

Interlocking Conflicts

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THE
OXFORD INTERNATIONAL
ENCYCLOPEDIA OF

PEACE



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Editor in Chief

VOLUME 2

Early Christianity and Antimilitarism—Mass Violence and Trends

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2010

INTERLOCKING CONFLICTS. Every social conflict, a contentious relationship between adversaries, is connected in significant ways to other conflicts. Particular conflict linkages have long been subjects of influential analyses. For example, in 1908, the German sociologist Georg Simmel (1955) discussed how external hostility is associated with in-group solidarity. The American sociologist Edgar A. Ross (1920) wrote about the ways in which crosscutting conflicts in a social system often mitigate the intensity and permanence of any one conflict. For example, in the United States, the multiplicity of crosscutting lines of cleavage—by ethnicity, class region, and religion—make any one cleavage unlikely to be highly antagonistic. This is so because antagonists on certain issues may be allies on another.

The German sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf (1959) discussed the confirming-contrasting situation: when one conflict is superimposed on another, both are likely to be intensified and made more intractable. This was clearly the case during the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. Regional conflicts were sustained and sometimes triggered when the Soviets and the Americans backed different sides in a civil war, which also exacerbated American-Soviet rivalry.

Beginning later in the twentieth century, conflict analysts mapped out the variety of linkages and conducted empirical research testing and elaborating some of the implications of different kinds of conflict linkages (Rummel 1963, Tanter 1966). Most relevantly for peace studies, analysts studied how changes in conflict linkages and changes in the adversary's perception of them affect a conflict's course of escalation and de-escalation and the attainment and sustainability of peaceful relations (Bar-Siman-Tov 2006, Kriesberg 1980, Wilkenfeld 1969).

Because conflicts are inevitably interlocked with each other, the boundaries of any single conflict are in an important sense socially constructed by the partisans or by conflict observers. For purposes of discussion, a particular bounded conflict may be considered the central one, whereas from another point of view it is peripheral or subordinate. Three analytic types of conflict linkages are examined here: (1) sequential conflict connections or linkages over time; (2) concurrent parallel conflict connections, including superimposed and crosscutting conflicts, which may differ in scale; and (3) concurrent layered conflict connections, including links between internal and external conflicts, which differ in level. Such connections and perceptions of them may change in ways that contribute to peacemaking and to peacebuilding.

Sequential Conflict Connections

Adversaries in a particular conflict may regard it as a discrete fight, sometimes waged in the context of generally noncontentious relations. Often, however, the partisans—and outside analysts—consider the conflict to be part of an enduring struggle. The fight is seen to be essentially between the same adversaries and is a link in a chain of fights, with a contentious past and future as well.

The designation of the beginning of a fight is often contested by the antagonists. Each side tends to point to some action the other side took that started the fight. For example, in the United States, the Cuban Missile Crisis is generally thought to have started with the construction of Soviet missile bases in Cuba, discovered by a U.S. reconnaissance plane in October 1962. In the Soviet Union, the episode was referred to as the Caribbean Crisis and began in 1961 with the U.S. efforts to forcefully overthrow the Castro-led Cuban government, thus incorporating another conflict episode from the Soviet perspective.

Peaceful relations are aided by the adversaries developing a shared understanding of their conflict's history—and if not empathy at least a mutual recognition of their different narratives. Methods to help opponents to forge such understandings are being developed and employed by governmental and nongovernmental actors in order to build an enduring peaceful relationship.

Whether a fight is regarded as discrete or as one battle in an ongoing war has important implications for the way the fight is waged and settled. Some fights are viewed as part of a long-standing feud or rivalry, with recurring humiliations and attempts at achieving revenge. Members of the opposing sides are taught to fear and hate the enemy, which prolongs the conflict and contributes to its destructiveness.

Many conflicts, however, are regarded as less serious episodes in a protracted struggle between interdependent adversaries. In such cases, any single confrontation is not regarded as an existential threat and it may be settled with the expectation that failing to obtain what is sought at that time may be rectified during a future contest. Thus, a labor-management difference can be regarded as more or less serious, depending on its perceived context. For some analysts and partisans, it may be seen as a part of a long-enduring class struggle, as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels argued. For other analysts and partisans, the common interests

are recognized, as well as the different ones, and means of contending are institutionalized, which protects the vital concerns of each side. Thus, recurring fights can become managed and mutually acceptable ways of conducting them can become institutionalized. This became the pattern in industrial relations in nearly all industrialized countries in the course of the twentieth century. Government regulations provide rules for controlling the conflict and settling a particular dispute.

Concurrent Parallel Conflicts

Concurrent parallel conflicts include superimposed and crosscutting connections. People have many characteristics that may be the basis for identity and for opposition to people with different characteristics. Individuals with such characteristics may share many of them with other people; for example, people of one ethnicity may live in a particular region, have relatively high incomes, share the same religion, and speak the same language, whereas members of another ethnic community reside in a different region, have relatively low incomes, practice a different religion, and use a different language. In such cases, the lines of cleavage are superimposed, and under these conditions, people are more readily mobilized for struggle, and conflicts tend to be more severe.

In some social systems, however, the lines of cleavage do not coincide but crosscut each other. For example, members of different ethnic communities may share the same language, live in the same locality, and both have diverse income distributions. Those lines of cleavage crosscut each other, and people on each side of a line of cleavage are less easily mobilized for struggle; furthermore, their conflict is less likely to be intractable. This is the case within societies and among them; hence, conflicts do not tend to emerge and to be moderate if they do. If they mobilize in terms of one division, they may be allied with some members of the opposing side in accord with a different division.

The many aspects of globalization contribute to transnational organizations and identities that constitute another set of crosscutting ties and conflicts. This is manifest in the workings of transnational advocacy organizations, multinational corporations, religious organizations, and diaspora groups.

Each adversary in an international conflict has additional adversaries in other conflicts. Consequently, change in the salience of one conflict has implications for other conflicts. Such changes may be intentionally

sought. Leaders of one party in a fight may try to reduce the intensity of its fight with a particular adversary by pointing out that they share a greater threat from a common enemy, therefore reframing the first conflict. For example, following the attacks of September 11, 2001, the U.S. government has sought to convince leaders in other countries that may have had grievances against the United States that they face a shared grave threat from international terrorist organizations.

A particular conflict may be viewed as located within a wider conflict system and may also be viewed to encompass smaller conflicts. Thus, the Israeli-Arab conflict has been considered as occurring within a superimposed Cold War and also as encompassing the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Syrian conflicts and Lebanese civil wars. Particular actors, to some extent, select which context is most amenable to reach a satisfactory conflict outcome. For example, some adversaries may agree to a separate peace, which allies of the dealmakers may regard as a betrayal. This was the case in the eyes of Arab governments when Egypt signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1979. From the perspectives of the Egyptian president Anwar el-Sadat and the Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin, their negotiated agreement alleviated domestic and bilateral concerns, but they differed in their hopes and expectations about the effects of their agreement for the course of settling the Israeli-Arab and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts.

Concurrent Layered Conflicts

Conflicts also can be regarded as interlocked when we focus on one of the adversaries in a conflict and consider how its internal conflicts are connected with its external opponent. The adversary may be a country, a government, an alliance, or an organization. It confronts external opponents, but it also contains challenging factions, organizations, or even countries. This section discusses internal-external linkages and how they affect each other.

Simmel's proposition that external hostility builds in-group solidarity has much anecdotal support, up to a point. The attacks of September 11, 2001, on the United States certainly produced an immediate sense of American solidarity, and many domestic disputes were diminished as a result. President George W. Bush and his associates stressed the great and continuing terror threats to the United States, which justified delegitimizing dissenting views about how to respond to the threats. However, overreaching in foreign wars undermined the support and generated domestic conflicts and resistance

to the Bush administration's policies. Such sequences are not rare. The Nazi leaders of the Third Reich rallied people against internal and external Bolshevik threats; and they grossly overreached. When foreign wars go on and on, domestic support generally declines and opposition emerges.

Quantitative analyses of the relationship between countries' internal and external conflicts reveals that, overall, the two are positively associated with each other, and not negatively, as posited by Simmel. The relationship turns out not to be simple. The direction of the relationship and its magnitude depends on the political structure of the countries, the kind of conflict measure, and the lag time between external and internal conflicts.

Struggles also have layered conflict linkages because each adversary has some members who have characteristics that tend to be nested within each other, like wooden Russian matryoshka dolls. For example, Sadat in the 1970s had several important identities: as president of Egypt, a member of the Arab nation, and a member of the broader Islamic community. He could think of his policies as advancing the interests of his person, his government, his country, the Arab nation, or the Islamic community. He could regard his adversary to be the Israeli government, the State of Israel, world Jewry, or Western imperialism. Depending on the salience of various identities, particular conflicts are likely to be salient, while others may be dormant. One fight may erupt and become salient, blocking the emergence of others or reducing the significance of a previously primary conflict, which enables it to de-escalate and even become transformed.

A conflict, therefore, is often embedded within a broader conflict or it contains other subconflicts. This may be so perceived by many of the parties in the nested set of conflicts, as was the case during the Cold War. However, in many cases, the perceived superimposition is claimed by some adversaries and rejected by others; furthermore, often the superimposition breaks up as new conflicts become more salient. For example, even in the early years of the Cold War, whereas some American officials viewed the world as a bilateral struggle between the Free World and the Totalitarian World, many countries insisted that they were nonaligned and not part of that struggle. Later, U.S. officials recognized the emerging conflict between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China and the possibility of dealing with North Vietnam somewhat independently of a single Communist enemy.

Following the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, the U.S. government responded with a "global war on terror," which incorporated regional and local conflicts around the world. Some governments rejected such claims, whereas others adopted that language to gain leverage against their challengers. This U.S. effort at linkage sometimes intensified conflicts and hampered their de-escalation and settlement. A more narrowly targeted, less militarized struggle against al-Qaeda might have been more effective and less likely to have generated additional conflicts.

Internal conflicts can sometimes foster external ones. Leaders in a country in which their rule is threatened may challenge or provoke another power and then try to rally their constituents to counter the external menace. Citizens will tend to rally around the flag, at least initially in such circumstances; however, such tactics can prompt leaders to undertake doomed adventures and subsequent popular repudiation. This was the case in 1982 when the military junta governing Argentina invaded the Malvinas/Falklands Islands, ruled by Great Britain.

Assessment

Conflicts are interlocked in many ways at the same time; the shifting salience of various linkages greatly affects the course of each conflict. How that occurs and how it is regarded depends on the locus of the viewer. For example, from the point of view of the U.S. president Richard M. Nixon on taking office in 1970, he faced domestic disorder based upon opposition to U.S. engagement in the war in Vietnam. Recognizing the hostility between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, he disaggregated the communist threat and greatly reduced the salience of conflict with these two states. He opened relations with China and initiated a policy of détente with the Soviet Union. He could hope that would isolate the North Vietnamese government and might make possible an honorable end to U.S. engagement in Vietnam. In any case, it would help counter domestic opposition to the continuing U.S. military involvement in Vietnam. The strategy may not have hastened peace with North Vietnam, but normalizing relations with China and the Soviet Union contributed to the later transformation of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War (Kriesberg 1992).

The prevalence, complexity, and fluidity of the connections among conflicts help account for the frequent unforeseen consequences of the adversaries' conflict

behavior. Understanding the nature of interlocking conflicts can help formulate and implement effective peace-enhancing policies that avoid producing unwanted consequences. Some such policies can entail changing certain conflict linkages or framing them differently and thereby avoiding destructive conflict escalation, transforming a destructive conflict, or reaching a mutually acceptable conflict termination.

[See also Conflict Transformation; Cuban Missile Crisis; De-escalation in Conflict, Theory of; Identity and Conflict; Intractable Conflicts; Middle East, Peace Efforts in; Stable Peace; and "War on Terror."]

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