CHAPTER 10
Conflict Theory
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This essay covers three broad topics. First, there has been renewed debate about human nature and the roots of intergroup violence and warfare in evolutionary biology, in psychology, and in anthropology. The “ordinary man” hypothesis explains why and how humans justify and participate in violence and atrocities. Second, in addition to interstate wars, political scientists have been studying insurgencies, ethnic cleansing, civil wars, genocide, ethnic riots, and other modes of violence called “new wars.” Based on hundreds of case studies, comparative research and large quantitative data sets, they have theorized about the root causes and dynamics of these conflicts, and about prevention, deterrence, conflict management, and peace making. Third, the social movement and collective action field in sociology developed a mobilization theory for explaining why and how relatively powerless groups confront regimes, how the dynamics of confrontations escalate to civil strife, what outcomes result, and whether violence was necessary for change. All three research traditions contribute insights and findings for conflict theory. In the conclusion, I argue that a theory of conflict should integrate group with state/ regime centered analysis (micro with the macro), give more weight to dynamics than to root causes, and make conflict management an equal partner with violent conflict.

HUMAN NATURE AND WARFARE

The psychologist Robert Hinde writes that (1997) “Certain behavioral propensities, including the capacity for aggression, are common to virtually all humans. This does not mean that they are genetically determined …humans have a capacity to be both aggressive and altruistic…the behavior shown depends on a host of developmental, experiential, social and circumstantial factors.” Although sociobiologists assume that genes exist for specific behavioral dispositions, like “self-sacrificial bravery in warfare” (Tiger and Fox 1971), no such genes have been identified, and behavior in warfare and group conflict situations has been explained in other terms. For example, Jews in Nazi Europe put up little resistance to the Holocaust. Were they genetically lacking in self-sacrificial bravery in warfare? The Jews who emigrated to Palestine belonged to the same gene pool, yet fought aggressively and successfully for the creation and defense of the state of Israel in 1946–1948 and in subsequent wars. Helen Fein (1979) has explained the lack of resistance during the Holocaust with a gradual entrapment model of the Jews by the Nazis. It started with the legal definition of Jew, followed by stigmatization,
stripping of citizenship and property, segregation from non-Jews, isolation in ghettos, and ending in labor and extermination camps. These differences in the behavior of Jews cannot be explained by sociobiology.

Controversy on the biological versus cultural dimensions of human nature compares primate social organization and behavior with those of preliterate, low technology human communities (Rodseth et al. 1991). Compared to primate mating, humans have marriage and kinship. In human bands, there is a relative absence of male dominance and hierarchy, and more equality among adult males on resource sharing, sex, and leadership. Systematic violence between closed social groups is rare. Avoidance is the dominant mode of conflict management among simple foragers. In summary, according to Bruce Knauf et al. (1991), “Simple human societies constitute a major anomaly for models which propose evolutionary similarity between great apes and prestate human patterns of violence.”

There are differences among archeologists and anthropologists on human warfare in prehistory (Keeley 1996). According to Ferguson (2006 pp.495–6), analyses of human skeletons for signs of lethal wounds, and studies of human settlements for indicators of warfare, such as fortifications and defensive walls and specialized weapons, find no firm evidence of war for thousands of years during Paleolithic times: “There are numerous regions in the world where good archeological data are available for centuries or even millennia before any suggestion of war appears…Although episodes of war are possible any time in human prehistory, there is no convincing evidence of collective intergroup violence any time before 10,000 years ago…and in many parts of the world much more recently than that.” How did relatively peaceful hunters and gatherers in the distant past turn into war-prone societies of recent centuries? One cause was in the shift from nomadic to sedentary life, where people had an interest in defending their land, food stores, and fishing sites. Avoidance was not possible and an aggressor had an opportunity to gain from warfare (Cohen 1984). Other conditions were the emergence of social ranking, increased population and resource degradation, state formation, and the spread of war from states to nonstate people.

Warfare became institutionalized and diffused when those who were attacked or threatened took defensive measures and developed their own institutions for war. Once institutionalized, the primary motivation of soldiers stemmed “from duty associated with the role occupied in the institution of war” (Hinde 1997) and not from aggressiveness. The performance of the groups, organizations and social units that make up a complex institution rest on the authority of command, the responsibility to obey orders, cooperation and bonding among peers, an esprit the corps that sharpens the insider-outsider boundary, loyalty to the organization, covering up mistakes and crimes, and ostracism for whistleblowers. Within society, there are collective beliefs and myths justifying the mission and actions of the institution (patriotism, security, defense, law and order, etc) and its claims on societal values and resources.

The literature on collective violence, on mass killings, on genocide and on terrorism show that they cannot be blamed on blood thirsty, sadistic, psychopathic perpetrators nor on some dark streak in human nature. The evidence supports the “ordinary man” notion expressed by Browning (1992), Atran (2003), Staub (1989), and Mann (2005, p.5) that “under particular circumstances most people have the capacity for extreme violence and destruction of human life,” and “ordinary people are brought by normal social structures into committing murderous ethic cleansing.”

What of atrocities, savagery, and extreme cruelty in some collective violence? For cultural materialists and ecological determinists, like Marvin Harris, the Aztecs’ annual fifteen thousand human sacrifices by tearing out their hearts while still alive and ritual cannibalism were a side-effect of the competition for resources in extreme scarcity. Harris (1980, pp. 332–340)
argued that the Aztecs suffered from a “uniquely severe deprivation of animal protein” and that the ruling class rewarded soldiers in war with the flesh of their captives after ritual sacrifices to their gods instead of keeping them as slaves.

Harris’ protein deficiency hypothesis has been challenged on factual grounds by Ortiz de Montellano (1978), and there are better cultural explanations. Robert Edgerton writes (2000, p.131): “Humans …are capable of empathy, kindness, even love and they can achieve astounding mastery of the challenges posed by their environment. But they are also capable of maintaining beliefs and values and social institutions that result in senseless cruelty, needless suffering, and monumental folly in their relations among themselves, as well as with other societies…” Aztecs believed that the gods give fertility to humans only if they are nourished by human beings. With human sacrifice, the Aztecs expected to tip the battle of supernatural forces between evil and good in their favor. The major reason for war was to capture enemy soldiers for ritual sacrifice.

Harris’ materialism does not accept mass murder on a grand scale in the pursuit of an ideology, as was true of the Cambodian genocide under the Pol Pot regime (Kiernan 1996) and in other instances of genocide and ethnic cleansing. In the cultural view, mass murder of civilians and extreme cruelty is justified in some belief systems that label victims as a dangerous threat to group survival, demands total conformity and loyalty in a crisis, glorifies criminal and cruel behaviors against victims as heroic and necessary, and lifts normal restraints against excesses. The core of an explanation becomes how a regime with such beliefs gains power and manages to get the majority of people to comply with its lethal actions. The psychology and anthropology of warfare find that many of the same qualities and relationships that make ordinary men cooperative and their leaders capable of organizing peaceful group activity – conformity to authority and peer groups, solidarity and self-sacrifice when the group is threatened, identification with group members – are the same motivations, qualities and relationships that under other circumstances organize ethnic conflict and war, and account for their excesses.

NEW WARS, CIVIL WARS, ETHNO-POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Since World War Two armed conflicts within states increased, and they surged after the end of the cold war when many expected a “peace dividend.” (Hewitt et al. 2008). Unlike wars between states, these “new wars” (Kaldor 2001, Balancie and Grange 2005) are undertaken by organized armed groups against their governments or other groups with guerrilla tactics, bombings, hostage taking, and population expulsion. The combatant – non combatant distinction in the laws of war becomes blurred; the number of civilian casualties and displaced persons from the fighting is enormous; the combatants want compliance or expulsion of the population rather than territory.

Violent large scale conflicts are many and varied. In the first decades after WW II, some movements against colonial domination (Vietnam, Algeria, Kenya, Palestine, Cyprus, Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, Angola, Mozambique) turned violent. Elsewhere, the aftermath of independence set off violent rivalry for control of the state or for secession of a region (Uganda, Congo, Nigeria, Malaya, Angola, Mozambique). Ethnic, national and religious self-determination movements sprouted everywhere, including Western Europe (Basque, Northern Ireland, Balkans), Asia (Chechnya, Kashmir, Indonesia, Sri Lanka) and North America (Quebec). There were rebellions against oppressive regimes (e.g. in Eastern Europe, in Central America, China in 1989, Nepal, Iran). Authoritarian regimes turned against their own people in genocides and mass purges (Cambodia and Rwanda genocides, Kosovo, East Timor, China’s Cultural Revolution).
No single theoretic framework can be expected to encompass all these conflicts. About some, such as the Rwanda genocide, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Northern Ireland conflict, to name but three, dozens of books have been written and hundreds of articles in both scholarly and popular journals. Government agencies, think tanks and INGOs such as the International Crisis Group (www.icg.org) monitor and update these conflicts on a continuous basis. There are encyclopedic compilations and analyses on recent civil wars and ethnic conflicts (Rudolph 2003; Balancie and Grange 2005), and in depth monographs on particular countries (Olzak 1994; Beissinger 2002) testing theories of ethnic conflict. Because states are the actors in world affairs, when substate identities and loyalties undermine the legitimacy and stability of states and insurgencies spill over from weak states to neighbors, international conflict management of the state system is at risk. Foremost among these destabilizing substate entities are ethno-political, ethno-national and ethno-religious movements (referred to simply as “ethnic” in this essay).

Five theories about new wars have been formulated. They are not mutually exclusive. All assume that in the post World War Two era of anticolonial, self determination and human rights discourse, ethno-national groups enjoy legitimacy for pressing claims to cultural and territorial autonomy and group rights, and that these claims inevitably clash with the principles of territorial integrity and state sovereignty in international relations. These theories also recognize that under some not infrequent conditions – demographic shifts, weak state institutions, threat of external attack, disintegration of multinational states, a domino effect of self-determination claims – conflict management between regimes, minorities, and other adversaries is vulnerable to breakdown and at high risk of armed conflict.

Ancient Hatreds (AH) assumes ethnic group membership, boundaries and identities are rigid, long-standing, and primordial – they resist assimilation and erosion from education, secularization and modernization (Kaplan 1994). Contentious issues and grievances are endemic in ethnic group relations because they are burdened with culturally transmitted memory of past violent conflicts, myths, fears and hostile emotions. Even after long periods of accommodation and ethnic peace, ethnic incidents can rapidly escalate to destructive violence. The theory is pessimistic about preventing, stopping and managing these conflicts through policies and reforms. Secession, territorial separation, and separate institutions are more likely to make for ethnic peace (Kaufmann 1996).

Identity Politics (IP), also known as Symbolic Politics (Huntington 1997; Kaufman 2001) holds that in multiethnic societies, the root cause of ethnic conflict is a threatened change in the prevailing ethnic hierarchy of dominance and subordination. Skeptical of primordial ethnic identities, IP holds that social construction of group identities is explained by the social psychology of intergroup relations. There is a cultural tendency toward ethnocentrism and group self defense that is evolutionarily favored, i.e. it is a normal, not a pathological aspect of group relations. Leaders create national and ethnic identities with powerful symbols and myths that have emotional appeal. Violence breaks out during ethnic rivalry over control of territory and governance amid exaggerated fears of extinction. Unless ethnic relations are properly managed, divisive ethnic myths, symbols, stereotypes, suspicions, and fears resonate in the population and get activated in ethnic cleansing, massacres, and atrocities.

Social psychological theory about social identity and intergroup conflict (Tajfel 1979) supports Identity Politics. Experiments find that in-group preference (ethnocentrism) derives from social categorization as such, even without competition, hostility or rejection of other groups. Self esteem, social identity, and ethnocentrism are validated in social interactions with like-minded persons. When group membership becomes salient in conflict, social boundaries sharpen, individual relations across groups become depersonalized and stereotyped, and
intergroup behavior becomes more aggressive and competitive than interpersonal behavior (Hewstone and Cairns 2001). Competitive and provocative public display of group identity symbols sets off rioting and violence as social tensions rise. To lower competition and uncertainty in ethnic relations, Identity Politics favors language and cultural autonomy, power sharing, diminishing the salience of ethnic identities and boundaries, and promoting a shared identity.

**Manipulative Elites** (ME) assumes fragility in ethnic group relations and social construction of identities, as Identity Politics does (Gagnon 1994/95), but highlights top-down more than bottom-up mobilization. Elites contend for power by manipulating social divisions and blowing them out of proportion with threat, fear and hate discourse and propaganda, and with no-compromise, aggressive, crisis politics. ME is an opportunity centered conflict theory in as much as elites create opportunities with issues and crises to advance their interests and goals. Conciliation is difficult when rival leaders demonize their adversaries as opponents who can never be trusted and must therefore be defeated, dominated or ethnically cleansed. Pressure and sanctions by external states and international agencies on ethno-national leaders for conciliation should be applied.

**Economic Roots** (ER) (Collier et al. 2003) locates root causes in a failed economy and a weak state, typically a poor country with an unequal distribution of incomes run by an authoritarian regime. War lords and violence entrepreneurs organize unemployed youths into armed groups. They may initially be motivated by political goals, but over time they tend to resort to criminal activities for financing rebellion, which becomes entrenched as a way of life. Facilitators of rebellion are mountains and rainforests and a weak and corrupt government. The greatest prize to combatants comes from appropriating revenues from diamonds, petroleum, timber and other export commodities, which finance the civil war and stimulate demands for secession. Once started, armed fighting has a tremendous momentum based on positive feedback that the authors refer to as the “conflict trap”: “the best predictor of whether a country will be in a civil war next year is whether it is at civil war now” (Collier et al. 2003, p.79). ER holds that ethnic divisions have been over rated as root causes of civil wars (Fearon and Laitin 2003); they occur in underdeveloped countries with weak governments that also happen to be ethnically divided.

ER builds on a decade of work on the economics of new wars and the “greed and grievance” research (Jean and Ruffin 1996) which emphasize greed and opportunity on the supply side of conflict over grievance on the demand side. For ER, violence has to be contained, anarchy (war lord and criminal mafia rule) prevented, and security for life and property provided before peace and reconstruction can take root. In conclusion, the World Bank authors write (Collier 2003, p.53): “The key root cause of conflict is the failure of economic development...in the absence of economic development, neither good political institutions nor ethnic and religious homogeneity ...provide significant defense against large scale violence.”

**Contention for Power** (CFP) associated with Tilly and his coauthors and associates (McAdam et al. 2001; Tilly 2003; Tilly 2005; Tilly and Tarrow 2007; Tarrow 1998) does not claim to be a comprehensive theory of large scale collective violence. CFP develops tools for answering some fundamental questions about group relations (Tilly 2003, pp. 24, 225) e.g. “how and why do people who interact without doing outright damage to each other shift rapidly into collective violence, and then ...back into peaceful relations?” The core idea is contentious politics, i.e. a collective political claim that impacts on the interests of rivals and adversaries. Groups excluded from the polity, the challengers, contend for power, equality, dignity, religious freedom, workers’ rights, and oppose corruption, exclusion, unfair taxation,
and oppressive government. For claim making, the challengers seize opportunities and exploit weaknesses in the regime and other adversaries. Most of the episodes of contention analyzed are from Western Europe and the United States.

Tilly (2003) refers to large collective violence as “coordinated destruction.” These conflicts (p.224) “arise from tyrannies large and small that flourish in low capacity undemocratic regimes”. In Contention For Power, issues, ideologies, and agents take the backseat to “relational explanations” (Tilly and Tarrow 2007, p.215) like “brokerage,” which is “new connections between previously unconnected or weakly connected sites,” and “boundary shift,” which is “changes in the persons and identities on one side or another of an existing boundary.” These changes in social relations explain the modes of collective violence (violent rituals, brawls, coordinated destruction, etc). Tilly writes (2003, p.20): “When examining different types of violence and regimes in which they occur we will pay some attention to variations in ideas but mainly seek explanations elsewhere…Motives, incentives, opportunities and controls receive more attention than ideas …but still do not constitute the nubs of explanations…we will focus our attention on interpersonal processes that promote, inhibit, or channel collective violence and connect it with nonviolent politics.”

The theories discussed can be faulted for neglecting a dynamic view of conflict. In the dynamic view, whatever the original causes, issues change, the cast of players and adversaries changes, the strategies of confrontation change, the conflict management capability of the polity changes, as the conflict ranges from conventional politics to armed fighting and eventually to negotiations and peace making or to repression (Posen 1993; Olzak 2006; Oberschall 2007). Because of these changes, Kaufmann observes that (1996, p.137) “Solutions to ethnic wars do not depend on their causes…restoring civil politics in multiethnic states shattered by war is not possible because the war itself destroys the possibilities for ethnic cooperation.” Whether or not AH are a root cause, whether or not manipulative leaders instigate conflict, whether or not poverty and a failed state are causes, whether or not divisive myths, symbols and identities fuel violence, protracted violent conflict generates hatred, manipulative extremist leaders gain power, the economic and political underpinnings for stable life are destroyed, identity politics flowers at the expense of shared identities, and conflict management weakens.

COMPARATIVE STUDIES

For some conflict analysts, mobilization capacity and opportunity for collective action are at the core of explanation for civil war and collective violence, in particular the territorial concentration and mixing of majorities and minorities (Kaufmann 1996). John Coakley and associates (2003) explore the consequences of territorial location and mixing of ethnic minorities for ethnic tensions and minority demands for cultural rights, political recognition, power sharing, and more radical demands for autonomy and secession. Monica Toft’s (2002/2003) study of minority settlement patterns finds that for ethnic groups in territories where they are a concentrated majority, the chances of rebellion and civil war are the highest because they have both the capability for mobilizing and the legitimacy for demanding independence.

Michael Mann (2005) researched ethnic cleansing, mass purges in totalitarian regimes, and genocide. His theory highlights ideas and ideologies, agents, relationships, opportunity and the dynamics of mobilization. The pivotal issue in extreme collective violence is the political power relations of rival ethnic and national groups when adversaries both lay claim to their own state over all or part of the same territory. An alliance of radical elites heading party-states, armed formations, and a supportive ethnic constituency triggers violent ethnic
conflict in reaction to perceived threats and fears to its privileged position. Mann writes that (2005, p.6 and p.23) “Murderous cleansing is rarely the initial intent of the perpetrators” and occurs in “governments continuing to exercise some degree of control.” It is that conjunction of top-down and bottom-up mobilization that provides capacity for murderous mass killings and ethnic cleansing.

Benjamin Valentino (2004), Norman Naimark (2001), and Chirot and McCauley (2006) also research mass violence. For Valentino as for Mann, mass killings are undertaken as a last resort by political and military leaders who want to suppress an insurgency or other real and imagined threats, or implement a radical or racist state policy (e.g. achieve a homogeneous nation-state purged of other peoples), when other means of dealing with these threats and adversaries are unsuccessful. On mobilization of the adversaries, Valentino puts the emphasis on top down leaders, cadres and activists who perpetrate most of the killings, as in Manipulative Elites. The majority of citizens become complicit bystanders due to regime propaganda. For Chirot and McCauley as well, core variables are racist and extreme nationalist ideologies advocated by leaders who manipulate perceived threats, fears and hostility against victims and who persuade “ordinary people” to become complicit in mass political murders. Naimark finds that regime leaders label minorities as disloyal to the homeland and a threat to very existence of the state before attacking them. Peacetime justice and accountability are replaced by crisis social control which lifts inhibitions against aggression and law violation in group relations.

Some conflict theorists analyze microdynamics, i.e. ethnic riots or collective reprisals and revenge killings during insurrections, rather than an entire civil war, insurgency, or ethnic cleansing. For Kalyvas (2006), in the Greek civil war, loyalties, partisanship, revenge killings, torture of suspected collaborators, and collective reprisals result from coercive control of local territory and people to obtain information that is the key to success in insurgency and counterinsurgency. Horowitz (2001) researched deadly ethnic riots around the world, “the most common form of collective violence in the twentieth century” responsible for many deaths, much property damage and the displacement of populations. As in Identity Politics, the root cause is an alteration of the prevailing ethnic hierarchy of dominance and subordination or claim making by subordinate groups which create uncertainty in group relations. Past history of conflicts, animosity, and lack of trust trigger fears, threats, and hostile encounters. Public events that display group symbols will be perceived as a challenge to the status quo – be it a funeral, an election rally, a religious procession. A small incident, like insults and rock throwing, can escalate into full scale ethnic rioting. Although Horowitz’s confrontation dynamic puts the accent on grassroots animosities (2001, p.194, p.230): “target choice …the group selected to receive violence are those that are disliked, feared or felt to be threatening…” he also finds that “the organization of the most serious deadly riots emanate from political parties, paramilitaries, extremist organizations, and secret societies, some or all of which are linked.”

Conflict theories find that “regimes that embark upon democratization in a multiethnic, populist, nationalist environment are more at risk of mass violence against minorities than stable autocracies” (Mann 2005, p.4). For Jack Snyder as well (2001, p.318) “…only thickly embedded liberal polities are well insulated from the risk of developing belligerent, reckless forms of nationalism in the course of democratization.” Quantitative studies also find that “partial democracies,” “low income democracies” and “anocracies” (a mixture of autocracy and democracy) are more politically unstable and at higher risk of civil war than stable democracies and autocracies (Collier et al. 2003, pp. 64–65; Hewitt et al 2008, p.13; Fearon and Laitin 2003, pp. 81, 84–85).
External resource support and public opinion for insurgency and civil war is important. Economic Roots and Manipulative Elites recognize that violence entrepreneurs and insurgents manipulate international public opinion, humanitarian NGOs, governments and scholars with a grievance and victimization discourse in order to justify their violent actions and to obtain support. Not infrequently they succeed in creating transnational support organizations and an international conscience constituency that state leaders cannot ignore when they consider sanctions and other conflict management measures (Olzak 2006). Much external third party intervention is for increasing the fighting capability of adversaries and increases the duration of civil war (Hironaka 2005).

Prevention, deterrence, and conflict management are major topics in conflict theory (Crocker et al 2001; Darby and Mac Ginty 2000; Wallensteen 2002). External intervention against sovereign states that turn on their people with lethal force raises fundamental issues about just wars, humanitarian intervention, an international legitimating mechanism for sanctions and military intervention, and effective delivery of military and other assistance to the victims (Walzer 1997). Doyle and Sambanis (2000, 2006) measure success in peace building with cessation of violence and other measures of reconstruction. They find that hostility (proxied by civil war casualties) is negatively related to success, state capacity is positively related, and UN peace operations have a positive peace building impact, although the UN has intervened in only 27 of 121 civil wars, and most end with unilateral military victory and amidst failures in peace attempts.

International assistance to adversaries during peace negotiations and for providing security after a peace settlement are indispensable, e.g. security guarantees for combatants to turn in their weapons (Walter 1997), “cutting the rebel financial jugular” (Collier et al. 2003 pp. 141–143), and containing spoiler and criminal violence (Darby 2006). Virginia Gamba writes that (2006, p.55–56): “Ultimately conflict and peace are interrelated. Nowhere is this more evident than in the complex environment of demobilization, disarmament and reconstruction…in the grey period between war and peace lies the roots of a successful transition or the making of a failed state.” Peace building research once again highlights the importance of strong capacity for governance and conflict management in conflict theory.

A central topic in international relations and security studies is how to manage an international order of some two hundred states many of which are unstable and vulnerable to internal civil strife, and whose ethnic wars and insurgencies spill across frontiers to destabilize other states (Huntington 1997; Kaldor 2001, chapter7). Peace building entails external assistance with peace operations; forging a vigorous civil society and economic institutions that cut across ethnic divisions; the social construction of identities that are shared; collective goods attainment that is in the interest of all groups; political institutions of power sharing, federalism, cultural autonomy (Sisk 1996); policies against discrimination and for inclusion; diplomatic pressures and sanctions against regimes that oppress minorities, and a lot of international reconstruction help that spans economic aid and reforms to build a justice system and local government institutions (Noel 2005; Oberschall 2007, chapter 7).

**QUANTITATIVE STUDIES OF COLLECTIVE VIOLENCE**

Several data sets have been assembled for the quantitative study of large scale violent conflicts. The original “correlates of war” (COW) organized by Singer and Small at the University of Michigan tracked both international and civil wars starting from the early nineteenth century.
The International Peace Research Institute in Oslo and Uppsala University created the Armed Conflict Data Project (ACDP) which monitors and updates interstate conflicts, civil wars and state formation conflicts in addition to interstate wars (www.prio.no). The State Failure Task Force at the Center for International Development and Conflict Management (CICDM) at the University of Maryland tracks genocides and politicides, ethnic wars, revolutionary wars, and adverse regime changes. These data sets have information on many violence variables (casualties, duration of conflict), the adversaries (size, composition), the society and state in which they take place, conflict events and dynamics, and outcomes. To be included in the data set, there are minimum casualty requirements – e.g. one thousand accumulated combat deaths, one hundred per year, at least one hundred for both adversaries, etc. although ACDP has lower thresholds for “minor armed conflicts.” Researchers supplement the available data sets with information on explanatory variables from demographic, economic, political, human rights and other sources.

Minorities At Risk (MAR) started by Ted Robert Gurr at CICDM (www.cicdm.umd.edu/inscr/mar), tracks 285 ethnic, racial and religious minorities that are politically active in defense or promotion of their interests in states with over half a million population. MAR collects huge amounts of data on these groups, states, and the conflicts they engage in (Gurr 1993; Marshall and Gurr 2003). It distinguishes indigenous peoples, ethno-nationalities, ethnoclasses (often immigrant groups), communal contenders and militant sects. It provides analytic summaries of group histories and has information on communal riots, massacres, and terrorist attacks. Because the high threshold for civil war and insurgency casualties excludes some high profile conflicts – e.g. during most of the Northern Ireland and the Israeli-Palestinians conflict, the annual threshold of one hundred deaths is not met – some researchers add them to their data.

The quantitative data sets for violent conflict are not without problems. Except for MAR, they select cases on the dependent variable (magnitude of casualties), which means that successful containment and conflict management that avoids escalation to the threshold level cannot be studied. There are severe measurement problems on important explanatory variables for comparing “roots of conflict” explanations such as Economic Roots against Identity Politics. The “religious factionalism” index (RFI) in Collier et al. (2003) omits divisions between “Orthodox” Christians and others, between Sunni and Shia within Islam, and between secularists entrenched in military regimes and fundamentalist who seek to overthrow them. Problems also exist for measures of “ethno-linguistic factionalism” which overlook territorial concentration and mix, and for “state capacity” which equates low income per capita with a weak state. Rwanda is a low income state, but its regime mobilized hundreds of thousands down to the village level for mass murder.

Civil wars are found in the low income states, a zone of turmoil in the African continent and a broad swath from the Balkans through the Middle East and Central Asia to India and Indonesia, with some small patches in Central America (Gleditsch et al 2002; Hewitt, Wilkenfeld and Gurr 2008). MAR found that of 285 politically active religious and ethnic minorities, 148 pursued some self-determination goals, of which 70 at some time waged an armed conflict, that is 25% of all active groups (Quinn and Gurr 2003). Comparing those who pursue self determination and autonomy by politics alone with those who engage in coercion, armed fighting is associated with a past history of fighting, repression, deprivation of political and civil rights, or similar current grievances. Important facilitating variables for both adversaries are external military support and assistance from foreign governments. The longer these movements last, the more difficult it is to contain and to settle them, which is confirmed by Collier et al (2003). The average duration of civil wars studied by Collier was
7 years; any such number depends on how cessation of hostilities is defined, and whether restart of fighting by the same adversaries after a lull is counted as the same or as a new civil war or insurgency.

On the controversy between Economic Roots and Identity Politics, David Laitin (2007) argues that when compared with the large number of possible ethnic conflicts in African states, very few actually happen. His methodology is however arbitrary: he counts civil wars as one event, although many of them are a series of ethnic armed conflicts and massacres between a changing and large cast of ethnic groups. The World Bank (Collier et al. 2003, p.59) findings on ethno-national and religious divisions as root causes of civil war are mostly negative, as are the findings of Fearon and Laitin (2003), but both use questionable measurement for ethno-national and religious factionalism. Also, instead of ethnic balance of power and threats to stratification, they focus on ethnic heterogeneity (i.e. variance in group size). Their findings are contradicted in other quantitative research. Doyle and Sambanis (2000) found that 64% of 124 civil wars are ethnic or religious. Fearon himself (2003 p.15) classifies 55% of civil wars as “ethnic” and another 17% as having an ethnic component; he also finds that these last longer than other civil wars. Other studies show these wars are less likely to be settled by negotiations rather than unilateral military victory and that their peace settlements are more likely to break down. After a comprehensive review Sambanis writes that (2004 p.848) “…there is a very strong relationship between ethnic heterogeneity (in a state) and an aggregate indicator of armed conflict, and much less with civil war.”

How to explain these apparent contradictions? The World Bank/Collier team and Fearon and Laitin both find that at all levels of ethnic diversity in a state, the incidence of civil war declines with rising levels of prosperity and measures of state capacity for delivering law and order. In low income states with low social control and conflict management capacity, ethnic conflict tends to escalate into civil wars whereas in high income strong states, they are contained at a low level of casualties and hence are not included in the “civil war” data sets of Collier and Fearon and Laitin. As terrible as these conflicts are in South Africa, Northern Ireland, the Basque region, the population goes to work, children go to school, people shop, transportation operates, although daily routines are episodically disrupted by fighting in particular locations. Unlike Darfur, hundreds of thousands of people do not become displaced and don’t end up in camps; unlike Colombia and Sri Lanka, entire provinces are not controlled by insurgents. Ethnic conflicts do occur in strong, high income states, but they are contained and managed at a lower level of violence than in low income, low capacity states. This explanation is supported by a study of civil wars from 1816 to 1997 (1000 or more annual deaths) which found that they are due to the weakness of states as measured by economic and military capabilities and public goods delivery rather than the strength of ethnic groups (Hironaka 2005).

A dynamic conflict theory explains some paradoxical findings. State capacity, manipulative elites, grievances and hatreds, and standard of life do not remain constant for the duration of the conflict, but change endogenously during conflict dynamics. Confrontations with its own people can change a regime from high to low capacity by eroding its legitimacy. The East German communist regime had a high capacity for surveillance and control of its people, yet it melted away facing unarmed, peaceful, democracy demonstrators in 1989. In the late 1980s, Yugoslavia was a strong middle income state. As communist organizations became discredited and nationalist parties and groups filled the institutional vacuum, it became a weak state. Local authority in mixed ethnic districts was usurped by armed ethnic crisis committees; many soldiers and officers deserted the armed forces;
the police became partisan; citizens armed; manipulative ethno-national leaders beat moderates in elections; ethnic threats, hate speech and fears flooded the mass media; and shortly organized ethnic civil war erupted, which destroyed the economy.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Despite some “paradigm wars” (Goodwin and Jasper 2004), a theory of conflict has coalesced in the past 30 years in social movement and collective action research in sociology. Ethnic movements and conflict is but one of many social divisions studied. Others are based on social class and inequality, youth, gender, religion, culture, and life styles, war and peace, and environment protection. The theory consists of five components: issues, framing, mobilization, confrontation and outcomes.

1. Issues. In a regime or government, organized groups with low cost privileged access to political institutions are members of the polity, but less privileged groups and diffuse publics are excluded (Tilly 2003; Tarrow 1998). A contentious issue between members and excluded groups might be a war necessitating taxes and drafting soldiers; self-determination or equality; compulsory schooling mandated by a modernizing state that stirs up language of instruction conflicts in a multilingual province; immigration of ethnic strangers who become competitors for jobs and services; religious and cultural issues that offend the adherents to traditional religion (e.g. on abortion, homosexuality, religious symbols banned in public places, etc.).

2. Framing. As dissatisfaction and discontent mount, adversaries frame the issue within rival belief systems, shared folk knowledge, and ideologies – self-determination for minority nationalities, inequality, human rights, national security, respect and dignity for one’s group. The frames resonate within a familiar culture and are communicated in the mass media and proximate social milieus to partisan publics (Gamson 1992). The organizing frames transform individual discontent into shared public grievances and call for relief through public actions. The adversaries organize around identity symbols expressed in slogans, songs, dress and hair styles, uniforms, flags, colors, and other visible markers for identity and commitment. A partisan conscience constituency emerges from an initially indifferent or uninformed bystander public and provides important resources, financial, electoral and public opinion support, to the challenger, whereas others provide it for the counter-movement (Zald and McCarthy 1987). Contentious politics has started.

3. Mobilization. Competitive mobilization erupts with leaders and activists formulating an agenda for change and with modes of resistance by the opposition. Because social movements advocate on behalf of large groups (women, minorities, citizens impacted by health hazards from pollution, etc.) and their goals are collective goods (legislation, reform, regime change), they are vulnerable to free riders, i.e. those who expect the benefits but do not contribute to the cost of attaining the goals (Olson 1965). Free riding is critical for the challenger because of participation costs (e.g. arrest) whereas the authorities foot the costs of protecting targets.

Obstacles have been overcome in a variety of ways (Klandermans 1997). The capacity for mobilization rests on strong communal and associational ties and solidarity within a social formation, and weak controls exercised by regime elites and state authorities (Oberschall 1973, chapter 4). Religious, ethnic and tribal communities, and patriotic, literary, veterans’ professional associations, and especially the two combined, have accounted for successful
mobilization of African nationalists against colonial rule (Zollberg 1966), the Nazi movement, the Southern civil rights movement, the New Christian Right (Oberschall 1993, chapter 13), and many others. Identity based on religion, ethnicity, ideology and issue advocacy is not vulnerable to free riding because it is earned through recognition of one’s peers with participation and commitment, and cannot be acquired vicariously.

Small groups of activists bonding in close knit social milieus emerge as pace-setters and leaders and bear the highest cost for participation in long campaigns, and inspire a larger groups of part-time activists (called “transitory teams”) for short and low-cost events (weekend demonstration), and an even larger sympathetic public (called a “conscience constituency”) who contribute funding but are not exposed to any physical danger or risk of arrest. In other settings, activists radicalized in one movement become activists in related movements that advocate for the same or similar issues, and bring leadership skills, tactical know-how and a political culture, thus diffusing radicalism.

Adversaries keep looking for opportunities for alliances with groups both within and without the polity, internal as well as external to the country itself (Tarrow 1998). Many nongovernmental organizations (human rights, environmental) have become truly international in organization and scope (Olzak 2006). Although some maintain this is a new development due to globalization, most political and religious movements in modern times have had an international dimension – the Protestant reformation, antislavery, republicanism after the French Revolution, socialism, communism, fascism, African nationalism, and radical Islam.

A shared culture can coordinate action in large groups without prior leadership and organization, a process called tacit coordination by Schelling (1963). Tilly’s (1975) and Rude’s (1964) research into popular protests in modern French history established a limited collective action repertoire that ordinary people more or less spontaneously and episodically resort to, and which create a loosely structured grassroots movement that spreads to nearby localities and locations. People share a protest repertoire from a common culture and knowledge of their traditions. In a time of political tensions, without planning, huge crowds gather in historic squares in their capital on anniversaries of momentous events and chant the same slogans and display the same national symbols and demand leadership or regime change, and the process triggers similar confrontations in provincial cities and towns.

Diffusion starts when a pace-setter becomes the focal point for tacit coordination, signaling to other sites and groups expectations as to participation, protest tactics, and social control responses. Out of local collective actions more permanent leadership and organization is forged, rather than the other way around. It happened when the sit-ins against segregated facilities in the South in 1960 spread form North Carolina black colleges to other cities and when campus building occupations in the late 1960s were triggered by highly visible and publicized confrontations at prestige campuses such as Columbia. It occurred at the overthrow of Eastern European communist regimes in 1989, as it had on numerous other occasions, e.g. the revolutions of 1848 (Oberschall 1973; 1993, chapter 8; 1996; Tarrow 1998).

4. **Confrontation** is characterized by the tactics and strategic actions the adversaries use for reaching a favorable outcome. A pivotal variable of confrontation is violence because it is likely to change the issues, players, strategies and other parameters of the conflict. An election campaign, a funeral procession, a march celebrating a historic event, and other collective actions are not in themselves violent. But, when political tensions and social divisions are acute, the probability of violence at these events is increased, and can lead to polarization and further violence.
Faced with disruption, the authorities are under pressure to restore orderly routines in daily life. The authorities’ response becomes a new issue: if the authorities ban marches, it is a free speech, freedom of assembly issue for the banned group; if the authorities intervene coercively, they risk being accused of police brutality. Protests to free those “unjustly” arrested and for punishing the police who “repressed” peaceful demonstrators become a new confrontation campaign. Amid rival accusations and framing of the confrontations, by-stander publics and external stakeholders become partisans, and competitive mobilization strains conflict management. In sum, collective violence leads to new issues, new players, new tactics in confrontations, with a risk of further escalation.

A variety of tactics, both conventional politics and unconventional protest, are engaged in confrontations as the challengers and their adversaries test each others’ strengths and weaknesses and the public responds. McAdam’s (1983) account of the Southern civil rights movement in the 1960s highlights a succession of campaigns the challengers undertook which were met by a variety of social control tactics by the Southern authorities and segregationist support groups. Some challenger tactics were calculated to focus mass media attention on brutal treatment and inequities, and shame the federal government to step in to protect black citizens when state and local government failed to do so. Counter-tactics were designed to exhaust the mobilizing capacity of the civil right forces by mass arrests and high court costs.

5. Outcomes. Though outcomes have been a somewhat neglected dimension of collective action, a recent overview of the topic (Giugni et al. 1998) identifies a multitude of impacts. Measures of success distinguish “acceptance” (also called “recognition”) of the challenger from advantages gained (also “goal achievement”) (Gamson 1990; Oberschall 1973, pp.342–3). Acceptance is usually measured by elected officials in legislatures and appointed officials in the executive and judicial branches, or some other mode of power sharing. Acceptance can be diminished by the adversary with such practices as gerrymandering of electoral districts and blocking appointments. Advantages are straightforward for the short run – specific gains on voting rights increase voter participation and translate into elected officials – but long term impacts of collective action are difficult to measure because conflict is a dynamic system and the adversaries will react to temporary setbacks. For instance, after blacks got the vote in the South, white voters massively defected to the Republican Party, restored their control of Southern politics for the most part, and enabled Republican victories in national elections.

When favorable changes in public policy and legislation occur, the social movement input is one component of a larger coalition of political groups, lobbies and supportive publics, all of which were crucial for success (Burstein 1998). There is a gap between policies, laws and implementation: what look like impressive legislative victories, as on environmental issues, can be gutted by lax enforcement and permissive regulatory practices. Implementation is much more difficult to measure than policy statements and legislation. For all these reasons, causal attribution of success is an elusive enterprise (Giugni et al. 1998).

An important debate is the extent to which disruption, including low levels of violence, are necessary for movement success. Both Gamson (1990) and Piven and Cloward (1977) find that disruption has positive effects on challenger gains, but their findings have been contested and rest on limited U.S. data. Opportunity turns out to be a pivotal variable in success: when powerful targets are vulnerable (e.g. they might be under pressure from multiple challengers), they are more likely to negotiate (acceptance) and compromise (advantages).

The “new wars” (NW) and social movement (SM) theories come at conflict from opposing directions. NW theory starts with states and regimes as its units of analysis, and descends to...
ethnic groups, political organizations, and insurgents. SM theory begins with small groups, networks, crowds, leaders, activists, and ascends to ethnic groups, social movement organizations, and regimes. SM has a sophisticated theory of mobilization and confrontation for a challenger, consisting of social infrastructure, repertoires, campaigns diffusion, framing, polarization, and escalation, but views the state and regime mostly as a social control apparatus. In NW, the state and regime capacity for collective action and for conflict management is highlighted, but grassroots mobilization of state adversaries remains underanalyzed. SM views contentious politics as necessary for social change and reforms. Claim makers advocate equality, human rights, environmental protection and cultural issues which can be accommodated without risking major social turmoil. For NW, contentious politics can spin out of control, usher in protracted violent conflicts, cause major human tragedies, and spread to neighbor states.

NEW DIRECTION: CONFLICT DYNAMICS

New Wars would profit by including the microlevel mobilization and confrontation dynamics of Social Movements, and Social Movements could enrich its one dimensional conception of regime social control with New War’s insights into regime actors, institutions, and strategies. Both theories would benefit from more attention to conflict dynamics rather than root causes that initiate conflict: how contentious issues and politics tips to either containment and conflict management or to destructive and escalating conflicts. Political leaders and adversaries make choices. Some draw on a history of accommodation and institutions for cooperation to contain and manage conflict. Others manipulate divisions and tensions and are willing to risk collective violence when it serves their purpose. A catastrophic outcome is not inevitable. We need more knowledge of the institutions and dynamics of contention that integrates conflict, conciliation and conflict management.

Relatively stable periods when conflict is managed are upset when an adversary escalates issues to confrontation and a crisis mode. Salient issues, key players, and strategies change as the conflict changes from conventional politics to armed struggle and later to a mixture of fighting and peace making. Bystanders become active participants; moderates become extremists or are killed and driven into exile; adversaries split into rival factions and new alliances form; external players (states, NGOs, insurgents) intervene. Issues change. At the start, core issues may be stateness or autonomy, but as conflict winds on, new issues emerge: how to contain and wind down an armed conflict, security concerns about disarming and integrating combatants into civilian life, reducing the culture of violence, and building viable state institutions become prominent. Specific mechanisms that drive issues, players and strategies in conflict can be identified and studied empirically. Among these are issue accumulation, the mobilization dilemma, framing, the security dilemma, the coercion paradox, and the paradox of peace making (Oberschall 2007 chapter 1).

Issue accumulation explains the protracted character of many conflicts. New issues arise out of the violent confrontations and pile on top of the original core issues, e.g. whether the security forces used excessive violence against demonstrators and whether some protesters initiated and provoked violence. The mobilization paradox refers to the strategy of exaggerating grievances, threats, fears and stereotypes and of promoting collective myths and group solidarity, which will be countered by the adversary’s propaganda, falsehood, and threats. The paradox is that success in mobilization of one’s constituency makes conciliation and peace more problematic. Framing legitimizes adversarial positions and actions. It seeks to
10. Conflict Theory

explain how the same events and actions are perceived and experienced in opposite ways by adversaries, and what blocks mutual understanding and meaningful dialogue. The security dilemma explains how ordinary people who are not initially partisan in a conflict become adversaries when state institutions cease to protect their life and property and they commit to an adversaries for security reasons. The coercion paradox is that repression is intended to suppress opposition, but it also stimulates more of it. The paradox is that over a wide range of repression, it is hard to tell ex ante which effect will prevail. The paradox of peacemaking is that rejectionists (of peacemaking with the adversary) and conciliators become rival factions within each adversary, and that these internal rivalries add additional conflicts on top of the original, which results in more complex and problematic conflict management than earlier. It is hoped that research on these and additional mechanisms of conflict dynamics that have been identified in “New War” and “Social Movement” studies will in time be integrated into a robust theory of conflict dynamics.

REFERENCES


