

# Refusing to Cooperate with Armed Groups

*Civilian Agency and Civilian Noncooperation in Armed Conflicts\**

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## Abstract

Conflict scholars have increasingly stressed the importance of taking civilian agency seriously for understanding of how conflicts operate on the ground and the social legacies they leave behind. Among the different expressions of civilian agency that this literature has studied, instances in which civilians refuse to collaborate with armed groups have captured particular attention. While this development is to be praised, the proliferation of neighboring terms (e.g. “voice”, “autonomy”, “civil action”, “oppositional agency”, “resilience”, and “resistance”, among others) menaces the further progression of this intellectually stimulating and policy relevant field of inquiry. In dialogue with the growing literature on civilian agency, and drawing on an established literature of concept formation, I propose civilian noncooperation as the root concept to capture these instances and specify its meaning by identifying both necessary and accompanying attributes. I discuss the advantages of this concept and assess it vis á vis alternative terms and conceptualizations. Finally, I illustrate how these conceptual foundations provide a more solid basis for empirical research by introducing a descriptive typology and a database of civilian noncooperation campaigns in the Colombian civil war. Research on noncooperation holds great potential to improve existing theories of conflict, as well as to inform crucial policy debates, including the protection of civilians, peace-building, and post-conflict reconstruction.

**Keywords** — civilian agency, civilian noncooperation, concept formation, internal armed conflict, Colombian civil war

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# 1 Introduction

Today Camila is a pivotal political and social leader in her community. As a young woman, she lived through the worst years of a civil war in her hometown of San Carlos, in northwestern Colombia, which witnessed alarming levels of war-related violence between 1985 and 2010. At least 33 massacres took place, 156 forced disappearances were registered, and 78 people fell victim to landmines. An estimated 75% of the population of San Carlos fled during this period (Grupo de Memoria Historica 2011). Despite most of Camila’s relatives, friends, and neighbors fleeing or dying, she remained.

When asked how she managed to navigate war in San Carlos, she described several strategies she, and the other few residents who remained, adopted. Among stories of people collaborating or joining armed factions in hopes of protection, she shared the experiences of residents who banded together to refuse to cooperate with armed organizations — challenging the explicit and implicit rules they imposed on the community. A group of schoolteachers, standing against armed groups’ orders and threats, coordinated to every morning walk together to school and teach whoever dared to come to class. A group of youths organized a theatre group to avoid recruitment and spread a message of non-participation in the conflict. A group of high school students organized ludic social activities in the evenings to reactivate social interaction and challenge an implicit dusk-to-dawn curfew.<sup>1</sup>

As in San Carlos, civilians in multiple conflict zones have devised a myriad of innovative ways to avoid cooperating with armed groups. They have done so to protect themselves and their communities, their (often scarce) resources, and their way of life. During the height of Baghdad’s sectarian violence in 2006, for example, residents of Al Karadah, a Shiite-dominated neighborhood on the east bank of the Dijla River, refused

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<sup>1</sup>Interview ID 77. Organizer. August 2015. I cite formal interviews as “Interview” and for each interview I provide an ID number, the general profile of the informant (i.e., community leader, village resident, external actor, combatant/ex-combatant) and the date of the interview. Informal conversations are cited as “Field Notes”, for which I also provide the general profile of the informant and the date. To protect respondents’ identities, I use pseudonyms and do not provide exact locations of interviews. The planning and implementation of field work for the larger project this paper is part of (Masullo 2017) sought to meet high standards of both rigor and ethics. The project received ethical clearance by the European University Institute in February 2014.

to host, support, or join Al Qaeda or the Ja'ish Mahdi Army (Carpenter 2012, 196). Similarly, in the recent Syrian civil war, Muslim communities west of Aleppo refused to collaborate with Al Qaeda and challenged the group's dominant narrative by openly expressing in banners "we don't want you here;" "we don't need your help."<sup>2</sup> Civilians have responded in similar ways to criminal organizations. In 2011, female residents of the small Mexican town of Cherán formed a *ronda comunitaria* (local guard force) to prevent drug cartels and the Police from entering their town and refused to take part in the criminal network operating in the area (Pressly 2016).

These experiences do not neatly fit the traditional and most established conceptual categories in the conflict literature. While the core focus of this literature has been dedicated to the armed groups themselves, recruitment and different forms of civilian support have dominated studies interested in the role civilians play in these settings. In this paper I contend that the concept of *civilian noncooperation*, defined as a set of actions that civilians living in conflict zones deploy to refuse to collaborate with each and every armed groups present in their territories, best captures these responses.

Students of armed conflict, in particular those interested in the micro-dynamics of civil war, have increasingly explored how ordinary civilians experience conflict and how they interact with armed groups. This rapidly growing literature has covered a wide range of civilian responses, providing a comprehensive understanding of civilian agency in conflict settings. Among these responses, instances in which civilians individually and collectively refuse to cooperate with armed groups have particularly captured scholars' attention. While this research has undoubtedly made important contributions, a variety of terms have been used to refer to these instances. These include "voice", "autonomy", "civil action", "oppositional agency", "resistance" (with multiple adjectives: civil/civilian/social/passive), and "resilience", among others.

This lack of consistent terminology risks hindering further progression of this nascent field of inquiry. Terms with similar meanings tend to crowd around each other and, as meaning and conceptual boundaries are often left poorly defined and underspecified,

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<sup>2</sup>Personal communication with Syrian local leader. October 2016.

arguments employing them risk flying past each other. Even when carefully defined, meanings (and, consequently, operationalization and measurement) vary across studies, making it difficult to assess, compare and aggregate findings, as well as to collect comparable data within and across conflicts. As in other critical areas of conflict research (see, e.g., Staniland 2012; Dorff 2019; Moncada 2017; Bateson 2020), we lack solid and unified conceptual foundations to describe and explain the complexities associated with the ways in which civilians respond to armed organizations in conflict zones.

Term proliferation and inconsistency in definitions can get in the way of a clear understanding of the phenomena that we study (Gerring 1999) and threaten the collective advancement of entire research programs (Sartori 1970). Other fields of inquiry in political science and international relations have previously faced this impasse, with research on democratization (Collier and Levitsky 1997; Paxton 2000) and corporatism (Collier 1995) providing key examples. Term proliferation might be a normal stage in the development of a nascent and rapidly growing field, and it might even be a sign of vitality and fertility. Still, to make the most of these recent developments in the study of civilian responses to armed groups, and further advance in its theoretical and empirical exploration, future research will benefit from a more solid and unified conceptual foundation. These are needed to collectively and cumulatively deal with some of the most pressing research questions: How, when and where civilians are likely to respond in one way or the other? What outcomes do these different responses bring about, and how? How do they affect other conflict dynamics? Answers to these questions will not only help improve our understanding of how conflicts play out on the ground, but will also provide useful insights to critical policy areas such as the protection of civilians, peace building, and post-conflict reconstruction.

In dialogue with recent contributions to the study of civilian agency (cutting across multiple subfields: civil war, social movement, civil resistance, peace studies), and building on an established literature on concept formation in political science, this paper aims to contribute to the development and unification of these conceptual foundations. I aim to break descriptive and conceptual ground by focusing on one civilian response — civil-

ian noncooperation — and undertake three tasks that are fundamental for the formation of robust and empirically useful concepts.

First, I propose civilian noncooperation as a “root concept”, clarifying and refining its meaning by identifying its core attributes; that is, those that are *necessary* for conceptual membership (Goertz and Mahoney 2012). As a point of departure, this approach, analogous to the idea of “minimal definitions”, has the advantage of accommodating a wider set of possible research goals, as well as covering a larger number of empirical manifestations. As such, the concept is proposed to be narrow in *intension* and wide in *extension*.<sup>3</sup> As I identify these defining attributes, I discuss how noncooperation relates to other concepts in its semantic field and stress how it brings additional clarity relative to other terms currently used in the literature.

Second, to increase conceptual and analytic differentiation, I propose a set of demarcations that identify *optional* attributes that help characterize in more detail the diversity of empirical manifestations of civilian noncooperation. These optional attributes are likely to be of particular relevance for empirical research; as they may be used as the basis for inclusion/exclusion criteria for data collection and/or purposive case selection. With these demarcations researchers can increase the concept’s *intension* and decrease its *extension*.<sup>4</sup>

Third, to demonstrate how a clearly defined “root concept” — and choices made in light of a clear set of conceptual demarcations — facilitates a classificatory exercise that adds analytical clarity and refined focus for empirical research, I offer a descriptive typology of noncooperation. In addition, along with the typology, I introduce a database of campaigns of noncooperation in Colombia, illustrating how the conceptual foundations offered in this paper can effectively and consistently guide the task of collecting comparable data. To further establish the empirical grip of these conceptual foundations, I draw

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<sup>3</sup>The intension–extension framework is central in Sartori’s approach to concept formation. *Intension* refers to the meaning the concept calls for, largely dictated by the number of defining attributes; *extension* refers to the range of cases to which it can be applied (Sartori 1970, 1041; 1984, 24; see, also Goertz 2008).

<sup>4</sup>Moving from the first task to the second is equivalent to moving down Sartori’s “ladder of abstraction” (Sartori 1970, 1040; 1984, 44-46). The possibility to do so is crucial for allowing the concept to travel while avoiding conceptual stretching

on original empirical material from the Colombian civil war, as well as examples from several armed conflicts around the world drawn from secondary sources and consultations with country experts.

While this paper is conceptual, it promises to contribute to the theoretical and empirical advancement of the growing field of civilian responses in a number of key ways. First, carefully defined and demarcated concepts are central for delimiting objects of study, allowing us to explore “one thing at a time and different things at different times” (Sartori 1970, 1040). Second, conceptualization is fundamental for descriptive analysis (Gerring 2012), which, in turn, is essential for assessing causes and consequences and advancing causal inference (Collier and Levitsky 1997, 432). Third, unified concepts serve as fact-finding and fact-storing containers; in other words, they are crucial tools for data collection and carving out meaningful categories for coherently guiding empirical research (Sartori 1970, 1040, 1043).

The paper is structured as follows. In the next section, I briefly review the literature on civilian agency in conflict settings to map how the study of civilian responses has recently grown to include various courses of action beyond the traditional focus on recruitment, support and, more generally, violent interactions. In Section 3, I engage in the first and second tasks outlined above, while in Section 4, I take on the third task. In Section 5, I briefly illustrate policy implications of studying civilian noncooperation in three key areas: the protection of civilians, peace building, and post-conflict reconstruction. I conclude the paper in Section 6.

## 2 Civilian Responses to Armed Groups

“[G]uerrilla warfare basically derives from the masses and is supported by them, it can neither exist nor flourish if it separates itself from their sympathies and cooperation”. With these words, back in 1937, Mao Tse-Tung described the fundamental logic of irregular war (Mao 1961, Chap.1). Two decades later, military historian Peter Paret summarized French thinking on guerrilla warfare in strikingly similar terms: “Military power plays a

secondary role in such a contest; the decisive factor is the population, which is both the strongest force in the struggle as well as its primary object” (cited in Johnson 1962, 649). These statements, crystalized in the oft-cited “hearts and minds” maxim, demonstrate that civilians have long been recognized as central to the dynamics of internal war. They have been identified as indispensable for armed groups’ survival, for the advancement of their organizational goals and even for their revolutionary success.

The vast literature on civilian cooperation has, over the years, made important advancements in explaining the multiple forces leading civilians to join the ranks of armed organizations or support them in different ways. Research has shown how security-seeking considerations (Kalyvas 2006; Kalyvas and Kocher 2007), selective incentives and sanctions (Humphreys and Weinstein 2008), community structure and social norms (Petersen 2001), and moral, emotional and identity-based considerations (Wood 2003; Viterna 2013; Costalli and Ruggeri 2015) affect civilians’ decisions to join armed mobilization and/or support armed groups.

Yet, those who join the ranks of armed groups or actively support them constitute a minority of the entire population caught up in war. In a seminal study, Lichbach (1995, 8) estimated that active participants in rebellion account for about 5% of the population. Similarly, in a recent study of the 1992–1993 Georgian–Abkhaz war, Shesterina (2016) estimated that around 13% of the Abkhaz population mobilized to fight, while Wood (2003) found that civilian participation in insurgent movements in El Salvador fell below one-third. These proportions are in no way trivial. Still, they indicate that large numbers of civilians living in conflict areas do *not* cooperate with armed groups. What does this segment of the population do to navigate conflict?

Research on wartime migration provides a partial answer to this question, showing that a large number of civilians flee their homes.<sup>5</sup> Yet, this literature also confirms that many civilians stay put and openly recognizes that we know comparatively little about

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<sup>5</sup>For this literature, see, among others, Steele (2011, 2017), Adhikari (2013), Steele (2019a), Lichtenheld (2020), and Lubkemann (2008). While the emergent research on civilian agency tends to fall short in its conceptualization of the agency of displaced people, some of these works constitute clear exceptions. Internally displaced populations and refugees retain agency and can affect civil war dynamics, such as Syrians in Jordan who, by engaging in nonviolent mobilization, have helped the development of institutions based in rebel-held territories in Syrian (Khoury 2017).

the choices of those who avoid displacement (Steele 2011, 2017; Adhikari 2013).

For long, conflict scholars assumed that those who stay in their localities support the strongest faction or are complicit in its rule (e.g., Steele 2009, 426; Kalyvas 2006). Consequently, the conflict literature tended to overlook other possible courses of action available to civilians living in warzones.<sup>6</sup> However, this has recently begun to change, with scholars from different research traditions and fields exploring a larger set of civilian responses to armed groups, from avoidance and hidden forms of resistance to sophisticated forms of violent and nonviolent engagement. This emerging and rapidly growing literature has highlighted that civilians, even if constrained to varying degrees, far from helpless victims are tactical agents engaged in the difficult task of navigating war.

This important shift can be attributed to at least three broad developments. First, following Kalyvas' (2003, 481) foundational observation that civilians "cannot be treated as passive, manipulated, or invisible actors," students of civil war have paid increased attention to the role that civilians play in shaping war dynamics, including violence (Kalyvas 2006; Kaplan 2017), communal conflict (Krause 2018), rebel governance (Mampilly 2011; Arjona 2016; Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly 2015; Rubin 2019; Gowrinathan and Mampilly 2019; Mampilly and Stewart 2020), and civil defense and militia formation (Jentzsch; Jentzsch, Kalyvas, and Schubiger 2015; Blocq 2014; Schubiger 2019). This literature has also shifted the attention away from violent interactions, with scholars exploring different expressions of civilian nonviolent action (Krause 2018; Masullo 2017, 2020; Kaplan 2017).

Second, a new wave of literature on civil resistance, largely stimulated by Chenoweth and Stephan's (2011) ground-breaking work, has stressed the transformative power unarmed, ordinary people have in the face of highly repressive actors and huge power asymmetries. While the stock and trade of this scholarship has been mass campaigns with maximalist goals against authoritarian and/or hybrid regimes, it has also stimulated research on more localized nonviolent action in internal armed conflicts, such as civil and criminal wars (e.g., Dorff and Maves Braithwaite 2018; Hallward, Masullo, and Mouly

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<sup>6</sup>A clear exception is the anthropological literature on conflict that has focused on the daily lives of ordinary people living in conflict areas (e.g., Lubkemann 2008; Nordstrom 1997; Shah 2018; Stoll 1993).

2017; Mouly and Hernández Delgado 2019).<sup>7</sup>

Third, building on the seminal work on Zones of Peace (Hancock and Mitchell 2007; Mitchell and Nan 1997) and inspired by the “local turn” in peace studies (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013), there has been a growing interest in local governance and civilian agency. Scholars have come to explore more closely how civilians can contribute to peace building and protection, for example by establishing peace communities/territories/committees (e.g., Mouly, Garrido, and Idler 2016; Masullo 2015; Mouly, Idler, and Garrido 2015; Autesserre 2021) and engaging in civilian self-protection (e.g., Baines and Paddon 2012; Jose and Medie 2015).

Together, these developments have led to a more comprehensive understanding of civilian agency in conflict settings, with a larger set of civilian responses being explored and a greater recognition of instances in which civilians have refused to cooperate with armed groups. Yet, this has come with a proliferation of terms that menaces the further advancement of this emerging field. Scholars have used a multiplicity of different terms to refer to similar but not necessarily equivalent responses. This includes “voice” (Barter 2014), “civilian autonomy” (Kaplan 2017; Dorff 2015), “civil action” (Avant et al. 2019), “resilience” (Dorff 2015; Carpenter 2012; Krause 2018), and “resistance” – with different adjectives: civil, civilian, societal, passive – (Arjona 2015; Ley, Mattiace, and Trejo 2019; Mouly and Hernández Delgado 2019).

As in related subfields, such as the study of vigilantism (Moncada 2017; Bateson 2020), this work has not coalesced into a coherent research program. While the terms used in the literature are clearly related to each other, the boundaries among them and with other terms in their semantic field (e.g., cooperation, fleeing) are often left underspecified. This lack of common language leaves us with an ambiguous understanding of the substantive contours of the phenomena (the *intension*), and with no clear inclusion/exclusion criteria for empirical referents (the *extension*). In the next section, I take on the task of

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<sup>7</sup>While internal armed conflicts have not been the focus of the civil resistance literature, some researchers have compared the drivers of this maximalist nonviolent campaigns and civil war onset (Chenoweth and Lewis 2013; Cunningham 2013). Moreover, more recent versions of this literature’s main data source, the Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes (NAVCO), will likely enable the examination of more localized forms of nonviolent action in conflict settings (e.g., NAVCO3; Chenoweth, Pinckney, and Lewis 2018; and NVAVC; Chenoweth, Hendrix, and Hunter 2019).

contributing to the development of more solid and unified conceptual foundations.

### 3 Defining Civilian Noncooperation

Two interrelated central tasks in developing “rigorous and useful concepts” are: (a) clarifying and/or refining meaning; and (b) situating the concept within its semantic field – i.e., the constellation of related or neighboring concepts and terms (Collier, LaPorte, and Seawright 2012, 222; Gerring 1999, 382-284).<sup>8</sup> In this section, I undertake these two tasks. I propose civilian noncooperation as a “root concept”, clarifying and refining its meaning by identifying its core attributes; that is, those that are necessary for conceptual membership (Goertz and Mahoney 2012).<sup>9</sup> As a point of departure, I opt for a definition that focuses on a small number of core attributes that produce a minimal, viable standard of civilian noncooperation (i.e., a concept with narrow *intension*). This has the advantage of accommodating a larger number of possible research goals, as well as covering a larger number of empirical manifestations (i.e., broad in its *extension*) (Sartori 1970, 1040; 1984, 44-46). While identifying these core attributes, I discuss how noncooperation relates to other concepts in its semantic field (e.g., cooperation, defection), as well as how it brings additional clarity relative to existing conceptualizations and terms used in the literature (e.g., autonomy, voice, resistance).<sup>10</sup>

Noncooperation is one possible course of action available to civilians living in conflict areas to respond to armed groups’ violence and pressures.<sup>11</sup> As civilian responses are likely to be contingent upon changing local conflict dynamics, they commonly shift over time in light of emerging conditions.<sup>12</sup> Bintu, a young woman in war-torn Liberia in the

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<sup>8</sup>Task (b) speaks directly to “field utility”, one of Gerring’s (1999) criteria for “conceptual goodness”.

<sup>9</sup>In referring to it as a “root concept”, I do not imply that this is *the* correct definition of civilian noncooperation. It is proposed as an adequate minimal point of departure to start unifying conceptual foundations in the study of civilian responses, and as a springboard for adding further demarcations and forming subtypes. For “root concepts”, see Collier and Levitsky (1997).

<sup>10</sup>This task is directly related to “differentiation”, another of Gerring’s (1999) criteria for “conceptual goodness”.

<sup>11</sup>Since my goal is not to ascertain moral or legal responsibility, I define civilians broadly to include all individuals who do not participate in the military activities of any established armed organization. This includes civil servants, political activists, and all those living in warzones that even while collaborating with armed groups beyond a coerced minimum, do not take part in any military activity (Masullo and O’connor 2017).

<sup>12</sup>As warned by Fujii (2011, 8), while the categories we use in conflict and peace research are static,

early 1990s, provides an illustrative example: she first tried to remain as uninvolved as possible in the war, but then identified as a victim in order to be eligible for humanitarian aid; later in the conflict she cooperated with one side in exchange for protection via girlfriending, and finally took up arms (Utas 2005).<sup>13</sup> Consequently, noncooperation designates a type of behavior, not a fixed role or attribute of individuals and communities.

The proposed definition, thus, focuses on the behaviors that constitute noncooperation. Treating noncooperation as such has clear advantages vis á vis other terms used in the literature that instead designate attributes of individuals or communities, such as resilience and autonomy. While resilience has been used to describe instances in which communities refuse to cooperate with armed groups to retain agency and keep sectarian violence at bay (Carpenter 2012; Krause 2018), resilience can also be used for responses other than noncooperation (i.e., quickly recovering from flight) and noncooperation can be practiced by individuals and communities with low levels of resilience. Similarly, while civilian autonomy, understood as “independence in decision-making and the freedom from violence required to sustain it” (Kaplan 2017, 45-46), can definitely facilitate noncooperation, it is not a requirement for it (noncooperation may involve claims to varying degrees of autonomy). Moreover, civilian autonomy can also facilitate responses other than noncooperation (e.g., a collective decision to cooperate with one side). This understanding has important implications for conceptualization (and subsequent empirical research): it requires to take careful stock of alternative courses of action and locate noncooperation within that broader range of possible responses.

To accomplish this, I use Arjona’s (2017) typology of civilian choices in war zones as a starting point to further develop the concept of noncooperation (see Figure 2). When armed groups are present in an given locality, residents must choose whether to stay or leave. Those who leave choose between different destinations in order to minimize the

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conflicts are dynamic, and this dynamism can shift actors’ relations, perspectives, motivations and identities.

<sup>13</sup>The novel *A Constellation of Vital Phenomena* by Anthony Narra provides a vivid illustration of these shifting roles in the context of the Chechen wars.

The fact that civilian choices are not fixed is also evident in other violent settings. During the Holocaust, for example, as the extent of Nazi plans to exterminate Europe’s Jewish population became more widely understood, ordinary Jews began to move away from compliance with the Nazis and engage in other responses to confront danger and try to survive (Finkel 2017, 99-100).

costs of displacement and/or maximize the prospects of security (Steele 2009, 2019a). If they stay, residents must choose between cooperating and not cooperating with armed groups.<sup>14</sup> Cooperation designates behaviors that directly benefit armed organizations and can be grouped into three broad types: obedience (to an armed group’s order), spontaneous/voluntary support, and enlistment (Arjona 2017, 2019).

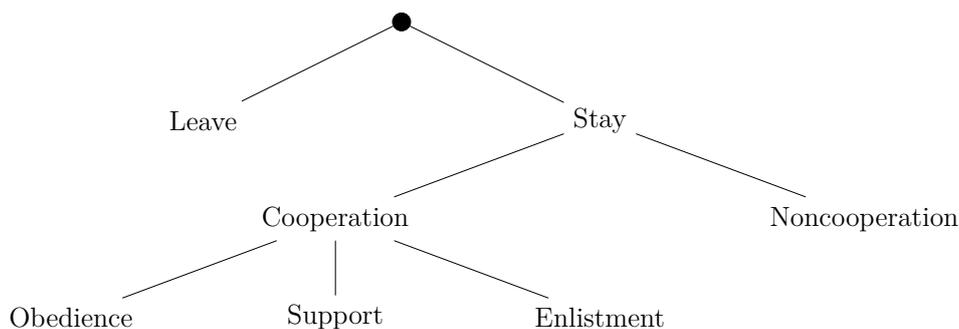


Figure 1: Portfolio of Civilian Responses<sup>15</sup>

The flip-side of cooperation is noncooperation. Arjona (2019) takes as noncooperation any act that directly harms the armed group. In an effort to further specify its meaning, I define it as a set of behaviors by which civilians *refuse* to collaborate with *each and every* armed group, including state and non-state armed forces.<sup>16</sup> It is through this refusal that noncooperation negatively affects armed groups. Sometimes it can directly and physically harm them, as when civilians organize violence of their own, but in many others it might just compromise their strategic interests, as when civilians decide not to provide information or shelter.

While noncooperation is defined as the flip-side of cooperation, this does not imply defining it via symmetrical negation or residually (by what it is not), and consequently noncooperation should not be understood merely as the negative pole of coop-

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<sup>14</sup>To be sure, leaving could be considered a refusal to cooperate, and in some conflicts civilians in exile have supported campaigns of noncooperation. However, my conceptualization focuses on the ways in which civilians respond to and interact with armed groups in their localities.

<sup>15</sup>Arjona’s (2017) disaggregates noncooperation into defection, disobedience, and resistance. As my aim here is to further specify the meaning of noncooperation, I do not include these types in the figure. However, throughout the paper I explicitly discuss how my proposed specification of the concept relates to these three types.

<sup>16</sup>In this definition I treat cooperation and collaboration as synonyms. Yet, I reckon that in some historical contexts, such as the Holocaust, this difference is important. See Finkel (2017, 72-73).

eration – i.e., the absence of cooperation –, like (negative) peace would be the absence of war. Cooperation serves to specify the “termination” of noncooperation, but does not define it (Sartori 1970, 1042). Not only the absence of cooperation might imply other behaviors (e.g. fleeing), but most importantly, the core defining attributes of noncooperation go beyond the absence of the attributes that define cooperation. This is the case because noncooperation is the *refusal* to collaborate and, as such, it involves *action*.<sup>17</sup>

This refusal might involve acts of commission, omission or combinations of both.<sup>18</sup> However – and this takes use to a second core attribute –, these acts must circumvent the explicit and/or implicit conventional channels established by armed groups and/or push the boundaries of what they consider permissible acts.<sup>19</sup> Specifying this attribute is important, as it draws a clearer boundary with cooperation and adds clarity in meaning vis á vis other terms used in the literature. It excludes more routine civilian actions, such as communicating complaints and providing feedback to armed groups through channels established by the latter. Even if civilians might manifest discontent with armed groups via these channels, these actions do not necessarily constitute expressions of noncooperation. Not only they do not affect armed groups negatively, but they can also benefit them. In spaces governed by rebels, leaving room for these actions can even be a strategy of governance aimed to legitimize rebel rule.

This has been in fact the case with several notorious armed organizations, such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in Colombia, the Free Aceh Movement in Indonesia, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka and the Taliban in Afghanistan, which established systems of “civilian representatives” or “advisory committees” to facilitate communication and seek feedback from communities to help them maintain and/or reinforce their control (Barter 2014; Arjona 2016; Zürcher 2019; Gowrinathan

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<sup>17</sup>By stressing that noncooperation is more than the absence of the attributes of cooperation, the concept gains depth – another of Gerring’s (1999) criteria of “conceptual goodness”. In concept formation, important shortcomings have been identified in the practice of defining via symmetrical negation (Goertz 2019, Chap. 3; Gerring 1999, 380).

<sup>18</sup>For example, disobedience, one of the forms of noncooperation identified by Arjona (2017), is often based on acts of omission.

<sup>19</sup>Here I draw on the contentious politics framework (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001) and recent civil resistance scholarship (Schock 2013). See also Gowrinathan and Mampilly (2019) for the importance of this attribute in the context of rebel governance.

and Mampilly 2019).<sup>20</sup> Despite this important empirical fact, the literature has lumped together these actions with expression of noncooperation under broader terms such as “voice” (Barter 2014; Kaplan 2017) and “civil action” (Avant et al. 2019).<sup>21</sup>

This second attribute also improves differentiation relative to “civilian autonomy”. From its definition as “independence in decision-making and the freedom from violence required to sustain it” (Kaplan 2017, 46), it is unclear when autonomy amounts to negatively affecting armed groups as opposed to facilitating their goals (see also Steele 2019b). In fact, under some circumstances armed groups might welcome civilian autonomy, as it can enable communities to mobilize information and resources more efficiently. This was the case, for example, in some villages in the Eastern Mindanao region of the Philippines, where the New People’s Army relied on organized, autonomous communities to secure territorial control, as it facilitated the collection of revolutionary taxes and enhanced close monitoring (Rubin 2019).

This lack of clear boundaries vis á vis other terms in the semantic field is problematic, as it reduces conceptual validity in three key dimensions: coherence, differentiation and field utility (Gerring 1999, 373–379, 382–384). In this respect, civilian noncooperation exhibits more internal coherence and has more discriminating power than similar terms used in the literature, something that will likely prove crucial for gathering better, comparable data for empirical research (Sartori 1970, 1039; Gerring 1999, 373–379).

Finally, a third core attribute of noncooperation pertains to what contentious politics scholars refer to as the targets of claims (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). The proposed definition of noncooperations explicitly stresses that the targets of claims are *each and every* armed actor civilians interact with in their localities, including state and non-state armed forces. This might be only one faction, as in situations of hegemonic control by one faction, or multiple, as in areas where control is disputed by two or more factions. Moreover, this attribute specifies that the targets of claims can involve both non-state

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<sup>20</sup>This has also been the case for drug trade organization operating in criminal conflicts. For example, in one of Rio’s largest *favelas* (slums), Rocinha, drug syndicates leaders have established councils to mediate conflicts between traffickers and community leaders (Glenny 2016).

<sup>21</sup>The term “oppositional agency” is an explicit exception in this regard. See Gowrinathan and Mampilly (2019).

and state armed groups, which is fundamental as armed conflict fragments space locally and local agents of authority and repression can be state as much as non-state (Kalyvas 2006; Tilly 1978). As such, this conceptualization accounts for a broader range of possible targets of claims relative to existing conceptualizations and other terms used in the literature. For example, the concept of noncooperation – as originally used by (Arjona 2017) – refers exclusively to non-state armed groups; the term “civil resistance” tends to privilege state actors as the object of claims; and other terms such as “oppositional agency” or “autonomy” commonly leave the “vis á vis whom” underspecified.

Moreover, this attribute helps overcome existing ambiguities left by existing conceptualizations. For example, defection, defined as aiding the rival faction or switching sides, and covering acts such as offering the rival group spontaneous support or enlisting in its ranks, has been often subsumed under noncooperation despite of clearly benefiting one armed group (e.g., Arjona 2017, 762–763; 2019, 233; Kalyvas 2006, 104). If we understand noncooperation as a type of behavior and take into consideration all armed groups civilians interact with, defection is unequivocally an expression of cooperation. When civilians defect, the type of behavior does *not* change, it just shifts from one faction to the other. By ruling out this expression of cooperation from its conceptual space, the concept of noncooperation gains both in internal coherence and external differentiation, becoming a better bounded concept (Gerring 1999, 175).

In a similar way, this last attribute brings domain clarity vis á vis the widely used (and often abused) term “resistance”. In its familiar and historically circumscribed conception that emerged from the World War II, resistance largely involved supporting one faction to resist occupation or extermination, such as the Polish and Jewish underground resistance groups assisting the Soviet Union in its struggle against the Nazis shortly after the German occupation (Finkel 2017, Chap. 7; see also Petersen 2001). In this sense, it involves cooperating with one side. The widely familiar adjective *partigiano* (partisan), describing combatants in the Italian resistance, clearly illustrates this point.<sup>22</sup> While noncooperation is less familiar and has less resonance than resistance, it avoids clashing

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<sup>22</sup>The semi-autobiographical novel, *Il Partigiano Johnny* by Beppe Finoglio, provides a detailed and fascinating account of the choices made by partisans in the resistance movement in Northern Italy.

with this historically circumscribed usage,<sup>23</sup> as well as it prevents us from calling resistance – with its many adjectives – pretty much everything civilians do to survive and navigate conflict and protect themselves from violence, as has tended to happen in the literature to date (see. e.g., Mégret 2009).

Yet, the way noncooperation is defined here gains in familiarity and resonance in that it is largely consistent with the use of the term in other fields and traditions of political thought. For example, the proposed concept is consistent with its use in the works of Lev Tolstoy, Mahatma Gandhi and Gene Sharp (see Tolstoy 2010; Gandhi 2001, 102–176; Sharp 1973, Vol 2; Chap. 4 – 7), where noncooperation is rooted in a theory of power that stresses that the authority of the ruler rests on the consent of the ruled (Gandhi 2001, 157, 161; Sharp 1973, Vol 1; Chap. 1). As the literature on non-state governance in both political and criminal conflicts has emphasized, armed organizations aspire to control and govern civilians to varying degrees and in different forms. As such, their authority and power is relational: if civilians refuse to cooperate, their authority is weakened. In this sense, civilian noncooperation underscores the *political* nature of combatant–civilian interactions – long overlooked given prevailing views of civilians as helpless victims and/or resources to be plundered.<sup>24</sup>

In sum, further specified in this minimal way, the proposed root concept of civilian noncooperation presents several advantages that would likely favor future empirical research in ways that promise a more structured contribution to the study of civilian responses. First, it allows for direct engagement with a set of established terms in its semantic field – such as cooperation and displacement. This way, the root concept of noncooperation does not “unsettle” the semantic field, something to be avoided in an area in which conceptual proliferation is taking place and conceptual confusion risks being a problem (Gerring 1999, 382; Sartori 1984; Collier and Levitsky 1997, 445). Rather, it establishes clearer conceptual boundaries with neighboring concepts, minimizes overlaps

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<sup>23</sup>Familiarity and resonance are other two of Gerring’s (1999, 368–371) criteria for “conceptual goodness”. As Gerring explicitly notes, working with these criteria always implies some trade-offs.

<sup>24</sup>Yet, as discussed in the next section, the proposed concept of noncooperation is not limited to nonviolent action, as it was for Tolstoy, Gandhi and Sharp. Again, working with Gerring’s criteria always implies some trade-offs.

and solves existing ambiguities. Second, it pushes researchers to more carefully take stock of alternative courses of action, something that is likely to be crucial for theory building. Common claims in the literature such as “this response is extremely risky”, “costs are prohibitively high” and “this is the most contentious course of action”, will have to be evaluated vis á vis its alternatives. As Fujii (2011, 8,9) put it, “[i]f we were to base theories of agency on only one set of actions [...] our theories would be at best, partial, and at worst, wrong” (see also Arjona 2017, 763). Last but not least, by readily and coherently fitting into existing conceptual frameworks, it counters term proliferation and promotes conceptual parsimony – ultimate goals in concept formation and innovation (Collier and Levitsky 1997, 451).

## **Conceptual Differentiation: Further Delimiting Noncooperation**

This root concept of civilian noncooperation represents a minimal definition, based on *necessary* attributes. As such, it intendedly excludes different *accompanying* attributes (also referred to as *optional* or *varying*) that one might find in several, but not all empirical manifestations of the phenomenon. In this section, I discuss four of these accompanying attributes that occur *in addition to* the root concept’s core attributes.<sup>25</sup> These four attributes lead to demarcations that are likely to have important implications for the way we conduct empirical research, as both descriptive and causal coherence are likely to hinge on them: individual/collective; from below/from above; unarmed/armed; and events/campaigns. When making choices along these demarcations, the researcher increases the concept’s intension (larger number of defining attributes) at the same time that she modifies its extension, excluding some empirical referents and/or grouping them differently. This exercises of conceptual differentiation makes the concept more operationalizable, helps refine empirical focus and improves comparability and analytical leverage (Gerring 1999, 378; Sartori 1970, 1036, 1038).

While the root concept of noncooperation can accommodate all these options, whether

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<sup>25</sup>Accompanying attributes can occur *in addition to* or *within* the root concept. The first option is more appropriate for “classical concepts”, while the second for “radial concepts”. The way the root concept was constructed follows the logic of “classical concept”, thus I focus on *addition to* attributes. See Collier and Mahon (1993).

to consider them or which to consider is more a matter of empirical focus, depending largely on the research question being investigated. These demarcations can provide researchers with guidance when delimiting the phenomenon to be studied, selecting the right (positive and negative) cases, compiling datasets, and/or defining the most appropriate unit of analysis. It is paramount to be explicit about these choices in order to produce comparable findings, define scope conditions and, ultimately, further our understanding of the topic.

### **Individual/Collective**

Manifestations of noncooperation include individual responses, strategies involving varying degrees of coordination, as well as highly sophisticated and organizationally demanding instances of collective action.<sup>26</sup> As causes and effects are likely to differ across these different expressions, it is important to consider and be explicit about this demarcation when conducting empirical research, especially when compiling datasets and engaging in both large- and small-N comparisons. Practically speaking, taking this demarcation into consideration implies determining the population of observations one will work with; i.e., (re)defining the scope of application of the concept (see Goertz 2019, Chap. 3).

Micro-strategies such as fence sitting (Kalyvas 2006, 225-235) and avoidance (Baines and Paddon 2012), as well as different expressions of what Scott (1985) termed “everyday forms of resistance”, constitute examples of individual responses or strategies involving low levels of coordination. While not all of these action are expression of noncooperation, they do sometimes imply a refusal to cooperate with armed groups. For example, “night commuting”, an avoidance strategy that commonly implies little prior coordination, has been widely employed in armed conflicts to avoid recruitment. During the Ugandan conflict, for example, children and youths walked to town centers in the evening to sleep in bus stations, hospitals or verandas (Baines and Paddon 2012, 238). Similarly, in rural towns during El Salvador’s civil war, children and youths climbed to the roofs of their

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<sup>26</sup>Since its inception in the Gandhian tradition, noncooperation has been understood as a force that may be used by both individuals and collectives (Gandhi 2001, 34).

shacks to hide overnight when the army was expected to come to town to enlist people.<sup>27</sup>

Yet, even under conditions of generalized repression or surveillance, civilians can still choose organization over individual self-help and publicity over stealth. Collective forms of noncooperation involve different levels of coordination and organization. They range from the efforts of the youth in San Carlos to avoid recruitment and express their dissatisfaction with war via cultural activities, all the way to the creation of self-defense guards, such as the *rondas campesinas* in Ayacucho during the initial phase of the Peruvian civil war (Fumerton 2001; Schubiger 2020), and the unilateral establishment of entire areas off limits to armed groups, such as the Filipino zones of peace (Garcia 1997; Avruch and Jose 2007).

Collective forms probably have the most theoretical purchase, as they shift our attention to what is perhaps the most puzzling (and under-explored) aspect of noncooperation: the challenges that civilians face in transitioning from “uncoordinated individual dissatisfactions” to “collective assaults on the holder of power” (Rule and Tilly 1975, 50). Moreover, recent research indicates that organization is what ultimately allows civilians to affect conflict dynamics, including rebel governance (Arjona 2016, 2015; Rubin 2019) and violence against civilians (Kaplan 2017).

If organization is likely to make a difference, the importance of bearing in mind this demarcation when compiling datasets and comparing cases to study the causes and effects of noncooperation becomes even more apparent. Yet, research on collective noncooperation should not only focus on the most visible, highly organized instances that have captured a big portion of the attention to date (e.g., Masullo 2015; Mouly, Idler, and Garrido 2015; Hancock and Mitchell 2007). Awareness of this demarcation should foster the study of both individual and collective forms, as well as widen the study of collective forms to instances that may not reach the organized status of the most visible cases.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>This avoidance strategy is vividly captured in the film *Voces Inocentes* (2004) by Luis Mandoki.

<sup>28</sup>Kaplan’s (2017, 15, 35-36) work is exemplar in this regard. On the one hand, he explicitly justifies his focus on collective processes by noting that individuals have a more limited set of choices and are unlikely to effectively protect themselves from violence. On the other, while he zeros in on a relatively visible case (Chap. 7), his work shows that communities can still reduce levels of violence against them without reaching extremely high levels of organization (Chap. 8).

## From Below/From Above

Another relevant demarcation involves the role of external actors. Some instances of noncooperation are formed and advanced exclusively by community members. In others instances, external actors, such as NGOs and international organizations, play a more active role, including designing concrete mechanisms and institutions, training communities and/or even instigating the mere idea of organizing noncooperation. This demarcation is relevant, as the processes and dynamics by which noncooperation emerges and is sustained, as well as the outcomes it might bring about, are likely to differ importantly as a function of the degree of external involvement.

The presence of external actors is quite common in instances of noncooperation. For example, ranging from the Catholic Church to the Organization of American States and the European Union, external actors played a role in the emergence of over 60% of noncooperation campaigns in the Colombian civil war.<sup>29</sup> Yet, the level and kind of involvement varies considerably from case to case. In some cases, external actors may provide support and guidance to a grassroots campaign. This was the case, for example, of the Nueva Vida Humanitarian Zone, an area off limits to armed groups on the Colombia–Panama border established by afro-Colombian communities with the support of the Inter-congregational Commission of Peace and Justice – a national faith-based NGO – and Peace Brigades International. In other instances, external actors can take a more central role, directly administrating noncooperation or even implementing it. For example, the Sri Lankan town of Madhu was defined as a “no guns, no uniforms area” and designated as an “open relief center” on the initiative of local catholic leaders and was overseen by the Church and the UNHCR (Hyndman 2003). Similarly, the Rikhey Zone, a demilitarized area in the Congo, was almost fully established from above by the United Nations (UN) in the 1960s in response to the escalating conflict in Katanga (Lee 1997).

In order to be categorized as civilian noncooperation, instances must involve active civilian participation. Those fully carried out externally not only sideline most of the

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<sup>29</sup>This is based on a database that I introduce in the next section.

challenges civilians face when mounting noncooperation, but may even act on behalf of – directly or indirectly – one party to the conflict (commonly the state), thus compromising a core attribute of noncooperation. With the exception of these “no-agency” cases, the root concept leaves room for instances with varying level of external involvement. Yet, for some research questions and goals, designating campaigns as “from below” or “from above”, and/or assessing the level of involvement of external actors, is likely to be crucial as this might have an impact on crucial processes, such as the capacity to successfully mount noncooperation and the ability to survive over time.

### **Armed/Unarmed**

Civilian noncooperation can take unarmed as well as armed forms. Unarmed expressions have captured the most of the attention in the nascent literature on civilian agency. A clear example are peace communities created in the late 1990s in northwestern Colombia, in which villagers organized to refuse to provide any form of logistical and survival services to both guerrillas and paramilitaries relying exclusively on methods of nonviolent action. However, there are also examples in which communities have organized self-defense forces to protect themselves from armed groups’ violence. The Naparama in Mozambique (Jentzsch) and the Fertit in Southern Sudan (Blocq 2014), constitute two examples of community-initiated militias to counter insurgent violence. Similarly, in the context of criminal wars, we have seen the emergence of vigilante groups to counter cartel penetration and activity. Some of Mexican *autodefensas* provide an illustrative, contemporary example (Osorio, Schubiger, and Weintraub 2016; Dorff and Maves Braithwaite 2018**bem’hamo’yeger’vigilantism’nodate**).

There is no reason to assume that there are contexts where *only* armed or unarmed forms of action can be mobilized, or that one form is residual to the other. Consequently, the root concept leaves room to both unarmed and armed instances of noncooperation. Still, researchers can take this demarcation into consideration by treating armed/unarmed forms as a discrete choice – as civil resistance scholars often do – or as running along a continuum – as has been more common in social movement research (Schock 2013).

Regardless of that choice, working on each of these expressions while being able to clearly differentiate them would enable research to cover a wider range of empirical manifestations at the same time as comparing both forms of action. This will allow for the examination of particularly relevant questions, such as why some communities choose to take up arms while others stick to nonviolent methods; why some campaigns move from one form of action to the other; whether the presence of one type of action affects the emergence of the other; or which form is more effective at protecting civilians.<sup>30</sup>

To be sure, including armed forms of noncooperation might create some tensions with the core idea of “civilian,” since armed noncooperation may largely forfeit participants’ ability to claim civilian status. However, what is of analytical importance here is that the decision to refuse to cooperate with armed groups, as well as the effort to organize into noncooperation – including the choice to take up arms – was made by civilians. As per the root concept of noncooperation and the baseline definition of civilian used in this paper (see fn 11), what matters the most is that civilians engaging in armed forms of noncooperation do not join an existing armed group – as this would constitute an expression of cooperation. While this does not fully solve the tension, embracing it and reflecting on what happens to the civilian status when individuals or communities engage in armed noncooperation further underlines the importance of accounting for this demarcation.<sup>31</sup>

## **Events/Campaigns**

One of the ways in which concepts matter is by influencing the level at which the analysis is conducted (Arjona 2019). Seminal and recent research has shown that the dynamics that influence civilian choices in conflict settings are highly localized. Therefore, unlike the majority of work on civil resistance to date that has focused on the country-level, the most appropriate and relevant “locus of choice” for the study of civilian responses,

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<sup>30</sup>The benefits of comparing armed and unarmed campaigns has been well illustrated in civil resistance research (e.g., Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Cunningham 2013; Dorff and Maves Braithwaite 2018). See also Dorff (2019) for an argument on the value of integrating research on both sides of the violent/nonviolent divide.

<sup>31</sup>For a more detailed discussion on why it makes sense to include instances of armed self-defense groups as part of civilian responses, see Jentzsch (2020).

including noncooperation, is the locality – a subnational unit that can take the form of the village, the neighborhood, and the county, among others (Arjona 2019).<sup>32</sup>

Yet, in these localities collective noncooperation sometimes brings civilians into campaigns of sustained interaction, while in others it takes the form of more temporally delimited events, such as protests against violence (Moreno León 2017; Vüllers and Krtsch 2020) and demonstrations for peace (García-Durán 2005; Funes 1998). Taking into consideration this demarcation is likely to be relevant for empirical research, as events tend to be far more common and recurrent than sustained campaigns, and single campaigns may involve multiple of events. For example, in the most comprehensive dataset of “collective actions for peace” in the Colombian civil war (García-Durán 2005), less than 5% of all acts of peace mobilization would qualify as noncooperation campaigns that bring civilians and armed actors into sustained interaction. Thus, focusing on the campaign or the event, or not distinguishing between the two, will likely yield different results.

The proposed root concept leaves room for the study of both events – more common in the social movement tradition – and campaigns – more common in the new wave of civil resistance research – of noncooperation. However, researchers are well advised to specify the focus of the analysis in this regard. Choices along this demarcation will have a clear impact on what the universe of cases will be, the instances that will make it into our datasets or that we select for intensive case study research, as well as the units that can be considered comparable in both small- and large-N comparisons.

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<sup>32</sup>Arjona (2019, 218) defines “locus of agency” as “the type of spatial units that [...] we consider to be the relevant context in which a given decision is made.” While the locality might indeed be the most appropriate unit of analysis, as Steele (2019b) notes, it is still relevant to explore how local responses interact with regional or national processes. For example, are local responses strengthened by connections with larger processes, or are they more effective if they remain locally circumscribed?

## 4 A Typology of Civilian Noncooperation

This section offers a descriptive typology of civilian noncooperation.<sup>33</sup> The typology is introduced with the aim of illustrating how a clearly defined “root concept”, as well as explicit choices made in light of demarcations that allow for conceptual differentiation, facilitate the task of creating organized classificatory systems.<sup>34</sup> The typology unpacks the intension of the root concept of civilian noncooperation and provides a modified extension. This exercise (equivalent to moving down Sartori’s ladder of abstraction) helps refine the focus for empirical research and improves leverage in evaluating both descriptive and causal claims.

While the range of empirical manifestations of civilian noncooperation within and across conflicts is wide, descriptions of several cases around the world and extensive fieldwork conducted in various warzones in Colombia, allowed me to identify one relevant and consistent dimension of variation worth to be developed – the level of confrontation – and three distinct ideal types of noncooperation – oblique, pacted and unilateral.<sup>35</sup>

All three types are full instances of noncooperation in that they all share the core attributes of the root concept.<sup>36</sup> Yet, they differ from each other by the level of confrontation that they exhibit. Regarding the demarcations identified in the previous section, while the typology covers campaigns forged from both below and above and allows for various combinations and levels of external actor involvement, it focuses exclusively on unarmed instances of noncooperation, that are collective and that lead to sustained campaigns.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>The main purpose of descriptive typologies is to identify and describe the phenomenon being studied. The criteria for classification are descriptive dimensions (defining attributes) of the concept and the types that emerge are “a kind of” in relation to the concept. This is different in explanatory typologies, where dimensions are explanatory variables and types are outcomes hypothesized to be explained by those dimensions (see Collier, LaPorte, and Seawright 2012; Elman 2005). For another example of a descriptive typology in conflict studies, see Steele (2019a).

<sup>34</sup>In other words, the typology illustrates the advantages of rigorously tackling the “what is?” question, before moving into the “how much?” (see Sartori 1970, 1984; Goertz and Mahoney 2012; Goertz 2019)

<sup>35</sup>In addition to the emerging literature on civilian responses, anthropological studies of life during conflict and reports by national and international NGOs operating in conflict areas, provided a strong empirical base for the developing of this typology.

<sup>36</sup>The principle of membership is that of “classical categories”, where all category members share the full set of attributes of the core concept. For “classical” concepts/categories and a detailed discussion of different principles of category membership, see Sartori (1970, 1984) and Collier and Mahon (1993).

<sup>37</sup>I define a sustained campaign as observable, continuous, and purposive events that bring civilians and armed groups into sustained interaction for anywhere from days to years, but that are discernible from one-off events (see Chenoweth and Lewis 2013).



It identifies types that are homogenous in the sense of sharing the core attributes of the root concept, yet they differ in their level of confrontation.<sup>42</sup>

Second, it is parsimonious in that it takes only three values, without sacrificing neither exhaustiveness, nor substantial descriptive and explanatory power. The variation it identifies opens a meaningful avenue of inquiry about both causes (e.g., what factors determine whether civilians choose more or less confrontational forms of noncooperation?) and effects (e.g., are more confrontational forms of noncooperation more likely to spur repressive reactions from armed factions?). Third, as it drives our attention to the nature and dynamics of civilian–combatant interactions, there are good reasons to expect that the variation it captures also influences other wartime dynamics, including patterns of violence, the establishment of social order, and the transformation of social networks. As such, it has the power to complement or challenge existing theories of civil war that, implicitly or explicitly, rely on assumptions regarding civilian responses.

Last but not least, it defines types that can be used as descriptive characterizations and, as we will see below, it allows the assignments of cases to types. (Elman 2005, 297). In what follows, I describe each of the three types and illustrate them with examples from the Colombian civil war.

### **Oblique Noncooperation**

In oblique noncooperation, civilians refuse to cooperate with armed groups in an indirect, *disguised* way. Disguised not in the sense of concealing, as civilians do engage in overt and visible actions; but in the sense of advancing noncooperation through activities that are not openly related to war dynamics and that do not imply direct expressions of refusal, let alone defiance. Civilians practice noncooperation without publicly declaring it, and

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instances. Likewise, if we were to find more confrontational ones, these would probably be armed expressions.

<sup>42</sup>Although the typology identifies distinct types, it does not imply that civilians cannot move from one type to another over time. For example, in rural West Aceh an independent *ulama* (guardian, transmitter and interpreter of religious knowledge) unilaterally formed the League of Acehese Islamic Boarding School Ulama in 1999 in open opposition to both warring sides operating in the area. As the conflict intensified, they scaled back and continued with their opposition in more oblique, institutionally less visible, ways: through Islamic teaching, referring to both warring sides as not real Muslims, indicating that joining either side was against the Qur'an, and focusing their sermons on messages of peace (Barter 2014, 87; Miller 2008, 40).

campaigns often remain carefully circumspect and institutionally invisible. While action do imply a refusal to cooperate, the fact that there is no direct engagement with armed groups, let alone an overt, outward manifestation of noncooperation, makes for a low level of confrontation.

San Carlos, the native town of Camila – the local leader I introduced at the beginning of the paper – provides an illustrative example of a campaign of oblique noncooperation. In the late 1990s, a group of high school students organized into the Youth’s Project of Peace (Joppaz). With the support of the Catholic Church and a body of volunteer firefighters, they organized evening street activities to convene people to play board games and share *chocolatadas* (communal pots of hot chocolate). Many residents welcomed the campaign. From a group of 8 or 10 that showed up in the first evenings, the number of participants gradually increased to 50.

While seemingly unrelated to conflict dynamics, Joppaz implied a clear refusal to cooperate with armed groups. First of all, by taking part in these activities, residents defied an implicit dusk-to-dawn curfew that armed groups had placed on the town. This curfew was strategically important, as it allowed combatants to operate freely at night, determine whether the enemy faction was around, and better plan and execute violent raids against the population. As a paramilitary ex-combatant told me, without people in the streets they could easily find out if the rebels were around.<sup>43</sup> Second, social isolation had stimulated distrust within the community, severely weakening its social fabric, feeding deadly cycles of denunciations and pushing residents to sporadically collaborate with armed groups. Joppaz sought to reactivate social interaction and forge norms of non-violence and nonparticipation in conflict. Third, as armed groups particularly targeted high school students to join their ranks, by actively involving the youth, they fought recruitment. As one organizer put it, Joppaz was about “stealing kids from war”.<sup>44</sup> The campaign was geared towards closing inroads into the community to both the paramilitaries and the rebels.

A young resident of San Carlos that took active part in the campaign characterize

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<sup>43</sup>Field Notes. Ex-combatants. August 2015

<sup>44</sup>Interview ID 79. Organizer. August 2015

it as “visible and invisible”: people were in the streets, but not in the central square; while it was about opposing armed groups, the actual activities were about playing and eating together.<sup>45</sup> Yet, the community (organizers in particular) was well aware of what they were doing. As Camila put it, these activities were “civil disobedience” with a “dissimulation mechanism.”<sup>46</sup>

## **Pacted Noncooperation**

In pacted noncooperation, action is overly related to war dynamics and civilians engage armed groups directly. However, they do so via consultation and dialogue. Instead of disguising their refusal to cooperate, civilians open a channel of communication with armed groups to express their determination to not collaborate with them and discuss possible terms of interaction. Before openly declaring noncooperation, civilians’ intentions are discussed and concrete norms of behavior might result from a bargaining processes. Yet, any agreement reached must be premised on the nonnegotiable choice of not cooperating with any side. As armed groups have to forgo strategic interests (e.g., obtaining full and exclusive support), this type of noncooperation involves a higher level of confrontation relative to oblique noncooperation. However, prior consultation and bargaining tempers confrontation.

What is perhaps the earliest campaign of noncooperation in Colombia provides an example of this type. In 1987, right-wing paramilitaries gave an ultimatum to residents of La India, a village in northeastern Colombia. They had about 15 days to decide whether to side with them, join the rebels, leave the region, or be killed. After analyzing their options and long deliberations, a group of community leaders concluded that “[n]either everybody will die, nor people will go with an armed group. We are from here, we are *colonos* [colonizers, settlers], so they [armed groups] will respect us. We will be neutral [...]”<sup>47</sup> This decision gave birth to the Peasant Worker Association of the Carare River (ATCC).

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<sup>45</sup>Interview ID 88. Resident-participant. September 2015

<sup>46</sup>Interview ID 77. Organizer. August 2015

<sup>47</sup>Interview ID 21. Founding member. May 2014

Despite fearing for their lives, a group of villagers ventured into the jungle to address the commanders of the different armed factions operating in the area. They expressed their decision to stay put but without collaborating with any of them. After intense dialogues, commanders accepted civilians' decision, agreed to try to leave them out of the war, and together they designed a joint procedure to ensure that villagers fulfill their pledge not to collaborate with any faction and to investigate cases of alleged noncompliance.<sup>48</sup> Dialogues with armed groups still persist 30 years later, and the ATCC continues to govern the lives of hundreds of peasants living in La India and surroundings.

### **Unilateral Noncooperation**

In unilateral noncooperation, action is also overly related to war dynamics and civilian engage armed groups directly too. However, there is no consultation, let alone bargaining. Civilians unilaterally declare noncooperation, unequivocally signal their decision to armed groups, and design and implement their own mechanisms and institutions to advance and sustain it. As it does not rest on prior consultation, and the parties do not agree on any joint mechanisms to regulate their interactions, this type of noncooperation involves a higher degree of confrontation relative two the other two ideal types. In fact, this type of noncooperation commonly involves a radical break in civilian–combatant interactions and often leads to direct confrontation.

In 2001 the members of various Nasa indigenous communities in the Colombian Department of Cauca unilaterally repurposed their indigenous guard to protect their territories and communities from increasing violence.<sup>49</sup> Comprised of community volunteers supervised by an autonomous indigenous village council (the *cabildo*), the Guard patrols Nasa villages in shifts carrying consecrated ceremonial wooden staffs and ribbons exhibiting the Nasa colors as authority badges. While within the community norms of non-participation in the conflict and cooperation with armed groups are promoted and

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<sup>48</sup>For a stylized description of this procedure and a rigorous assessment of its effects on violence, see Kaplan (2013; 2017, Chap. 7).

<sup>49</sup>The Guard is an institution that exists in several indigenous communities and it is tasked with protecting indigenous territories regardless of the presence of armed groups. As part of an “emergency plan” due to escalating conflict, the Nasa community in Cauca repurposed its guard to respond to armed groups' violence and infiltration.

enforced, the Guard protects the territory and keep it off-limits to armed groups.

Rebels, the army and paramilitaries are not allowed to transit through Nasa territories and/or demand things from the Nasa people. The Guard regularly confronts combatants face to face and ask them to retreat from their territory.<sup>50</sup> They have removed police trenches, disassembled homemade missiles found on their lands, and searched for kidnapped people. In addition, they have designed and implemented early warning systems and defined areas where Nasa people can temporarily settle during armed confrontation. Extending the *cabildo*'s control, they are the guardians of public order in their territories. All these procedures were defined within the community, with no consultation with armed groups, and openly and clearly informed to them via Nasa official memos (*comunicados*).

#### 4.1 A Database of Civilian Noncooperation Campaigns

The three previous examples give color and texture to each of the ideal types. Yet, they only provide an initial indication of the typology's capacity to sort cases and say little about the breadth of the phenomenon. To illustrate further the typology's empirical grip and show how the conceptual foundations offered in this paper provide clear guidelines for data collection, I close this section by briefly introducing a database of nonviolent, collective campaigns of civilian noncooperation in Colombia between 1987 and 2010.

I compiled the database drawing on original data collected in the field, and it includes over 50 instances of civilian noncooperation in over a third of Colombia's 32 departments. For each instance included in the database, I identify its geographical location (up to the smallest geographical unit for which information is available), key descriptive features of the location (e.g., presence of coca crops, strategic value of the territory)<sup>51</sup>, date of campaign emergence (year, and month when available), the armed organizations present

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<sup>50</sup>While still unarmed, encounters can turn physical, reflecting the high level of confrontation involved in this type of noncooperation. This has happened on repeated occasions with the Nasa Guard. For instance, in July 2012, in the town of Toribío, over 100 army soldiers were literally pushed away from Nasa territories. See "Indígenas expulsan a 100 soldados de base militar del Cauca" *El Espectador*, 17.07.2012

<sup>51</sup>For every entry, at least the municipality is indicated. While analysis at the municipal level are likely to suffer from over-aggregation given the localized nature of the phenomenon, having this geographical indicator allows matching this database with time-series datasets on violent events, most of which are compiled at the municipal level.

in the territory when the campaign emerged, the presence and role of external actors supporting the campaign, and the type of noncooperation.

In terms of inclusion criteria, I followed a basic, yet conservative, procedure: If I learned about the campaign first-hand or was able to visit the location of a campaign identified in secondary sources (press articles, NGO reports, secondary literature), the instance was immediately included in the database. If I learned about it via secondary sources and was unable to verify the case *in situ*, the campaign was only included if at least two *independent* sources provide evidence of it.<sup>52</sup>

The map in Figure 4 gives a sense of the breadth of civilian noncooperation in Colombia and illustrates its spatial distribution in the country. It shows that the typology indeed captures existing variation and that each type has corresponding empirical referents – i.e., the typology does not create entity-less types (see Gerring 1999, 383; Sartori 1984, 38–39). Moreover, it shows that all three types, which were defined based also on experiences outside Colombia, can be found in the same country and even within the same region. This suggests that the national/regional context, and the macro type of armed conflict (in this case, irregular civil war), does not necessarily determine the types we are likely to observe on the ground.<sup>53</sup> Note, however, that this database does not constitute a census. It likely over-represents the most visible experiences and surely suffers from under-reporting, especially of those campaigns that are harder to capture empirically; e.g. oblique noncooperation.

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<sup>52</sup>The database is constantly updated and new versions are made available at [www.juanmasullo.com/publications](http://www.juanmasullo.com/publications)

<sup>53</sup>Even if anecdotal evidence suggests that these three types are likely to be found across different conflicts, this is open to systematic empirical assessment.

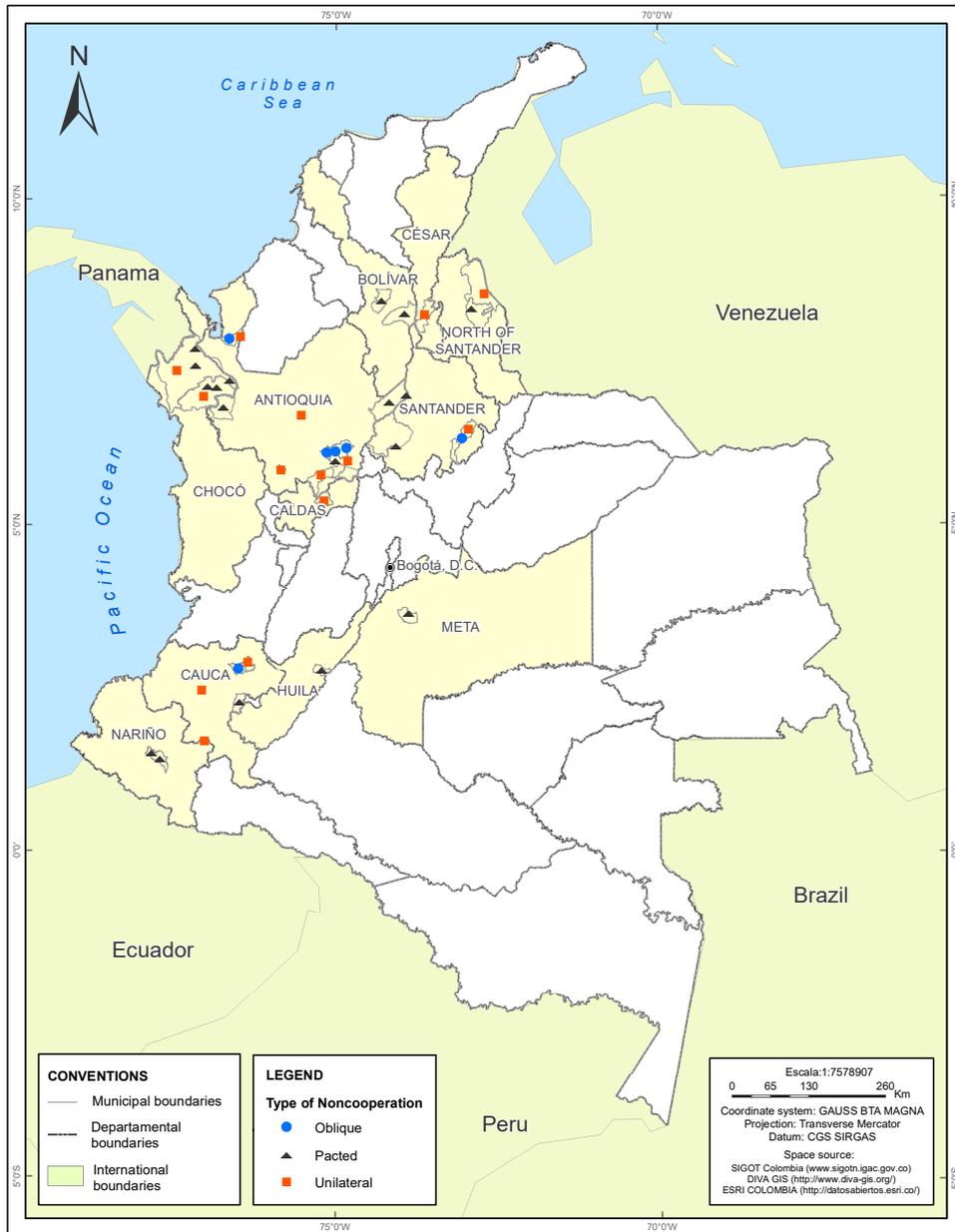


Figure 3: Instances of Noncooperation in Colombia by Type

## 5 The Policy Relevance of Civilian Noncooperation

An improved understanding of civilian noncooperation, and more generally of the different ways in which civilians respond to armed groups in conflict-affected settings, can have important implications in key policy areas. These include, among others, the protection of civilians, peace building and post-conflict reconstruction.

Civilians may pursue several goals through noncooperation. However, an overarching

objective is to protect themselves, their scarce resources, and their way of life from armed groups' violence and rule (Masullo 2017; Kaplan 2013, 2017; Arjona 2015, 2016). In light of increasing recognition of the protection potential of civilian agency, practitioners and scholars have begun to argue that civilian initiatives should be the starting point of civilian protection programming (Jose and Medie 2015; Gorur and Carstensen 2016). Consequently, an improved understanding of civilian noncooperation could richly inform current protection debates, in particular those related to civilian self-protection (Jose and Medie 2015), and potentially contribute to the development of a more robust and comprehensive framework for the protection of civilians.

Communities face many obstacles to initiate and maintain campaigns of noncooperation, and have a hard time getting armed groups to respect their choices. Thus, there is much that support from domestic and international actors engaged in the protection of civilians can do. External actors can make a difference, for example, by providing communities with mobilizing resources, or by enhancing visibility and facilitating victimizers' accountability – which would raise the public relations and reputational costs of armed groups' use of violence. As a participant in a campaign of unilateral noncooperation in northwestern Colombia noted: “[w]ithout that people [international actors] we are nothing. They [armed groups] would have killed us. They have even said it: ‘we respect the community because of those blond people [referring to the international accompaniment]’,”<sup>54</sup>

Yet, external support should be informed by research based on solid conceptual foundations and linked to theories of how armed groups behave and interact with civilians on the ground.<sup>55</sup> Basing such interventions on faulty conceptual and theoretical foundations can prove detrimental to both civilians and external actors. For example, while increasing the visibility of a unilateral campaign can be an effective strategy, it can prove deadly to oblique and even pacted forms. Villagers of the ATCC – the pacted campaign introduced earlier –, explicitly noted that to maintain dialogues with armed groups and

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<sup>54</sup>Interview ID 13. Participant. March 2014.

<sup>55</sup>Kaplan (2013; 2017, Chap. 7) has embraced this approach, providing the most rigorous assessment to date of whether (and how) communities can protect themselves from violence.

to have them respect the agreements, it was vital to keep international visibility and denunciations at a minimum.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, whether noncooperation rests on pacts between civilians and non-state armed groups, or involves the use of violence, is also something external actors must take into consideration when making decisions about whether and how to support civilian initiatives, as it might compromise their credibility and/or violate their institutional mandates (Masullo, Paddon Rhoads, and Welsh 2019).

Research on civilian noncooperation can also have implications for peace building and post-conflict reconstruction. As Barter (2014, 13) noted, the potential for civilians to build peace can be largely determined by the choices they make during armed conflict. If instances of civilian noncooperation are not identified, or remain poorly understood, peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction efforts risk ignoring local actors that can offer key opportunities and/or obstacles. The 2012–2016 peace talks between the Colombian government and the FARC provide a clear example. Villagers long engaged in pacted noncooperation complained that the negotiating teams did not actively involve them in the negotiations despite of their long experience in bargaining with FARC.<sup>57</sup> In fact, communities that have engaged in noncooperation have been found to be well equipped to facilitate mediation with armed groups and foster ex-combatant reintegration (Mouly, Hernández Delgado, and Giménez 2019), as well as to support grassroots peace-building (Masullo 2018) and truth and reconciliation projects in the aftermath of violence (Zech 2019).

Research on noncooperation, and on what communities do to navigate war more generally, can richly inform the design of better targeted post-conflict reconstruction policies. Recent research has found large disparities between what localities need after war and the interventions governments and international actors prioritize in their reconstruction efforts (Firchow 2018). The demands and/or expectations that those who engage in noncooperation have from reconstruction programs are likely to differ from those of displaced populations or people who had reciprocal relationships with armed groups. Improving our understanding of noncooperation and being able to identify experiences on the ground

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<sup>56</sup>Interview ID 6. Organizer. March 2014. See also, Masullo (2020, 23-24).

<sup>57</sup>Field notes. Community leaders. 2015 & 2016.

could help governments and international organizations respond more accurately to specific needs, as well as to avoid excluding portions of the population from policies designed to help those affected by war. For example, noncooperators in San Carlos have complained about not being eligible for most of the state assistance offered to victims of war. “We are known as the ‘resisters’ because we never left, and there is nothing out there for the ‘resisters’,” noted an active participant of the Joppaz campaign.<sup>58</sup>

## 6 Conclusion

Conflict scholars have increasingly stressed the importance of taking civilian agency seriously if we are to improve our understanding of how conflicts operate on the ground and the social legacies they leave behind. Civilian choices feature in many explanations of conflict processes, and several theories make (usually implicit) assumptions about civilian behavior (Arjona 2014; Dorff 2019). A rapidly growing literature on civilian agency has recently emerged, enhancing our understanding of the different ways in which civilians can affect conflict trajectories and outcomes. In doing so, it has pushed our attention beyond the more traditional focus on forms of civilian support with armed groups towards a more diverse set of possible civilian responses. Among these responses, instances in which civilians refuse to collaborate with armed groups have captured particular attention. While these developments are to be praised, we have seen a parallel proliferation of neighboring terms (e.g., voice, resistance with multiple adjectives, autonomy, resilience) that menaces the further progression of this intellectually stimulating and policy relevant field of inquiry.

To prevent this impasse, this paper aimed to contribute to the establishment of more solid and unified conceptual foundations. In dialogue with this growing literature, and drawing on an established literature on concept formation, I proposed civilian noncooperation as a “root concept” to capture instances in which civilians refuse to cooperate with armed groups and further specified its meaning by identifying both necessary and accompanying attributes. In doing so, I discussed the advantages of this conceptualiza-

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<sup>58</sup>Field notes. Participant. August 2015.

tion, assessing it vis á vis alternative terms and conceptualizations. In addition, I showed how these conceptual foundations can facilitate empirical research by introducing a descriptive typology and a database of civilian noncooperation campaigns in the Colombian civil war. This underlined the benefits of working with clearly defined concepts that allow researchers move up and down the ladder of abstraction, modifying the concept's intension and extension to achieve the adequate empirical focus. With this, I hope to be offering scholars a well defined dependent or independent variable which can enrich existing theories of conflict, by complementing as much as by challenging them.

While civilian noncooperation is probably not the most common among civilian responses, it is more prevalent than what traditional theories of conflict would predict and what many observers would expect. Civilian noncooperation is an important pattern of civilian agency that has the power to transform the positioning of actors within the political and social arena. Therefore, failing to properly capture it and produce ordered and cumulative knowledge would not only hinder the advancement of our scholarly understanding of conflict processes and their legacies, but also prevent our research from informing key policy areas, such as the protection of civilians, peace building and post-conflict reconstruction. Let's don't allow concepts to get in our way!

## Biographical Statement

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