics of these social figurations.

In this paper, we therefore propose a conceptual framework to read the spatio-temporal dynamics of social figurations of violence in civil wars. We start off with the writings of two authors that we find particularly useful in bridging the structure-agency puzzle pertinent in understanding social figurations of violence. Geographer Michael Watts’ work on “governable spaces” in Nigeria provides us with a first Foucauldian inspired framing of the multiple and overlapping governable orders that exist in places adept to political violence.<sup>xv</sup> Anthropologist Henrik Vigh employs the metaphor of navigation to encompass instability and movement in action over space and time thereby emphasising that agency occurs within constantly shifting environments and across shifting terrains.<sup>xvi</sup> While Watts’ analysis emphasises the structural dimension of the geography of civil war, Vigh’s work alerts us to the room for manoeuvre that still pertains in figurations of violence. In a third step, we argue that in order to understand the geography of war, one needs to locate these governable orders and navigation strategies within the shifting terrains of space and time in different localities experiencing civil war thereby opening up our view on the multiple trajectories and spatialities that the practices of everyday life in civil war entails. We illustrate these conceptual thoughts with empirical examples from Sri Lanka, Nepal, Ethiopia and Sierra Leone.

## **Governable spaces and governable orders**

As a starting point we engage with two of Michael Watts' writings on "governable spaces" in Nigeria's troubled oil delta, *Development and Governmentality* and *Antinomies of Community*.<sup>xvii</sup> Watts' "governable space" is taken from or rather inspired by Rose's discussion of the spatial dimension of government and authority in Foucault's writings.<sup>xviii</sup> Rose defines governable space(s) as the "modalities in which a real and material governable world is composed, terraformed, and populated"<sup>xix</sup>. Watts further operationalizes the idea of a governable space, which, in his interpretation, "necessitate[s] the territorializing of governmental thought and practice", in short it is a "political thought territorialized".<sup>xx</sup> In the case of the Niger Delta, Watts describes three distinct governable spaces, namely the "space of chieftainship", the "space of indigeneity" and the "space of the nation state".<sup>xxi</sup> In the section on the "space of chieftainship" he describes how an alliance of Nembe chiefs and militant armed youths extracted benefits from Shell oil company, a practice that over time degenerated into violence, fierce competition and "complex complicities between chiefs, youth groups, local security forces and the companies".<sup>xxii</sup> As a result "a specific form of pastoral power (chieftainship)" was eventually displaced by "a governable space of civic vigilanteism" (ibid). A second space of authority was consumed by the Ogoni 'space of indigeneity'. Struggling for greater administrative autonomy and self-determination within Nigeria's Rivers State, Ogoni ethno-nationalist movements combined discourses of autochthony with claims for greater control of the Delta's resources. This process of "indigenous claims-making on the state" gave way to multiple ethno-nationalist mobilizations, which in turn produced "new forms of governable space".<sup>xxiii</sup> Nigeria's nation-building process since the 1960s thrived on oil revenues as well as a reproduction of colonially inherited decentralized despotism. Within the Niger Delta's "space of nationalism" local political entities controlled by rent-seeking groups multiplied and thereby led to an "unimagining" of the national community.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Watts' interpretation of "governable spaces" proves inspiring for the conceptual exploration of the everyday geography of civil war. First, despite being by definition a territorialized emanation of material and symbolic authority, governable spaces are not delimited by the classic and often misleading units of analysis such as the "local",

“national” and “international” that comes with methodological nationalism.<sup>xxv</sup> Instead, governable spaces expand and contract as the result of particular relations of domination that transcend formal spatial categories of the container type. Second, Watts’ writings highlight the multiple, dynamic and interrelated forms of real-life power that co-exist at the same time. “Governable spaces” encompass the idea of localized forms of power of a heteroclitic character. In this sense Watts’ “governable spaces” are far removed from a totalizing conception of the famous “conduct of conduct” that inhibits most Foucauldian analysis. Watts acknowledges this point in the concluding part of *Development and Governmentality* where he admits that “my account of Nigeria reveals ragged, unstable, perhaps ungovernable, spaces and analytics of government that hardly correspond to the well-oiled machine of disciplinary and biopower”.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Watts analyses social figurations and institutional logics – as “social spaces” rather than the *geography* of violence. Watts’ usage of the “governable space(s)” conceptualises the interrelated systems of power (“space of chieftaincy”, “space of indigeneity”, “space of nationalism”), and labels and describes them as if they existed in mutual exclusion. Rather than trying to decipher a series of distinct “governable spaces”, the challenge, we argue, lies in understanding the configuration, the entanglement and interplay of these multiple “governable spaces” in a given locality and at a given time, i.e. their specific spatialities. In this sense power, force, coercion and authority are relational emanations of “governable spaces” that exist both within and beyond the nation-state. Particularly if one thinks from the perspective of empirical (field) research, the notion of a “governable space” becomes vague and aloof. Who, for instance, is governed by the “governable space of chieftaincy”? All actors who respect and follow their customary authority (institutional or regulating space) or all persons who are physically situated in vicinity to chieftain powers (territorial space)? Are the limits of a “governable space” territorial, bodily or relational?

The social figurations of “governable spaces” reflect a non-territorial “space”, the “space” of rules and order, but the practices that these social figurations foster are embedded in specific localities, they are exercised in a particular place at a particular time. The social figurations transcend a locality, the practices of agents don’t. We

therefore suggest the notion of governable *order*, which is closer to Foucault's understanding of governmentality. Foucault writes:

“I think it is not a matter of opposing things to men, but rather of showing that what government has to do with is not territory but, rather, a sort of complex composed of men and things. The things, in this sense, with which government is to be concerned are in fact men, but men in their relations, their links, their imbrications with those things that are wealth, resources, means of subsistence, the territory with its specific qualities, climate, irrigation, fertility, and so on... what counts is essentially this complex of men and things; property and territory are merely one of its variables”<sup>xxvii</sup>.

A *governable order* is a non-territorial, social figuration of a system of power, norms and rules that transcends spatial scales. In this sense, a governable order is just what Watts calls a governable space, i.e. a non-territorial, institutional entity. In a specific space-time, different governable orders co-exist, overlap at a particular place, each with different sources of normativity, legitimation and coercion (e.g. the state's order, the order imposed by security forces, the order coercively implemented by rebels or combatants, etc.). These orders are not equally formative as they create different moments of exclusion and inclusion of different groups and individuals. The realm of power of each of these orders depends on the degree of their legitimisation in every day life, the relative political and coercive power of its representatives and their reproduction through social practices. These governable orders have leverage in particular places and time – with varying specifications for different agents. They thereby act as a nodal point of historically and spatially superimposed layers of political authority.

To conclude: it is arguable that the term governable *order* provides more clarity in denoting the *social* figuration of a system of power, norms and rules – i.e. the *social rationality* of these different orders, while *governable space* describes the spatial configuration of these different governable orders in a specific place and time. In this sense, we would subsume what Watts calls governable spaces as governable order as he describes three distinct logics of governing and ordering rather than describing their territorialization in a specific space-time.

## Shifting terrains

A brief example from the Sri Lankan civil war can help illustrate our argument here: In Sri Lanka's multi-ethnic east, twenty years of civil war, inter-ethnic violence, guerrilla tactics and regimes of terror saturated in a political economy of violence and appropriation with multiple co-existing orders and systems of rules.<sup>xxviii</sup> At the time of research (2000-2003), Sri Lanka's east experienced a sedimentation of a regime of low-profile warfare with some territorial pockets held by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), while other territory, mostly the coastal towns and major roads being under the control of the government's security forces. Localized battles and small-scale attacks were an everyday experience. In this situation, one could broadly distinguish at least four co-existing governable orders: (1) the remnants of the authority of the state apparatus, (2) the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) rule, (3) the rulings of the Sri Lankan security forces (often operating outside formal legal rules), and (4) the customary norms of caste, religion and class. These four co-existing governable orders sedimented in specific spatial regimes of order, power and coercion that had quite distinctive characteristics in different places – these are what we refer to as governable *space(s)*.

The governable spaces as territorialized regimes of co-existing governable orders were not stable or rigid, though. Bargaining and fighting between combatants over their relative realms of power, both territorially and ideologically, defined the order of rules for peasants, fishermen, women, youngsters, bureaucrats and other people in a given territorial space. The power differentials between the combatant groups fluctuated over time and space, and subsequently the order of rules changed with these shifting power differentials. These variations occurred on different time scales: for example, heavy fighting could shift the borderline or frontier between territory under government control and territory under LTTE control (in the Sri Lankan context, the former was called “cleared”, the latter “uncleared”, or not yet cleared, areas). But these frontiers were not fixed impermeable lines. Rather, the LTTE moved across those frontiers during night time when the rebels controlled most of the territory and the Sri Lankan security forces withdrew to their camps.

For a peasant or fishermen, this implied that the rules did not only change with the shifting military battle lines, but the order of rules and the rulers were different: during the day when the security forces were in charge and during the night when the LTTE ruled. However, this situation was not of the sort that the peasant could simply switch to two different modes of living and two distinct orders of rule – the day and the night rule. Rather, the governable space consisted of an overlap of these governable orders – they coincided in space and time, their institutional logic persisted, in varying guises, throughout day and night, the rules did not just vanish, but the relative importance of some rules vis-à-vis others differed during the scope of day and night. When performing an action A during daytime, a peasant had to consider what the implications were for his life during night time, or the other way round. For example, if the peasant paid taxes to the LTTE during the night, this was a reasonable thing to do under the order of LTTE rule, but it was a dangerous thing under the order of the military’s rule during the day. When peasants move to specific places, the order of rules changed as well: when peasants living in uncleared area under LTTE control wanted to sell their agricultural products, they needed to go to market towns that were located in cleared areas. They passed the frontier line between LTTE rule and military rule, but both rulers interrogated the peasant with suspicion.

Broadly similar dynamics have been reported from Nepal’s “People’s War” (1996-2006). The Maoists established so-called “people’s governments” with “people’s courts” in predominantly rural areas, where the Nepalese government had withdrawn police forces in order to avoid “increasingly daring attacks by the Maoists” and/or where Maoists had destroyed local government buildings and forced displacement of local government officials.<sup>xxix</sup> Hence, towards the end of the 1990s, there were “effectively two states at work in part of the country”.<sup>xxx</sup> The power, norms and rules coerced by the Maoists differed significantly from the ones of the Nepalese government system, in that e.g. caste discrimination was abolished, inter-caste marriage, marriage of widows was supported, and gambling and alcohol was prohibited under the Maoist rules. Furthermore, new land registration papers were issued and tax collection schemes were introduced. The latter resulted in an almost complete halt of government tax collection in Maoist-controlled areas.<sup>xxxi</sup> However, in many areas the governable orders of the Maoists and the

Nepalese state co-existed, and shifting constellations of violent actors exerted competing norms, rules and regulations on villagers.

J. Pettigrew vividly describes the “cultures of terror” experienced by civilians caught between the two warring parties – the Maoist insurgents and the state security forces.<sup>xxxii</sup> She describes an example of two competing governable orders in that villagers were forced to accommodate and provide food for Maoist combatants, which was prohibited by the state. In both cases, non-compliance with orders encompassed the threat of use of physical violence by both warring parties. This implied that civilians’ daily lives were impinged by contested governable orders, forcing them to adapt to these orders with shifting constellations of violent actors over time and space. Pettigrew describes how villagers were forced to accommodate rebels during night-time, which made them prone to being intimidated by state security forces who often came to search for Maoists in the next morning. Again, these governable orders produced different territorially confined regimes - governable spaces, depending on the relative military presence and intrusion of Maoists in rural and (peri-) urban places.

Governable orders are not simply out there and the weak prisoners of the network of rules – the governable space - they find themselves in. As Carolyn Nordstrom has suggested: “No matter how brute the force applied to subjugate a people, local-level behaviours arise to subvert the hold violence exerts on a population”.<sup>xxxiii</sup> We here depart from a strictly Foucauldian reading of power and ordering that finds little space for creative agency and actor’s elbow room. Boyden and de Berry rightly suggest that “(...) war does not inevitably destroy all that it touches, and (...) while war causes many to become extremely vulnerable, vulnerability does not in itself preclude ability”.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Actors, including the subaltern or the weak, have room for manoeuvre within social figurations of violence and the prevailing governable orders in which they are located. In Nepal, for example, villagers circumvented the danger of being victimized or threatened by violence, for example by changing specific housing strategies (e.g. young men reside with single women) and by finding out who would come to the village before hand, i.e. “tracking” Maoists’ movement – in order to at least be prepared and possibly create some space for negotiation with them.<sup>xxxv</sup>

Arguably, the governable orders of the two conflicting parties had different implications for civilians depending on features such as caste, ethnicity and gender. Those segments of the population particularly targeted by Maoists, such as government officials, teachers, local elites, had limited agency in areas under Maoist control, forcing them to migrate, as spaces of vulnerability had emerged for these groups within the Maoist governable orders.<sup>xxxvi</sup> In the same areas, spaces of opportunity emerged for lower caste groups such as *Dalit*, as the following quote of a *Dalit* illustrates: “Our situation is much better than before – we used to be discriminated against because we are *Dalits*”.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Hence, governable orders in this case favour and disfavour different segments of the population, creating spatially and socially differentiated opportunities for agency.

## **Navigating conflict**

This brings us to the concept of social navigation that we borrow from Henrik Vigh and which we consider as fruitful for complementing the analysis of governable orders and spaces.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Vigh developed the concept of social navigation in his research on youth and violence in Guinea-Bissau. For Vigh, the “strength of the concept of social navigation is that, as an analytical perspective, it is able to encompass ‘instability’ and movement in our understanding of action while building on an awareness of both individual will and social forces.”<sup>xxxix</sup> While acknowledging Bourdieu’s concept of habitus and field<sup>xl</sup>, Vigh finds it less suited to the fragile and fluid conditions of civil war and suggests the terminus “social terrain” as a description of the topographies of governable spaces, which are “at times a non-transparent social topography, at other times fluid and in continual movement and at yet other times volatile and explosive”.<sup>xli</sup> The term social navigation, which builds on work by Honwana, Johnson-Hanks and Mertz, serves as an analytical optic to illuminate the way agents “guide their lives through troublesome social and political circumstances”.<sup>xlii</sup> It also echoes Ralf Dahrendorf’s concept of “life chances.”<sup>xliii</sup> Navigation signals the inherent dangers and pitfalls of agency in fragile, uncertain, in-transparent and violent configurations of governable orders: “in dangerous waters one navigates simultaneously around underlying perils and through oncoming waves as well

as towards a distant point in or beyond the spatio-temporal horizon, whilst ... being also forcibly moved by the current”.<sup>xliv</sup>

Two aspects are central in this conceptualisation of social navigation: first, it underlines how actors navigate the immediate and the imagined lifeworld at the same time, both in relation to their current placing within a governable space and to their imagined future placing. Second, the navigation metaphor enables us to grasp how agents act, not only in relation to other actors and in relation to a given (fixed) social order (or governable space), but in relation to intricate interactions between agents, events and the shifting topographies of social orders and governable spaces; social navigation in short “is praxis as motion within motion”.<sup>xlv</sup> Navigating in perilous waters demands actors to redraw trajectories, strategies and tactics of agency – and with increasing navigation experience, these tactics and strategies also become ingrained in specific everyday praxis. In this sense, for Vigh, social navigation is not another metaphor for agency, but rather for the interface between agency and structure (in the sense of Giddens). Mats Utas makes a similar point by saying that “... agency is no longer something you possess or do not. Rather, it is something you maintain *in relation to a social field* inhabited with other social actors. Agency is thus highly dependent on specific social situations”.<sup>xlvi</sup>

Social navigation is blended with the fluid topographies of governable spaces in different forms of agency. In the context of her work on child soldiers, Alcinda Honwana finds Michel de Certeau’s distinction between tactics and strategies particularly useful.<sup>xlvii</sup> De Certeau argues that “the space of a tactic is the space of the other. This it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power ...”.<sup>xlviii</sup> Strategies, on the other hand, require a subject and a “proper” place – a regularized, rule governed, institutionalized location, from which relations with an exterior other is generated. In other words, a strategy relates to an already-constructed place, static, given, a structure, whereas tactics are the practices of daily life which engage with that structure.<sup>xlix</sup> Most authors seem to consider the agency of people navigating in the social terrain of civil war as confined to tactical agency (we will argue further down that this is problematic). Honwana, for example, describes the tactical agency that child soldiers dispose off, and Mats Utas makes a similar point when he suggests that “tactic agency forms part of the trajectories travelled by the weak”.<sup>1</sup> This argument seems to mirror

James Scott's famous injunction of the "weapons of the weak", the "silent", "hidden" strategies of resisting power.<sup>li</sup>

Arguably, these authors suggest that non-violent, civilian, non-combatant, marginalized actors – "the weak" – dispose of navigation capacity in the topography of governable orders that set the political context of their lives. In our view, this ability emerges at the ambiguous interface and interplay of different governable orders in its territorial fluidity and temporal fragility. Ambiguity creates both, threats and opportunities, but these seem to be confined to tactics within the governable spaces they operate in.<sup>lii</sup> In the Sri Lankan civil war, for example, farmers, fishermen and local traders developed some "weapons of the weak" that they tactically deployed at the interfaces and disjunctures of the different governable orders: Muslim traders, for example, were able to navigate between the conflict lines. As they were neither Tamil nor Sinhalese, they could deal with both, LTTE and Sinhalese army officers. In many places at the Sri Lankan east coast, Muslim traders gradually established a trade monopoly as they bought produce from Tamil farmers and fishermen, which they managed to transport through a large number of military checkpoints to the markets outside of the war zone. Tamil traders were handicapped in this trade, as they could easily get in trouble at a checkpoint for being suspected as an LTTE spy. But Tamil farmers could also pay back by informing the LTTE on malpractices and unequal market exchanges with Muslim traders who would then be taxed or intimidated by the LTTE at night.<sup>liii</sup>

These mundane practices of everyday survival and entrepreneurial activities deployed small opportunisms, the pursuit of self-interest and struggles over resources. "Ordinary" people and combatants each played their role in this geography of civil war. The hybridity and ambiguity of multiple governable orders created uncertainty and fear, while at the same time opening space to resist subordination, oppression, forced deference and humiliation. But often, resistance against the logics of governable orders produced new violence and opportunisms, mostly against the ethnic other. With the shifting dynamics of territorial control and military dynamics, land markets in the patchwork of Tamil and Muslim paddy fields periodically developed patterns of forced sales and unequal exchange.<sup>liv</sup> Sometimes, Muslims sold land at marginal prices to Tamil neighbours, when they did not feel safe to go to their fields for cultivation (e.g. when the

LTTE had the upper hand or there were lots of incidences of fighting). In other cases, Tamils sold to Muslims. When Tamil-Muslim conflicts emerged, Tamil farmers would harvest the fields of their Muslim neighbours who were afraid to go to their fields and vice versa.

In other places, Sinhalese farmers used the protection of the military to block the flow of irrigation water to Tamil and Muslim tailenders and used up the water at the expense of the latter. They did so at night time, when it was too dangerous for the irrigation engineers – mostly ethnic Tamils - to come to these places. The latter were also reluctant to stop Sinhalese farmers from blocking channels as Sinhalese army and politicians could easily exert pressure on the Tamil engineers who worked for a Sinhalese dominated state. One can therefore posit that contrary to Scott's peasant resistance against the ("bad") rich people, where "good" and "bad" are normatively defined through the analytical lens of class struggle, the weapons of the weak in Sri Lanka's civil war were muddier and opaque, located in the twilight of ambiguous and fluid governable spaces.<sup>lv</sup>

But it is not only the weak that navigate through the currents of fragile governable spaces, but the powerful do so as well by employing tactics of obedience and coercion. The example of the so-called "plastic hat elders" in Ethiopia's violence-torn Somali region indicates the ambivalent position of government paid elders who navigate between the demands of the ruling political party and the communities they are supposed to represent. They embody multiple types of authority, which they enacted differently according to the place, time and governable order they happen to be in. Three overlapping governable orders are most influential in the governable spaces of Ethiopia's eastern lowlands: (1) Somali kinship, (2) the party rule of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and its Somali satellite, the Somali People's Democratic Party (SPDP) and (3) the rule of the Ethiopian national army and secret service.

In her ethnography of the Mzeina Bedouins' political identity anthropologist Smadar Lavie talks about the "Mzeina disrespect for, yet dependency on, their sheikh".<sup>lvi</sup> The same applies to Somali communities in Ethiopia's Somali region and their elders appointed and paid by the government, commonly known as *lataliye* (advisors) elders.<sup>lvii</sup>

On the one hand the *lataliye* elders implement decisions and policy by the ruling Somali People's Democratic Party (SPDP), a close ally of the federal government. Being seen as working with the federal government undermines their popular legitimacy, because the government – being dominated by non-Somali highlanders – lacks any credible support among Somalis in Ethiopia. On the other hand the SPDP represents Somali region's only political party trusted by EPRDF and is the principal gatekeeper of government and administrative positions. Some *lataliye* elders are aware of their uneasy position in between the opposing demands of the SPDP and their own kin. When interviewed, one elder from the Degodia clan who is both a district *lataliye* in the southern part of the region as well as a member of the Degodia's customary elders council, self-critically explained: "This new role is burdensome, it is much more burdensome than the former role we used to have as elders. The public sees us as elders that are only implementing the government policy rather than clan interests. (...) Whenever there is a clash between the people and government interests, we are forced to follow the government interests. This has negative consequences for our reputation from the side of the public". Yet the same elder also stated "When the government pressures me, I also try to get some concession from the government". While this elder had to play the tactics of obedience to "the party" and security officials, he also maximised his room for manoeuvre by extracting benefits for themselves as well as his genealogical group.

An elder from the regional capital Jijiga reported that "these *lataliye* elders tell their people to elect the government party candidate or otherwise the government would punish them". Most community members expressed overtly negative judgements when asked about the *lataliye* elders. They characterised the *lataliye* elders as "loudspeakers" and as "handpicked by the government". An educated elderly person compared them to angels who descend on the population and "tell what the government tells them". A businesswoman referred to them as "not good quality". They were also ridiculed with the Somali expression *koofiyed bacle*, literally meaning "plastic hat elders", which encapsulates the idea of discredited traditional leadership (while respected Somali clan elders are associated with hand-woven hats). A senior regional official established that "these *lataliye* elders were selected by the government because they have to transmit to the people what the government wants". Interviewees often discursively juxtaposed the

*lataliye* elders with what they considered as the “true” elders. While the *lataliye* elders were associated with government and party politics, the “true” elders, as a civil servant put it, “are outside of the government system, they are maybe in their homes, in the mosques, in their business”. Such observations may lead to the assumption that “genuine” customary authorities co-exist with “corrupted” - in this case, the *lataliye* - elders. Rather, we would argue, it is necessary to situate all of the region’s clan elders and leaders within the prevailing “geography of violence” in order to understand how they navigate through the fluid topography of governable orders.

## Shifting spaces

Our combined conceptual deployment of governable orders, spaces and social navigation has provided a suggestive frame to circumvent the structure-agency dilemma: We have been careful not to propagate a strictly Foucauldian governmentality framework by enriching it with the analytics of the “weapons of the weak.” What, then, is the *geography* of civil war? We have been arguing throughout the paper that governable orders overlap in distinctive *spatial* patterns thereby forming governable spaces, which is the terrain (of power, norms and rules), within which actors navigate in their everyday life. Rationales of governing and the threats or opportunities they entail are becoming spatialized in specific power geometries that are malleable in space and time. This is, indeed, the “geography” that we are arguing for.

Massey’s critique of de Certeau is relevant here. As Doreen Massey reminds us, De Certeau’s distinction of tactics and strategies bears the danger of reproducing too easily a dichotomous binary of power/resistance, thereby taking governable spaces as given (and fixed), although they are in constant renegotiation.<sup>lviii</sup> For Massey, de Certeau employs a conception of power in society as a monolithic order on one hand and tactics of the weak on the other. Tactics in that view are “romanticized” as the weapons of the weak – navigating cleverly between the lines, within and between different currents (governable orders), but our empirical examples have indicated that life at times of war is more complex than that. As Massey suggests, not only does this over-estimate the coherence of the powerful, while confining the potential power of “the weak”. Massey goes on to

argue that de Certeau's conception contrasts strategy as assuming a "place" whereas tactics depends on time – "... always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized".<sup>lix</sup>

Massey's alternative conception of space holds that it is an open ongoing production; space is an event, not a static closure and therefore, open to change (this is her normative premise).<sup>lx</sup> Massey argues that anthropologists have tended to press the representation of space into a temporal sequence, thereby foreclosing the multiplicities, the multiple trajectories of spatialities that are possible. Similarly, writings on "logics", "rationale" and "figurations" of violence place temporal sequence before spatiality as they foreclose multiple trajectories of spatialities in the governable spaces that emerge from the political economy of war. We therefore follow Doreen Massey's suggestion and consider space to be (1) the product of interrelations, constituted through interactions, (2) heterogeneous, plural and co-existent (3) and never finished, but continuously under construction.<sup>lxi</sup>

Massey's work also alerts us to the multiple connections, flows and networks across space that make up the sedimentation of different logics of governing into permeable governable spaces at a particular time and place. In the geography of war, these connections are highly significant as the space for navigation of one person often depends on actions, rules and orders executed in other places. Also, the working of governable orders comes through multiple spatial connections. These connections can be material and non-material. Family and clan networks play a crucial role in how agents navigate through the geography of war. Well known are the financial flows of Diaspora communities to both, their extended families "at home", and to fund the fighting of rebels, a prominent example being the strong network of the LTTE to extract taxes from Tamils living abroad. But these connections also play out in more convoluted ways having an influence on the governable orders and collective subjectivities. Fear, for example, often results in acceptance of rules even if there is no direct local threat. People follow rules even though the acts that have created this fear have been conducted in a remote place (and other people have been the victims of it). But their legacy has travelled to other places and other minds that have not directly experienced it, but have heard about it – or have heard rumours. Communication – mouth-to-mouth flow of information – can

trigger a remote response – spatialising the governance of intimidation beyond the place of violent acts or suppression. Even without being there, “they” - e.g. the LTTE and their demands, threats - are around, “their” presence is felt.

In Sierra Leone’s civil war, for example, the geography of civil war can be seen in the shifting spatial figurations surrounding the bush camps of the rebel organisation Revolutionary United Front (RUF). At the early stages of the civil war (1991-1996), the RUF operated from these bush camps where it also trained and “ideologized” its cadres and recruits.<sup>lxii</sup> The camps became spaces of its internal militarization. At the same time, the camp attracted “civilians” – actors not considered as RUF recruits, but providing services to them as well as their wives, husbands and children. The camp’s social order was based on strong social and genealogical bonds, which made the boundaries between combatant and non-combatant inhabitants highly malleable. Women, for example, could be part of the RUF cadre, could be victims of sexual harassment or working successfully in the service sector – and being some of these at the same time. The forests surrounding the bush camps deployed their own distinctive governable space: while these territories provided some kind of protection against harassment from the government troupes, they were confined to a coercive regime of intimidation and expropriation that the RUF imposed on the inhabitants of the forests, which made it difficult to escape from either the camps or the surrounding bush.<sup>lxiii</sup>

But this governable space of the bush camps came under turmoil when the governmental forces started to attack the bush camps and penetrated the surrounding territories. The camps and the bush became spaces of risk and uncertainty. Hunter defence troops (or Civil Defence Forces, CDF), the *kamajor*, scoured the forests. They had been recruited by the government as special task forces as they knew the forest terrain very well, while the governmental troops did not.<sup>lxiv</sup> Through these military manoeuvres, a new governable order of violence, intimidation and expropriation emerged that made life for the inhabitants of the forests very delicate. Had they accustomed themselves to the governable space that the RUF’s presence had created and enjoyed relative protection from the governmental troops, inhabiting territories located close to the bush camps now turned into a source of risk and vulnerability. The intrusion of the CDF belligerents, and thereafter, of the governmental troops, into the former territories

under control of the RUF created a much more ambivalent situation through the presence of different belligerent groups imposing each their own governable orders that shifted with their presence and absence in a particular place and time.

Non-combatants and other inhabitants of the camps, who were not RUF cadres, left the terrain in large numbers and attempted to cut off their social ties with the RUF in order to avoid harassment from CDF or governmental troops. This unsettled the relative social cohesion that had emerged in the governable space of the camps and the bush. Archibal and Richards have argued that in the initial period, the RUF was a rebel movement without strictly authoritarian rules and orders. Cohesion was maintained through multiple social bonds and obligations between RUF cadres and the amalgam of inhabitants of the camp and bush space. When the CDF and governmental forces penetrated their territory, the equilibrium of the governable space shirked and the RUF disintegrated as a rebel organization. Subsequently, the RUF changed into a fatalistic and authoritarian group, similar to an armed sect with fragmenting organisational structures. Rebels and sub-commanders acted independently from their leader, plundered, looted and killed the inhabitants of the territories that they came through.<sup>lxv</sup> In this situation, a highly malleable governable space emerged with the overlapping governable orders of various marauding belligerents shifting according to their presence or absence. But when one left, the other came sooner or later – their presence was felt even in their absence. Interestingly, when the war ended officially in 2001, hardly any CDF fighter was demobilized. The hunter defence units seemed to have vanished into thin air.<sup>lxvi</sup> Networks and connections that developed in the civil war had become redundant and with them the specific ideologies and identities attached to them.

The geography of the Sierra Leonean civil war indicates that space is constituted through interactions and it is never finished, always under construction. The governable space that evolved around the bush camps in the initial stage of the war was a fragile equilibrium created through the specific social relations that the RUF cadres and the inhabitants of their camps and the bush had developed. But this governable space disintegrated into a new, more ambivalent, more violent one with the onset of an oligopoly of belligerents plundering and looting the population and where different

governable orders of coercion, oppression and expropriation overlapped making life a risky gamble of survival.

## **The geography of war**

Edward Said wrote in *Culture and Imperialism* that „just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting, because it is not only about soldiers and cannons, but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings.“<sup>lxvii</sup> Geographer Michael Watts builds on Said’s thought and claims that “violence might be understood as ‘struggles over geography’ ”, reminding us of “... a geographer’s sensitivity to territory, location, to mapping and to the processes of confinement and exclusion“.<sup>lxviii</sup> These struggles over geography are the product of the complex interplay of governable orders that sediment into governable spaces, the complex thing that Allen and others calls “geographies of power” or, to use Massey’s term, “power geometries”. While governable orders refer to the logics of governing and are therefore conceptual constructs, they materialize and territorialize in particular time-spaces.<sup>lxix</sup>

Our argument in this paper has been that the social figurations of violence in civil wars cannot be detached from their spatio-temporal topographies, that is their governable spaces. These governable spaces are the topographies of overlapping, entangled governable orders with different logics that impose themselves on agents in a particular location and time thereby creating an interplay of rules and orders that agents navigate in. At the same time, we have posited that a rigidly Foucauldian governmentality perspective tends to ignore the spaces for social navigation that emerge at the fragile disjunctures that the spatio-temporal dynamics of the overlap of different governable orders creates. Governable spaces, the ordering of different governable orders, in a particular place and time are highly malleable in situations of civil war – and nobody can be sure what tomorrow will hold. The struggle over geography, over the fluid topographies of governable spaces, cannot be grasped through simple hierarchical conceptualizations of space, power and scale. Ontologically, we have therefore argued that these malleable, hybrid, fluid, in-transparent governable spaces require a conceptualisation of social

figuration that is spatial – spatial in the sense of Massey’s suggestions on space as being the product of inter-relations, heterogeneous and under construction. Elwert read the economic rationale in the markets of violence and Keen detected the economic functions violence produces. While economy is important, it is only part of the story. The geography of war entails the difficult terrain of navigating through the governable spaces of violence – a fluid topography of multiple orders, rules and rationales.

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<sup>x</sup> Georg Elwert, *Anthropologische Perspektiven auf Konflikt*. In: Eckert, J. M. (eds.) *Anthropologie der Konflikte. Georg Elwerts konflikttheoretische Thesen in der Diskussion*. (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag 2004) pp 26-38. – D. Keen, *Conflict and collusion in Sierra Leone* (Palgrave Macmillan 2005).

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