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Revisiting the links between economic inequality and political violence: The role of social mobilization

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Revisiting the links between economic inequality and political violence

The role of social mobilization

Patricia Justino*

February 2022

Abstract: The main aim of this paper is to explore theoretically important mechanisms through which economic inequalities may affect the emergence of political violence given the forms of social mobilization they (may) generate. The paper identifies and explores two mechanisms under which social mobilization in unequal societies may result in either non-violent or violent collective action and, ultimately, in violent conflict. The first condition is the level of social cooperation between different social groups that are formed during the process of social mobilization. The second is the efficacy of collective action to drive change, which is in turn shaped by the ability of individuals within groups to coordinate their actions. Forms of social mobilization become violent when antagonism is the dominant form of social interaction between different social groups in unequal societies, and when each of these social groups exhibits high levels of internal coordination.

Key words: inequality, political violence, social mobilization, collective action, social cooperation

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1 Introduction

Growing socio-political instability and rises in global inequality experienced recently in many parts of the world have brought back to the forefront of social science research the age-old, yet still unsolved, debate on the links between inequality and political violence. Scholars since Aristotle have argued that persistent inequalities amongst and between socio-economic groups may increase social discontent and, eventually, the propensity of individuals and groups to engage in social and political unrest.¹ Recent phenomena seem to support this view, including the ‘Arab Spring’ events, the intensification of several armed conflicts over the last decade, growing identity and class tensions and the rise of protest movements across the world. Many of these events have been attributed to global rises in income and wealth inequality over the last four decades (Piketty 2014; Stiglitz 2013), exacerbated by the ongoing global pandemic (Iacoella et al. 2021; Kishi 2021). However, there is surprisingly little agreement in the literature about whether and, especially, how inequality causes political violence.

The empirical search for a relationship between economic inequality and political violence has generated a wealth of studies and debates about the measurement of and correlation between these two phenomena.² An older body of literature reported strong correlations between different forms of political conflict and income and asset inequality (Muller and Seligson 1987; Schock 1996), class divides (Scott 1976), and relative deprivation (Gurr 1970). But more recent conflict studies have consistently failed to find evidence for a statistical association between standard measures of income inequality (for instance, the Gini coefficient) and the onset of civil wars (Collier and Hoeffler 2004). Some scholars have successfully argued that this may be because violent conflict responds to economic, social, and political differences between social groups rather than vertical forms of inequality (Cederman et al. 2013; Østby 2006; Stewart 2008). Others have maintained that armed conflict is associated not with inequality per se but rather with levels of socio-economic polarization (Esteban and Ray 1994; Esteban and Schneider 2008; Montalvo and Reynal-Querol 2008) and ethnic fragmentation (Easterly and Levine 1997).

This ongoing debate has considerably advanced our understanding as to whether economic inequality may be associated to political violence. Much less has been done to understand what causal pathways may shape *how* economic inequality may affect social and political (dis)order. Whilst economic inequalities persist in many countries across the world, only a handful of these countries have experienced or will experience violent conflict. This is because, as famously argued by Ted Gurr (1970: 13), the ‘primary causal sequence in political violence is first the development of discontent, second the politicization of the discontent, and finally its actualization in violent action against political objects and actors’. However, despite the proliferation of theoretical and empirical studies on the relationship between economic inequality and political violence, to date relatively little is known about the mechanisms that link inequality-driven discontent among individuals and social groups to the ‘politicization of the discontent’ into forms of social mobilization, or the conditions under which social mobilization may result in ‘violent action’.

The main aim of this paper is to address this gap in knowledge by exploring theoretically the pathways through which economic inequalities may shape political violence given the forms of social mobilization they generate. To that purpose, the paper develops a framework which brings

¹ See, among others, Gurr (1970), Stewart (2008), and Cederman et al. (2013).

² See reviews in Stewart (2008), Brück et al. (2009), Justino (2009, 2012, 2013), Cederman et al. (2013), Blattman and Miguel (2010), and Verwimp et al. (2019).

together insights from behavioural economics and social psychology to shed light on this ongoing debate. This framework draws attention to two key mechanisms that shape how social mobilization in unequal societies may result in either non-violent or violent collective action. The first is the level of between-group *social cooperation* that emerges during processes of social mobilization in unequal societies. The second is the level of efficacy of within-group *collective coordination* to drive change.

While it is acknowledged that inequality is a multidimensional phenomenon, the paper focuses largely on economic inequality, defined as differences in income, consumption, or wealth between individuals or social groups along the income distribution. Social groups are defined as ‘a number of individuals with a common interest’ (Olson 1971: 8). To facilitate the analysis, we can think about these groups as social classes (the rich and the poor).³ Social mobilization is the social and political process through which individuals come together to achieve and/or reinforce that common interest, while collective action refers to activities by social groups intended on advancing their common interest by attempting to shape social and political change (Olson 1971; Tilly 1984). These range from non-violent actions such as demonstrations, labour strikes, non-violent protests, and petitions, to violent collective actions such as violent protests, riots, coups d’état, revolutions, and civil wars.⁴ The main aim of the paper is to provide a conceptual understanding of when social mobilization in unequal societies may be characterized by either non-violent or violent collective action, and other forms in-between.

To systematize the mediating effect of social mobilization in the relation between economic inequality and political violence, the paper maps out a new typology of social mobilization, which includes four categories: peaceful social mobilization, covert social mobilization, fragmented violent mobilization, and organized violent mobilization. The paper then theorizes how each of these four stylized types are determined by how economic inequality shapes two key components of social mobilization: social cooperation between social groups and collective coordination within social groups in any given society. This framework is not intended to explain the universe of factors that determine social mobilization, nor to provide a new theory of violent conflict, but rather to illustrate some key, yet overlooked, conditions under which individual or group dissatisfaction with economic inequality may result into collective mobilization that may (or may not) turn violent.

This theoretical framework bridges across four bodies of literature that have remained to date largely disconnected. The first is the longstanding empirical debate outlined above on the effects of economic inequality on political violence. This paper argues that the lack of empirical agreement to date is largely to do with the fact that the effect of economic inequality on political violence is not necessarily direct but is rather mediated by forms of social cooperation and collective coordination, which in turn shape how social mobilization becomes (or not) violent. The second is a body of literature on the determinants of social mobilization (Moore 1978; Skocpol 1979, 1994; Tilly and Tarrow 2015). This literature has produced important knowledge about how social movements complement political parties and interest associations, the political and social contexts and structures that facilitate or hinder social movements, and their relationship to state politics and political systems.⁵ Less research has been conducted on how social, economic, and political conditions—such as persistent economic inequalities—may affect how citizens participate in social movements, or on the ways in which civic collective action can produce either peaceful or violent

³ However, these social groups can also be defined along ethnic, religious, and other cultural lines (for instance, we can think of a society ruled by one dominant ethnic or religious group, with other social groups placed at the bottom of the income distribution).

⁴ The paper refers to these violent actions interchangeably as violent conflict or political violence.

⁵ This literature is reviewed in, for instance, Jenkins and Kladermans (1995).

socio-political change. Recent studies on social movements have analysed how economic disparities caused by the 2007–08 global financial crisis have affected voting and protest behaviour (Aghajanian et al. 2022; Della Porta 2015; Justino and Martorano 2016; Rudig and Karyotis 2013). However, this body of research has not been able to convincingly identify the causal mechanisms that may explain the links between inequality and individual participation in protests. There is also to date limited knowledge about why some protests and other forms of ‘contentious politics’ are sometimes peaceful while others become violent. Finally, the paper argues that whether social mobilization motivated by economic inequalities may turn violent is ultimately conditional on how people, individually or in groups, cooperate with others in society and are able to coordinate their actions. This analysis makes use of literature in behavioural economics and social psychology on the formation and evolution of social cooperation (Axelrod and Hamilton 1981; Bowles and Gintis 2011; Gambetta 1988) and the efficacy of collective action (Bardhan 2005). The paper builds on these behavioural insights to explore and develop new theoretical arguments on how the interaction of between-group cooperation and within-group coordination may sometimes result in peaceful social and political change but in violent conflict in other cases. To do so, the paper proceeds as follows. First, the paper discusses the relationship between economic inequality and social mobilization and outlines the mediating role of social cooperation and collective coordination. Second, insights from that analysis will form the basis of a theoretical framework, which will illustrate how the interaction between social cooperation and collective coordination may result into either non-violent or violent forms of social mobilization in unequal societies. This framework is extended in a subsequent section to include the role of state capacity and how this may affect the initial social mobilization framework. The final section summarizes the main arguments and outlines future research agendas on the links between economic inequality, social mobilization, and political violence.

2 From economic inequality to social mobilization

A great deal of research has tried to understand how inequality-driven social discontent may result in the ‘politicization of the discontent’—or, in other words, into organized forms of social mobilization. The main theoretical prediction is that when inequality rises, social mobilization will increase, as citizens organize collectively to demand societal changes (Dalton 2017; Gurr 1970). Empirically, results have been mixed, with some studies finding a positive effect of economic inequality on social mobilization, others a negative effect, and others no effect at all (Dubrow et al. 2008; Gilens 2012; Solt 2008, 2015). These mixed results are largely due to the fact that social mobilization can be affected by collective action problems resulting from free-riding and imperfect information (Bardhan 2005; Houle 2009), coordination challenges among those at the bottom of the distribution (Alesina and La Ferrara 2000; Bardhan 2005), and elite capture (Gáfaró et al. 2014, 2022; Houle 2009), with all these factors being endogenous to inequality itself (Justino et al. 2019). In addition, social mobilization takes on different forms ranging from demonstrations, strikes, and petitions, to riots and revolutions, with economic inequality affecting each of these phenomena differently in different settings. Making progress in this area of research requires, therefore, a more systematic understanding of what causal mechanisms may be at play in the relationship between economic inequality and social mobilization. It requires also a more systematic conceptual language to map out the different forms of (non-violent and violent) social mobilization that may emerge from the interaction between these mechanisms.

What causal mechanisms shape the relationship between economic inequality and non-violent and violent social mobilization? Recent studies have produced important analyses about the conditions

under which social mobilization may become more or less violent.⁶ Some have discussed how high levels of social cohesion among community members often act to reduce social discontent and tensions even when economic inequalities persist (Cullen and Colletta 2000; Varshney 2002). Lederman et al. (2002) argue that social trust between community members is associated with reductions in crime levels across Latin America (where levels of inequality are notoriously high). In contrast, civil war studies have shown that high levels of cohesion *within* homogenous groups may in some cases aggravate social tensions *between* groups, particularly when economic and political inequalities between groups are high (Cederman et al. 2013; Stewart 2008). Such social tensions may under specific circumstances create the basis for violence between ethnic, religious, or other identity-based groups (Pinchotti and Verwimp 2007; Sambanis and Shayo 2013), often due to the rise of parochial attitudes and mistrust against outsiders (Bauer et al. 2013; Bowles and Gintis 2011).

Despite apparent contradictory results, there is across these studies an implicit unifying idea that the effect of economic inequality on violent mobilization is largely shaped by how individual and groups cooperate and relate to each other. Overall, it appears that economic inequality may generate violent mobilization when social cooperation between groups is low or frayed.

A large literature in political science and political sociology has noted that social mobilization is not only dependent on the levels of social cooperation, cohesion, and trust in society, but also on the ability of individuals within groups to coordinate and commit to collective action given their access to information, their levels of internal organization and cohesion, and the resource constraints they may face.⁷ Achieving effective coordination within social groups—either to ensure peaceful or violent social mobilization—is not straightforward (Olson 1971). In general, coordination within groups is shaped by two key factors: how bargaining disputes are solved within the group, and how the group is able to overcome internal free-riding and moral hazard challenges. Groups that are able to resolve internal disputes and overcome free-riding and moral hazard challenges more easily are likely to ensure stronger collective coordination. However, like social cooperation, collective coordination is also shaped by economic inequality. Below, we discuss in more detail how economic inequalities shape these two key components of social mobilization—social cooperation and collective coordination—drawing on recent findings in behaviour economics and social psychology on the formation and evolution of social cooperation and on strengthening social coordination.

2.1 Economic inequality and social cooperation

Few studies have offered a systematic analysis of how economic inequality may affect group cooperation, although a small literature has shown that the participation of individuals in local organizations is lower in more unequal societies (Alesina and La Ferrara 2000; Baland and Platteau 1997; La Ferrara 2002). A related body of research has also noted that public good provision is less efficient in ethnically divided societies (Alesina et al. 1999; Miguel and Gugerty 2005). Overall, these harmful outcomes (low civic participation and reduced public goods provision) are shown to result from a negative effect of economic inequality on social cooperation between different social groups. This is largely because income and wealth inequalities generate social conflicts between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ that may at times lead to outright social antagonism as social distances between the two groups increase. Social antagonism may become particularly strong when economic inequalities intersect with forms of social and political exclusion,

⁶ An earlier analysis of this question is outlined in Tilly (1978).

⁷ This literature is analysed and reviewed in Tarrow (1998) and, more recently, in the compilation put together in Della Porta and Diani (2015).

segregation, and discrimination, which may further entrench social cleavages and tensions (Cederman et al. 2013).

However, under some circumstances, economic inequality may lead to increased cooperation between social groups. This is the case when these groups have common interests despite persistent economic inequalities between them. This may be, for instance, the case when different social groups have longstanding trading relations (Bardhan 2005), such as in the case of some Muslim and Hindu historical trade relations, which have ensured their peaceful coexistence in some communities in India despite persistent economic inequalities between the groups (Jha 2013). Common interests may also include a shared desire for security. For instance, Aghajanian et al. (2020) show that, in slums in the Indian state of Maharashtra, Hindu and Muslim groups forced to live alongside intentionally form community organizations as an insurance against potential future communal violence, even though the two groups report not trusting each other. In these contexts, shared interests—economic, security, or otherwise—may force groups to make efforts to cooperate and generate institutions of cooperation even if their positions along the income distribution are disparate.

Two sets of factors may shape such common interests.⁸ The first are spatial factors, related to what the economics and political science literature has defined as ‘neighbourhood’ effects (Durlauf 2006; Wilson 1995). Spatial segregation of social groups along economic lines may affect levels of social cooperation when groups grow apart and social distancing increases, reducing the relevance of common interests. Social antagonism is further strengthened by disparities in access to public goods and economic opportunities associated with spatial segregation (Cutler and Glaeser 1997; Sethi and Somanathan 2004; Wilson 1995). Increased social antagonism explains, in turn, how some forms of violent social mobilization may be concentrated in certain (deprived) geographical locations, as illustrated by the Ferguson riots in the USA in 2014,⁹ the Los Angeles riots in 1992 (DiPasquale and Glaeser 1998), and the persistence of Hindu-Muslim riots in poor neighbourhoods in India (Brass 2003; Gupte et al. 2013). However, spatial segregation may also lead to the formation of social groups that are internally homogenous. In these cases, segregation across different groups or communities may increase social cooperation *within* those groups, whilst widening the gap *between* social groups (Akerlof and Kranton 2000; Hoffman et al. 1996; Kranton 1996). This is largely due to forms of ‘parochialism’ (Bowles and Gintis 2004, 2011) that may result in suspicion and discrimination against ‘other’ groups and lower levels of social interaction (Putnam 1993, 2000). Anti-migrant attitudes are examples of this phenomenon (Citrin et al. 1997; Mayda 2006).¹⁰ In general, shared common interests (and thus between-group cooperation) are likely to be stronger in unequal societies that avoid forms of spatial segregation.

The second set of factors are normative. Norms of reciprocity, fairness, and altruism between social groups are key to the emergence and reinforcement of social cooperation and the reduction of social antagonism (Algan and Cahuc 2010; Varshney 2002). In unequal contexts, such social norms may counteract the rise of social antagonism when they increase preferences for redistribution among groups at the top of the income distribution. This may be so because social norms of reciprocity and fairness may increase aversion to inequality across all groups in society (Justino and Martorano 2019), or because demands for social justice (for themselves or for others)

⁸ This literature is reviewed in Justino and Moore (2015).

⁹ See, for instance, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/05/11/city-life-what-racism-has-done-to-baltimore>.

¹⁰ Recent studies have also shown that within-community cooperation has at times facilitated the emergence of violence. Examples include the 1994 Rwandan genocide (Pinchotti and Verwimp 2007; Straus 2006), armed resistance in Lithuania against the Russian occupier (Petersen 2001), and the rise of anti-social attitudes against outsiders in some post-conflict societies (Bauer et al. 2013).

is likely to be stronger among social groups with a stronger sense of social affinity (Klor and Shayo 2010; Luttmer 2001). Social antagonism may rise when social norms do not support social justice agendas, leading in turn to reduced levels of social cooperation (Bowles and Gintis 2011; Schelling 1981) and lower levels of trust towards institutions and between communities (Alesina and La Ferrara 2002; Gambetta 1988). Shared common interests may still be strong in unequal societies where social groups express stronger forms of altruism and reciprocity between each other.

2.2 Economic inequality and collective coordination

Economic inequality shapes social mobilization not only through its effects on social cooperation but also on the ability of social groups to coordinate. Within-group coordination may be a challenge in highly unequal societies. First, bargaining disputes within social groups or organizations over the benefits of their collective actions are likely to be high in unequal societies, resulting in less than efficient outcomes. This is because most of the energy and time of the group may be spent in resolving internal social conflicts (Bardhan 2005), or due to raising the costs of negotiation and enforcement (Bardhan 2005; Miguel and Gugerty 2005). As shown in La Ferrara (2002) for the case of Tanzania, social groups in more unequal communities are less likely to take decisions by vote, tend to report more often poor group performance and misuse of funds, and their members interact less frequently. Second, monitoring free-riding and moral hazard behaviours is also more difficult in contexts of high inequality (Arnott and Stiglitz 1991; Ben-David 1998), which may hinder the effectiveness of collective coordination to drive social mobilization.

Effective within-group coordination may nonetheless be possible in unequal societies when the leaders of relevant social groups have a vested interest in the outcome of the collective action (Justino et al. 2019). One example is the improved access of elites to the political and economic benefits offered by a better organized society (Bardhan 2005; Olson 1971). Elites may also need to rely on strong collective coordination to ensure mass mobilization that may be needed during election periods or for successful rebellions (Kuhn and Weidmann 2015). Alternatively, elites may want to ensure high levels of collective coordination to take better (political or economic) advantage of their embeddedness in strong, well-coordinated social networks (Amat and Beramendi 2020; Justino et al. 2019). When elites assume a strong coordination role with enough buy-in from the social group(s) they rule over, within-group coordination is likely to be high, even in the presence of high levels of within-group economic inequalities. However, it may also be the case that leaders may engage in their own rent-seeking activities and disengage from the group (Banerjee et al. 2001), or encourage forms of social segregation and exclusion within the group (Bardhan 2005) that may lead to weak or fragmented collective action. In either case, within-group collective coordination in unequal societies is largely determined by how much interest elites have in securing such coordination.

3 When does social mobilization become violent in unequal societies?

This paper makes the argument that economic inequality will affect the probability of violent conflict due to the forms of social mobilization it generates. Economic inequality that results in peaceful forms of social mobilization may lead to social instability and social tensions but not necessarily to the use of violence to resolve social conflicts. In other contexts, economic inequality may promote violent forms of collective action. The net outcome is dependent on the interaction between the two factors discussed above. The first is the level of social cooperation *between* the different social groups. The second is the ability of individuals *within* groups to coordinate their

actions. Table 1 offers a new typology of social mobilization based on the interaction between these two key mechanisms.

Table 1. A typology of social mobilization

		Within-group coordination	
		High	Low
Between-group relations	Cooperation	Peaceful social mobilization	Fragmented social mobilization
	Antagonism	Organized violent mobilization	Fragmented violent mobilization

Source: author's elaboration.

Strong levels of cooperation between different social groups may facilitate social mobilization in unequal societies, but it is unlikely that these forms of social mobilization will become violent due to shared common interests between the groups. Two outcomes are possible. The first—defined as *peaceful social mobilization*—encompasses situations of stable relations between social groups along the income distribution with occasional forms of largely peaceful and legal social mobilization when redistributive interests between the groups do not coincide. This form of social mobilization includes what Dubrow et al. (2008) call ‘soft protests’ (legal demonstrations, signing petitions, and contacting government officials), as well as legal protests and demonstrations that are part of the ways in which citizens in democratic settings related to the state (Tilly and Tarrow 2015). Forms of peaceful social mobilization can also be used to mobilize voters along political agendas and express their voices and demands through political participation in the democratic process.

The second type is *fragmented social mobilization*. This represents situations in which some groups may challenge the social status quo through a variety of largely informal and disorganized processes. This is generally the case of unequal societies where civil society is weakly organized but groups maintain common interests (Chenoweth 2021). The prevalence of one of these outcomes over the other—peaceful social mobilization or fragmented social mobilization—will depend on the level of coordination *within* each of the social groups involved. Groups that are able to solve internal coordination challenges may be able to support forms of *peaceful social mobilization* (through, for instance, the creation of civic organizations such as workers’ unions, agricultural cooperatives, users’ committees, and so forth) when cooperation between social groups is high. Low within-group coordination in settings of between-group cooperation—which characterizes many largely peaceful developing countries with weak civil societies—is more likely to result in the prevalence of informal forms of social mobilization by individuals with specific common interests. Effective collective action is unlikely to arise, but social mobilization may take the form of sporadic demands. These forms of mobilization tend to take place in contexts of weak democratic institutions where distributions of social, economic, and political power are highly skewed.

Violent social mobilization has a higher probability of emerging when social antagonism is the prevalent form of social relations between social groups. The rise of parochial attitudes and mistrust of the ‘others’—described by Shelling (1966) as the ‘dark side of social capital’—is a powerful way in which antagonism between social groups will result in violent forms of social mobilization because it fuels social discontent and grievances and also facilitates the recruitment of those willing to fight (Bauer et al. 2013; Petersen 2001; Straus 2006). Two forms of violent mobilization can emerge. The first—*organized violent mobilization*—is characterized by organized social groups taking up arms and other forms of violent action to resolve disputes with other social groups (or the state). This is likely to occur in contexts of group antagonism when within-group coordination is high. This is because high levels of within-group coordination will ensure that the

group is able to recruit and retain their members, support their commitment to the groups' causes, and mobilize support outside the group to shape wider political agendas (Daly 2016; Lewis 2020; McAdam et al. 1996). For instance, internal group cohesion is mentioned by Petersen (2001) as a condition for successful rebellion, while Wood (2003: 119) discusses how the trajectory of *campesinos* in El Salvador from political mobilization to armed insurgency was linked to the intensification of coordination within their social group as different factions came together: 'a trajectory of political mobilization began with their involvement in Bible study groups. For others, it began with conventional efforts at labor organization. For still others, it began with covert collaboration with guerrilla organizations', through the work of 'networks [that] were built in the course of mobilization' and a growing 'sense of community, lacking since the violence of 1932, that was a necessary condition for development of organized resistance in El Salvador' (ibid.: 120). Other studies have related the ability of groups to recruit fighters to their levels of internal coordination and discipline (Weinstein 2006), the strength of peer-pressure and community norms (Petersen 2001), socio-emotional motivations and identity, including 'pleasure of agency' (Wood 2003), and forms of collective self-esteem and group worth (Horowitz 1985). In the case of El Salvador again, Wood (2003) describes how a sense of shared identity and values ensured high levels of within-group coordination in a setting of high antagonism between peasants and the elites that formed the state in El Salvador. Along similar lines, Calhoun (1991) argues that protesters defied authorities in Beijing in the summer of 1989 at great physical cost due to a strong shared sense of honour, which facilitated coordination.

Low within-group coordination in contexts of high levels of between-group social antagonism is likely to generate less coordinated sporadic civil movements with low staying power, such as violent protests that quickly subside (Branch and Mampilly 2015), or the situations of 'no peace no war' described in Richards (2005), where alliances and antagonisms between social groups shift depending on the political context at certain periods of time, and where there are no solid or permanent alliances between social groups. This may be also the case when competition (for instance, for jobs, land, or other scarce resources), rather than solidarity and reciprocity, dominates the relationship between social groups (Scott 1976). In these contexts where social groups are not able to organize themselves to actively fight the 'other', antagonism between social groups may result in *fragmented violent mobilization*. Examples include, for instance, the situations experienced in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Somalia, or Yemen, where social agreements are not possible, but local (armed) elites do not have the coordination capacity to engage in more organized, larger-scale forms of violence.

4 Contextual factors: social mobilization in weak and strong states

It is important to remember that between-group relations and within-group coordination are determined to a large extent by the context in which social groups coexist. Notably, the nature of the state and the way in which social, economic, and political institutions are organized are important factors in shaping the emergence (or not) of violent social movements. This is because the state—defined as a set of governing institutions with the monopoly over the use of violence in a specific sovereign territory—is central to how social conflicts in society are solved. In addition, the state also shapes the opportunities and constraints under which social movements and collective action operate (Jenkins and Klandermans 1995). The interaction between two factors may determine how states affect the probability of violent social movements erupting. These are the strength of state institutions and their bureaucratic apparatus, and whether the political system is characterized by democracy or autocracy, which in turn shapes the strength of the civil society.

Strong democratic states may be more likely to be able to support the peaceful resolution of social conflicts between social groups because they have in place more inclusive institutions (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006) and are governed through ‘open orders’ (North et al. 2009), and are thus able to use (non-violent) resources to address emerging grievances. Strong democratic structures will also allow citizens (in groups or individual) to organize collectively and demand social change through voting, as well as through the participation in political parties, trade unions, and other civic society organizations. In these contexts, the likelihood of either organized or fragmented violent mobilization emerging is minimized because key institutions of governance—courts; police and the judicial; power-sharing; and redistributive structures—are able to solve most societal cooperation problems (i.e. they ensure that different social groups are able to agree and learn to live together) and commitment problems (i.e. the legitimate monopoly of violence by the state ensures that the non-use of violence is enforced successfully) (Justino 2022; World Bank 2017).

Strong states may also be governed through autocratic and extractive institutions (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006). These institutions may be able to curtail organized violent mobilization (or any form of social movements) using repression or effective ‘despotic control’ (Mann 1988), to the extent that no form of social mobilization takes place. If it does, it is repressed effectively by force. Any form of social mobilization—violent or non-violent—is likely to be fragmented and short-lived under strong autocratic regimes. However, high levels of repression may result in high levels of violence, which in turn may threaten the strength of the regime and its institutions over the longer term. If within-group coordination becomes strong and social groups are sufficiently motivated to face and rebel against repression (Lichbach 1987; Petersen 2001), organized violent mobilization may emerge. As argued in Goodwin (2001: 3), violent social movements are ‘directly a response to political oppression and violence, typically brutal and indiscriminate’. Wood (2003: 120) adds that in the case of El Salvador ‘repression forged insurgency because it reinforced the framing of the government as a profoundly unjust authority’, a process that is likely to be particularly at play in highly unequal societies with strongly repressive states. A more recent example is that of the recent Arab Spring events where different social groups mobilized against autocratic states as repression increased and the social contract broke down (Devarajan and Ianchovichina 2018). The emergence of organized violent mobilization in strong autocratic regimes will depend fundamentally on the capacity of civil movements to organize themselves in the face of repression (Rozenas and Zhukov 2019), a factor that has been strengthened in recent events by the expansion of social media (Dowd et al. 2020; Enikolopov et al. 2020; Manacorda and Tesei 2020).

Weak states—defined as those unable to fulfil their basic functions of public good provision, taxation or holding the monopoly of violence and upholding the rule of law—may be more open to challenges from their own population or opposing groups because they are more vulnerable to economic, political, or military shocks caused by internal or external factors (Skocpol 1979; World Bank 2011), or because the opportunity for those that fight to move into other forms of political and economic life is more limited (Tilly and Tarrow 2015). Weak states, however, often go hand-in-hand with weak civil society organizations as the weakness of state institutions often permeates into low ability of civil society to organize and thrive. The probability of large organized social movements—violent or non-violent—emerging in weak states is likely to be low. Those where democracy is the dominant form of political organization may experience fragmented forms of social mobilization at times when differences between social groups emerge. Weak autocracies may be prone to either fragmented non-violent or violent mobilization. Violence may emerge, as argued in Huntington (1968: 5), because ‘[t]he rates of social mobilization and the expansion of political participation are high; [but] the rates of political organization and institutionalization are low’. Weak states are particularly prone to violence when their institutions of governance breakdown along three key dimensions: the unconstrained power exercised by certain individuals or social

groups against others in society, failed bargaining agreements between different social groups, and the exclusion of relevant individuals and groups from the bargaining arena (Justino 2018; World Bank 2017). Moreover, because violence affects the distribution of economic, social, and political power among groups and shapes norms of behaviour, values, and attitudes, we tend to observe vicious cycles of state weakness and violence where violence becomes part of how governance is exercised and how institutions are built—such as is currently the case in Iraq, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Yemen, the Central African Republic, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, among others.

5 Conclusion and future research agendas

The main aim of this paper was to lay out theoretical conditions under which social mobilization in unequal societies may result in violent collective action and, ultimately, in violent conflict. The paper explored two key mechanisms which determine whether social mobilization and collective action will become violent in contexts of high economic inequality. The first is the level of social cooperation *between* different social groups that are formed during the process of social mobilization. The second is the efficacy of collective action to drive change, which is in turn shaped by the ability of individuals *within* groups to coordinate their actions. Forms of social mobilization become violent when antagonism is the dominant form of social interaction between different social groups in unequal societies *and* when each of these social groups exhibits high levels of internal collective coordination. Violence is unlikely to emerge in societies with high levels of between-group cooperation as common interests and norms of reciprocity may maintain cordial relations between groups at different points of the income distribution. Violence is also unlikely to emerge when within-group coordination is weak—and, if it does, it is prone to being sporadic and fragmented. The emergence of violent collective action may also depend on the institutional setting of each given society, including the strength of its state institutions and the dominant political system. Notably, in democratic settings, citizens may be able to organize themselves collectively and demand social change through non-violent means such as the electoral process and/or through participation in political parties, trade unions, and other civil society organizations.

This theoretical framework paves the ground for future research agendas on the links between economic inequality and violent conflict. A promising future line of research has to do with the specific conditions that facilitate the emergence of violent mobilization in unequal societies. Until now, social scientists have been largely preoccupied with understanding whether economic inequality may affect the onset of violent conflict. The literature is slowly converging towards the consensus that economic inequality is associated with forms of violent conflict when it coincides with disparities between social groups. What we are missing is a systematic understanding of *how and when* economic inequality may shape the likelihood of violent conflict emerging in specific contexts. The analysis in this paper suggests that social and political institutions and the social organization of different societies mediate the relationship between economic inequality and violent political conflict. The paper argued that economic inequality will result in violent conflict when it leads to high levels of antagonism between well-organized social groups. This result, in turn, raises important questions about the factors that affect within- and between-group relations, as well as the institutional settings that underpin such relations. Moving the debate from the measurement of correlations between economic inequality and violent conflict to new analysis of the factors that mediate such a relationship will allow us to better understand the complex interaction between inequality and political violence in different institutional settings where state, elites, and civil society interact. In particular, future research will need to unpack further what exact institutional and normative settings may promote or repel cooperation between social groups and what factors may ensure collective coordination within different groups in society. This paper has

discussed the role of two specific mechanisms, but it is possible that other mechanisms founded on individual and group preferences and identities may also be relevant. It is hoped that the focus of this paper on the mechanisms governing the relationship between economic inequality and political violence opens new avenue for research that address this important ‘*how*’ question.

Second, the discussion in this paper focused on the relationship between economic inequality, social mobilization, and violent conflict but left open issues around what levels or types of inequality may matter for violent social mobilization and collective action. In particular, it is likely that the effects of economic inequality on social mobilization and collective action depend on the levels of initial inequality (Bardhan et al. 2006), and the ways in which inequalities manifest themselves (Justino and Moore 2015). Societies with lower initial levels of economic inequality are likely to be better able to ensure that different social groups share common interests, as well as the emergence of stronger norms of reciprocity between social groups that will support higher levels of social cooperation. Social cooperation is unlikely to persist when inequalities reach high levels. However, that threshold is to date unknown. Inequalities beyond economic inequality and intersections between inequalities may also matter. Recent research has shown that political inequalities and the political and social exclusion of certain social groups may be more likely to increase the probability of armed conflict than economic inequalities that do not translate into political and social exclusion (Cederman et al. 2011; Cederman et al. 2013). As economic inequalities rise across the world, it is likely that political and social decision-making processes will be captured by those at the top of the income distribution to serve their own interests at the expense of others in society (Piketty 2014). Such processes of social and political capture by those at the top have been at the heart of ongoing and growing protests across the world, such as the Occupy movement and Black Lives Matter. At times some of these protests have turned violent, but it remains unclear whether these movements have been able to lead to effective change. Future research will need to build on this work and take into careful consideration how different types of social, economic, political, or cultural inequalities may interact in shaping the functioning of social movements and their forms of collective action in the years to come.

The third area of research is about measurement. Advancing research on the issues raised in this paper faces considerable empirical challenges, particularly in terms of the availability of data on different types of social movements and their characteristics that can be compared across countries. Recently, there have been notable improvements in the collection and compilation of systematic data on levels and evolution of inequality (Atkinson and Piketty 2007, 2010). The availability of data on social mobilization is more limited. Several advances in the collection of datasets—such as the Afrobarometer, the Latin American Opinion Project (LAPOP), the Asian Barometer, the Arab Barometer, the European Social Survey, the World Values Survey, and the Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes (NAVCO) dataset (Chenoweth and Lewis 2013)—have led to new research on these issues (Justino and Martorano 2018, 2019). However, there is still much progress to be made in the identification, measurement, and analysis of the causal mechanisms—such as those outlined in this paper—that may shape the relationship between inequality, social mobilization, and violent conflict. Recent developments at the intersection between economics and social psychology research has offered new insights into foundations of social cooperation and trust (see review in Cardenas and Carpenter 2008), but less so on how to measure between-group social cooperation or how to identify specific social groups in ways that may be comparable across different countries.

The theoretical framework developed in the paper has also important policy implications. In particular, it proposes a number of entry points for policy interventions that will create stronger incentives and improve the capacity of societies and governments to manage socio-political conflicts without the use of violence. These entry points take place at two levels. The first is on the relationship between inequality and social mobilization, by ensuring that inequality does not

substantially weaken social cooperation between different social groups. Social cooperation may be maintained by the strength of common interests and norms of reciprocity between social groups even in unequal societies. However, there will be a threshold beyond which social cooperation may be unsustainable. The second is on the relationship between social mobilization and violence, by ensuring that collective action and processes of social mobilization do not result in violent conflict. Many of these interventions are well known. Notably, interventions that strengthen the social contract between states and citizens and between different social groups are likely to be able to sustain higher levels of social cooperation. Examples of such policies include progressive income taxation systems, social policies that improve the distribution of human capital and the equality of opportunities, the implementation of safety nets and social protection programmes, and so forth (Atkinson 2015; Piketty 2014; Stiglitz 2013). Important measures that may prevent social mobilization from becoming violent include anti-discriminatory legislation related to gender, race, religion, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, and the improvement of social mobility through more equalizing social, welfare, and anti-segregation policies (see discussion in Stiglitz 2013). For instance, recent studies have shown that government welfare spending can lead to reductions in political conflict when associated with improvements in levels of social trust (Justino 2015; Justino and Martorano 2019) and when it positively affects perceptions of inequality (Justino and Martorano 2016, 2019). The theoretical framework developed in this paper suggests, however, the need for future research to better understand how and when such policy interventions may strengthen social cooperation and collective coordination in ways that avoid violence.

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