C-Escalation and D-Escalation: A Theory of the Time-Dynamics of Conflict

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A basic principle of social conflict was stated more than 100 years ago by Georg Simmel [1908], and elaborated 50 years later by Lewis Coser [1956]: external conflict increases group solidarity.

FIGURE 1. ESCALATING CONFLICT
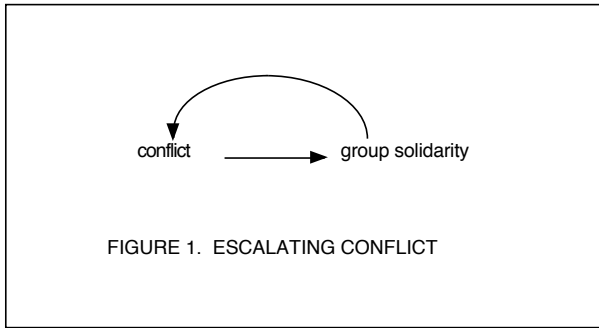
But solidarity also causes conflict. [Figure 1] Solidarity is a key weapon in conflict; groups with solidarity are more capable of mobilizing and fighting; and groups that already have very intense solidarity are especially sensitive to threats to their boundaries.

We can see the mechanisms on the micro level. Figure 2 is a model of Interaction Ritual (IR), the basic process of human interaction (Collins 2004). The boxes on the left

are three major ingredients. Conflict raises the level of each. Face-to-face interaction is crucial so that micro-signals and emotions can be sent back and forth; and threat motivates people to assemble. In ordinary interactions, mutual focus of attention, and shared emotions, drive each other upwards in a feedback loop. Conflict is one of the most powerful ways of doing this, by ensuring everyone is paying attention to the enemy and to one's own participants. Anger and fear toward the enemy is one of the strongest and most contagious emotions.

FIGURE 2. CONFLICT AS AN INTERACTION RITUAL: MICRO-FOUNDATIONS
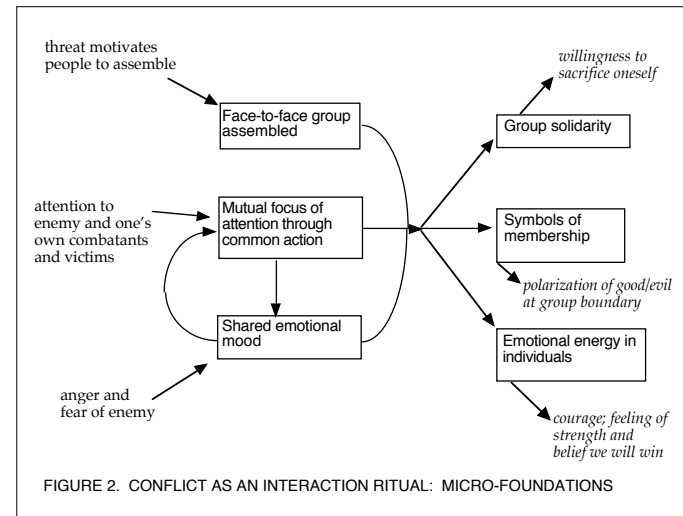
On the right side of the model are three major outcomes of successful interaction ritual: Group solidarity, as Durkheim [1912/1964] noted, makes one willing to sacrifice oneself for the group. Interaction ritual produces idealized symbols of membership, identification of good and evil with the boundary of the group. And it produces high

emotional energy, that is, confidence and enthusiasm; in conflict, emotional energy takes the form of courage, feeling strength in the group and belief that we will win in the end.

These outcomes are highest when the interaction ritual is at its most intense; interaction ritual is a set of variables, and we are going to trace their rise and fall over time. Conflict theory is not the opposite of a theory of human ideals, social cooperation and solidarity; we don't have a sentimental good theory of human beings on one hand, and a cynical conflict theory on the other. It is all part of the same theory.

C-ESCALATION

We now have a series of feedback loops, and I am going to add some more. Conflict and solidarity cause each other to rise, and thus we have the familiar spiral of conflict escalation. Plus we add what I will call the atrocities/polarization loop. [Figure 3]

FIGURE 3. ESCALATING CONFLICT: ATROCITIES AND POLARIZATION
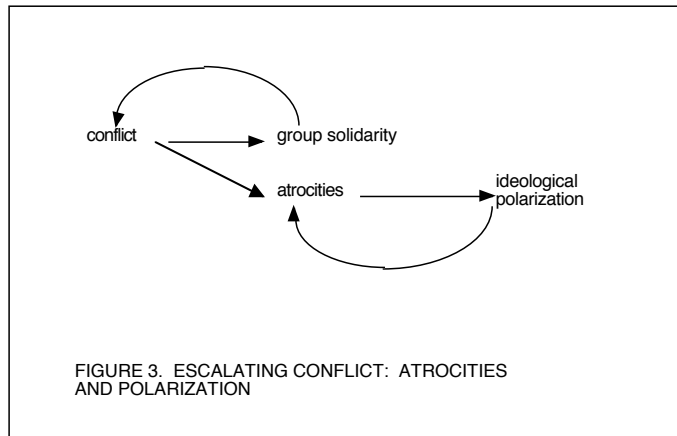
Atrocities are actions by the opponent that we perceive as especially hurtful and evil, a combination of physical and moral offense that we find outrageous. Atrocities generate righteous anger, an especially Durkheimian emotion, bringing about the imperative feeling that we must punish the perpetrators, not just for ourselves but as a matter of principle.

The atrocities loop starts already at the level of conflict talk. This is apparent in small-scale conflicts, such as arguments, and trash-talking that precedes fights (Collins 2008: 337-369, and references therein). Conflict talk is a combination of insulting the other, boasting about one's own power, and making threats. On the micro-level, most of this is only Goffmanian front-stage performance, but in an escalating situation partisans take it as real; we remember our opponent's worst utterances and repeat them among ourselves, to keep up the emotional stimulus for our own high-solidarity ritual. In gossip as in politics, negatives are remembered much more strongly than positives (Baumeister 2001; Rozin and Royzman 2001).

And as time goes along, stories about atrocities the enemy has carried out circulate, mobilizing more people onto our side, increasing the size of our interaction ritual. As conflicts escalate over time, some of the atrocities turn out to be real; but some of them are only rumors, and many are exaggerated. During the period of escalation, it is difficult to distinguish between rumors and realities; in the heightened interaction ritual, no one is interested in this distinction.

When conflict turns violent, however, I would like to emphasize that there are several sociological reasons why atrocities really do occur. The most important point, documented in my work on the micro-sociology of violence (Collins 2008), is that

violence is generally incompetent and imprecise. Most persons in threatening situations stay back from the action, and relatively few actually fight; even those posing as belligerents usually do not get beyond threatening gestures and verbal bluster. Those who do fire guns, use weapons, or launch bodily blows miss their targets most of the time. Perhaps surprisingly, this incompetence is a major source of atrocities.

The research program of the micro-sociology of violence is to find what happens in violence-threatening situations as fully and accurately as possible, and in detail that allows us to observe the micro-mechanisms that determine who does what and with what effect. I make use of photos and videos,[1] participants' detailed accounts, ethnographic observations, forensic reconstructions (such as bullet paths and numbers of shots fired), data on bodily physiology and subjective phenomenology. Becoming familiar with masses of such data makes a micro-sociologist skeptical of taking at face value what participants say about their motives for violence.[2] Good interviewing and reporting needs to probe for detail in the sequence of what participants did, and what others did including opponents, supporters, and bystanders. We want as much situational context as possible, especially on what happens in the early part of the escalation; this helps overcome fallacies arising from sampling on the dependent variable, cases where violence successfully comes off.

What micro evidence of this kind shows is that for the most part fighters are full of confrontational tension and fear. Photos of combat, riots, brawls, hold-ups and other kinds of violence typically show body postures are tense; facial expressions most commonly display fear. Fighters are pumped up with adrenaline and cortisol; their hearts are beating around 160 beats per minute, where fine motor coordination is lost (Grossman

2004). As a result, combatants often hit the wrong target, whether by friendly fire-- hitting their own side-- or by hitting innocent bystanders. Confrontational tension/fear (ct/f) makes most violence incompetent— virtually the opposite of surgically precise— and this is a source of atrocities.

As I explain at greater length (Collins 2008), for violence to actually happen, perpetrators must find a pathway around the barrier of ct/f. There are a series of such pathways, producing different types of violent scenarios. What is most relevant here is the pathway of *attacking the weak:* The most successful tactic in real-life violence is for a stronger or more heavily armed side to attack a weaker victim. In brawls, gang fights, and riots, almost all the damage is done by a group that manages to find an isolated victim.[3] Thus most violence is easily perceived as an atrocity, to be avenged by further violence, which the other side in turn also perceives as atrocity. As an exception, the ideal "fair fight" between evenly matched individuals does happen, but only in carefully arranged duels or exhibitions; such fair fights are not regarded as atrocities and do not result in escalation.[4] This supports my point that it is the perception of atrocities that produces polarization, not just violence per se.

The most dramatic kinds of atrocities are what I have called "forward panic": an emotional frenzy of piling on and overkill, that happens when a group engaged in prolonged confrontation suddenly experiences their tension is released because dominance shifts overwhelmingly in their favor [Collins 2008: 83-133]. The famous Rodney King beating, captured on a camcorder in 1991, was of this kind; and so are many instances of police beatings that happen at the end of a high-speed chase. The process also is found in typical one-sided beatings of individuals or small groups caught

by bigger groups in riots, and massacres in military battles after one side has given up. An important micro-interactional feature is that the victims have lost all their emotional energy, and become passive in the face of the victorious party's onslaught.

The connection between atrocity and polarization is illustrated particularly clearly in an incident in the Palestinian *intifada* in October, 2000 (details, sources, and photo in Collins 2008: 421-423). Four off-duty Israeli soldiers had the bad luck to drive their jeep into a Palestinian funeral procession for a young boy killed the day before by Israeli troops. The outraged crowd of several hundred chased the soldiers into a building and killed them. In the photo, one of the killers waves his blood-stained hands to the crowd below, who cheer and wave back. Their faces show joy and solidarity, entrainment in the act of killing. From the Israeli side this is an atrocity; for these Palestinians, it is an intensely moral interaction ritual, a celebration of what from their perspective appears as just deserts.

Atrocities on one side thus tend to cause atrocities in response. Neither side sees their own actions as atrocities, because of ideological polarization. And this apparent moral blindness as viewed by the opponent is taken as proof that the enemy is morally sub-human.

Polarization is an intensification of the Durkheimian process of identifying the group with good, and evil as what is outside the boundary of the group. Intense conflict unifies the group in a tribalistic ritual, giving the palpable feeling that Durkheim argued is the source of the sacred, and the basis for the social construction of good and evil. As conflict escalates, polarization increases: the enemy is evil, unprincipled, stupid, ugly,

ridiculous, cowardly and weak-- negative in every respect. Our side becomes increasingly perceived as good, principled, intelligent, brave, and all the other virtues.

Polarization is the source of many aspects of conflict that in calmer perspective we would regard as immoral and irrational. Polarization causes atrocities: because we feel completely virtuous, everything we do is good, whether it be torture, mutilation, or massacre. And because at high polarization the enemy is completely evil, they deserve what is done to them. Genocidal massacres, like Rwanda in 1994, start with buildup of emotional polarization, broadcasting the threat of atrocities that the enemy has already carried out, or is about to carry out if we do not forestall them.[5] Similar processes operated in the tortures carried out by US guards at Abu Ghraib, in an atmosphere of small group ritualism and hilarity expressing intense emotional solidarity against a humiliated enemy (Graveline and Clemens 2010). Polarization is the dark shadow of the highest levels of successful interaction ritual. The more intense the feeling of our goodness, the easier it is to commit evil.

A second consequence of polarization is to escalate and prolong conflict. Even if a realistic assessment might show that further conflict is unwinnable, or that its costs would be too great, periods of high polarization keep partisans from seeing this. Because of polarization, both sides perceive themselves as strong and the enemy as, ultimately, weak; therefore we expect to win.

Figure 4 represents the Soviet viewpoint during the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. The political poster (displayed on the streets of Moscow) depicts the American commanding General MacArthur as a blind man about to walk off a cliff. Notice the little toy-like device in his hand: it is an atomic bomb, which at that time only the Americans

had as operational weapons. The American viewpoint was expressed in newspaper

cartoons at the same time caricaturing Stalin as a buffoon blowing up from his own acts.

At such moments, polarization sets the framework in which rational calculation takes

place; both sides regard an immanent war as winnable.

The extent to which conflict can escalate depends not only on emotional

processes, but on numbers of participants and resources. Longer-lasting conflicts require

further feedback loops. A group needs to mobilize its members; for major conflict, it

seeks sympathizers and allies. [Figure 5]

FIGURE 5. ESCALATING CONFLICT: ALLIES
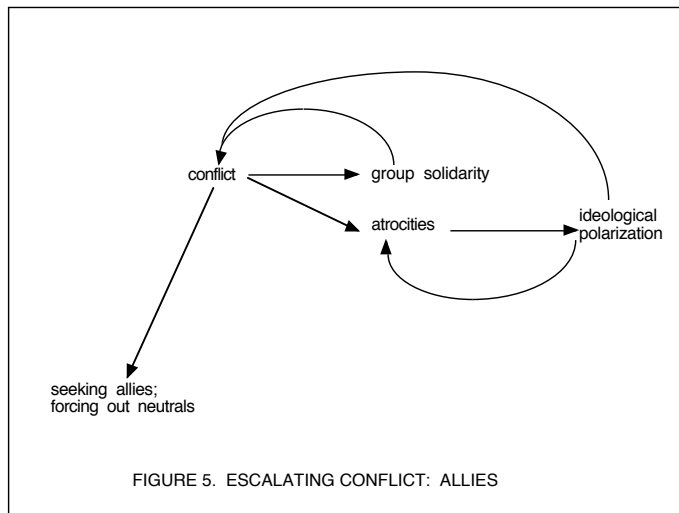
This is done by activating prior network ties; and by making exchange partners

feel it is not only in their interest to join us, but that it is morally imperative to do so.

Partisans try to mobilize the network by appealing to ideals-- showing what virtues we

represent-- and above all by circulating atrocity stories, showing how evil the other side

is. The process of recruiting allies is done by spreading emotional polarization to others

who are not originally involved.

A typical move is to magnify the enemy threat to include everyone. The following

example comes from messages circulated and re-circulated in a cascade of emails

received by ASA officials, and others, this past January 2011. The mobilization, which

lasted a little more than a week, began with stories that death threats were being made

against one of our members, a sociologist advocating militant action by welfare

recipients; these threats were supposed to have come from followers of a conservative

television commentator, who accused her of fomenting violence and socialism. In short,

polarization that had already been going on between these ideological opponents was

now looking for allies. As it turned out later, these death threats had been received

sporadically over the past year, and there was nothing immanent about to happen; and as

a general pattern, as police reports show, overt death threats are a disruptive tactic and are

virtually never carried out, and real assassination attempts do not announce themselves in

advance. But the nature of e-mail list-serves-- a new weapon for conflict mobilization--

made it possible to create a sudden cascade; each message carried a long list of recipients,

and a tail of previous messages, giving the impression that a large and growing number of

persons were taking part in the demand for action. (Analyzing the messages in retrospect,

I found that less than 10 persons were producing the bulk of messages.)[6a] This flurry of e-

mails created a new type of interaction ritual, a virtual IR, generating its own rhythm, that

accelerated for several days as the messages became more and more frequent.

They came first for the Communists,

and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist.

Then they came for the trade unionists,

and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews,

and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew.

Then they came for me

and by that time no one was left to speak up.

>>>>> sent January 14, 2011 8:37 PM

The tone of the messages was one of desperate urgency for action. The poem, which came from the 1930s, implies that if we don't take action, we will end up in a Nazi concentration camp. The action that was being demanded was that we should join in signing a petition supporting our poverty-activist sociologist and condemning her opponents, and that the ASA should take the lead. And in fact, in a few days, current ASA officers wrote a statement of support and counter-attack, which was published on our website. This led to a second flurry of messages from conservatives, including a small proportion of threats.

During this period, ASA officers received a total of 8 emails and 1 phone call from conservative critics. A much larger reaction was not in direct communication with their opponent, but among the conservative partisans themselves, in the form of 154 posts on a blog site devoted to the ASA statement. As is typical for such sites, all posters hid their identities under pseudonyms. The most active individual on this site— posting 7 times-- was also the most extreme. He gave the address of the ASA offices, pointed out that it had a glass façade, then twice repeated the implication ("People who work in a 12-story building with a glass façade should probably think twice about who they're throwing their fucking stones at.") But other posters confined themselves to insults and ironic remarks about sociologists (e.g. "attracting attention to their own incompetent, absolutely worthless profession"). The lone advocate of violence kept returning to his theme, that violent threats by the Left should be met by a violent response. Apparently he lived near Washington DC, since he had seen the building, but he seemed unwilling to do the action alone. After his fifth post, he finally got a response in agreement, apparently from a rural gun owner in a different part of the country. (…"this ol' country boy, for one, spends plenty of time at the range. Lefties are afraid of guns, citizens willing to protect themselves.") But this was vague rhetoric, rather passive in tone; no one endorsed an attack on the ASA office. The preponderance of the posts got off onto Tea Party tactics, endorsing their successful electoral action, and some explicitly rejecting violent tactics. ("Let the shitbirds with the giant puppet heads do the window-breaking. We'll fix the country instead.") The lone extremist started getting derailed, added a post praising the Tea Party's superiority to unruly mobs; finally he made one more ambivalent appeal

for violence and gave up. The remaining 80 posts were confined to criticizing and insulting Left activists and sociologists in general. [6]

This period of counter-attack lasted a little more than twenty-four hours and then both sides calmed down and turned their attention elsewhere. No one has been assassinated and the ASA office has not been attacked. Among the things we learn is that peaks of ideological polarization depend on a sudden acceleration and a circular flow of communications, repeatedly reinforcing the urgency for core participants who send and receive the most messages. We also learn there is always room for micro-sociological observation of whatever goes on around us, if you keep your analytical perspective.

I add one more quote from the initial e-mail cascade, illustrating the pattern that mobilizing allies in a conflict includes attempts to drive out neutrals, by declaring that the polarization boundary is absolutely dichotomous:

>> > "The hottest place in Hell is reserved for those who in time of crisis remain neutral" – Dante >> >
>>> E-mail received during petition drive vs. conservative commentator [1/23/11 7:08 PM]

It is typical of the polarization process not be overly careful about accuracy. Dante did not say this; and if you have read Dante's *Inferno* you will know that the lowest circle in Hell is reserved not for neutrals but for Judas Iscariot, the betrayer of Christ who went over to the enemy. But this is a rhetorical move. It is generically the same as a militant slogan during Civil Rights rallies in the 1960s: "If you're not part of

the solution, you're part of the problem." It is an attempt to push those who have a positive network connection with us into intensifying their commitment; it is not a tactic that can succeed with those who are more distant. And it is a tactic that appears during the early phases of intense polarization; later in a conflict, as we shall see, if a conflict is going to be negotiated it is precisely these neutrals who are in a position to reduce polarization and bring about de-escalation.

It is predictable whether third parties become allies of one side or the other, and with what degree of enthusiasm or reluctance, or whether they remain neutral; as Donald Black [1998] shows in *The Social Structure of Right and Wrong,* it depends on network position and relative social distance from both sides.

If seeking allies and forcing out neutrals is successful, we add them to our coalition. This supports the last component of the process, mobilizing material resources. [Figure 6] These include the numbers of activists, fighters and supporters who take part in the effort; money, as you well know from fund-raising campaigns; full-time organization, if the conflict is to last for any considerable period of time; and weapons, if the conflict is violent.

FIGURE 6. ESCALATING CONFLICT: MATERIAL RESOURCES

FIGURE 7. C-ESCALATION   (COUNTER-ESCALATION)
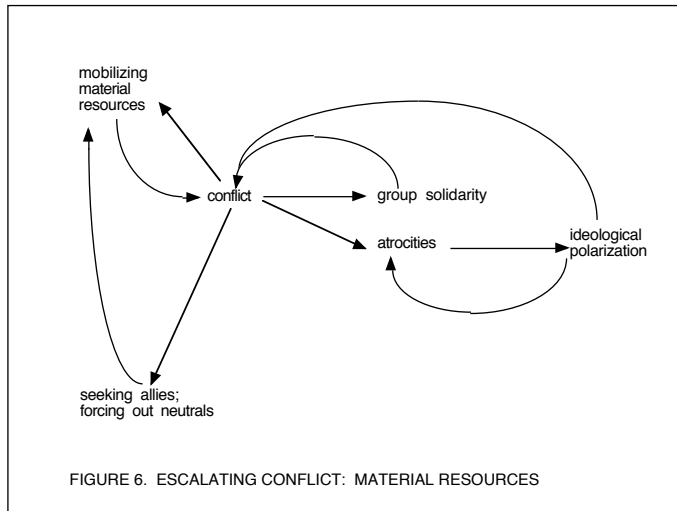
One of the things that varies among conflicts is how much of their resources come from outside allies. In the Arab uprisings of 2011, some have relied heavily on outside intervention-- notably in Libya. Systematic comparisons are needed on what difference it makes if resources are mostly external or internal, and whether they are military, economic, or communicative such as journalistic sympathy and internet activity. [7]

We now have the full model. All these processes are happening for both sides of a conflict simultaneously, so we need to model them twice. This gives us two interlinked flow-charts, each escalating in response to the other. Hence the title C-escalation, for counter-escalation. [Figure 7]
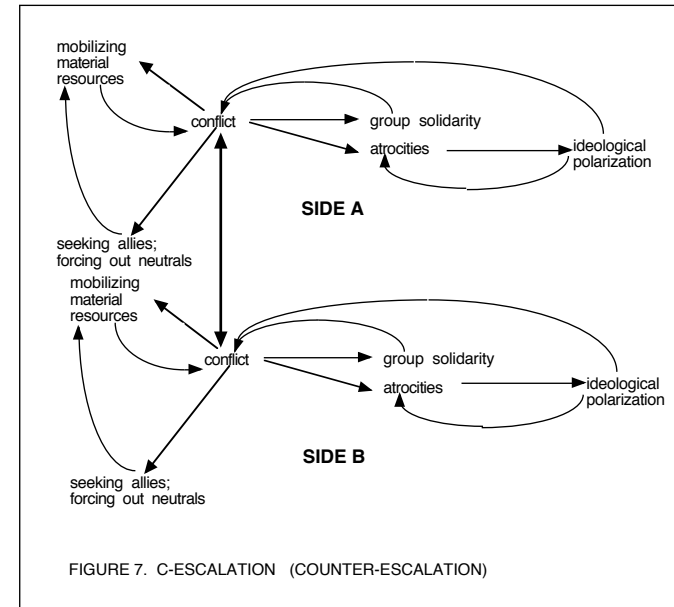
Notice that all feedback loops in the model are positive. If we were to do a computer simulation, conflict would escalate to infinity. What keeps this from happening in reality? Two processes introduce negative values into the variables. One process is victory or defeat, which is asymmetrical, as one side goes positive and the other side negative, or at any rate going negative at different rates. The other process is de-escalation.

VICTORY, DEFEAT, OR STALEMATE

Moves against the enemy are attempts to destroy the major variables that support their ability to carry the conflict. There are three main paths. [Figure 8]

FIGURE 8. WINNING, LOSING, STALEMATE
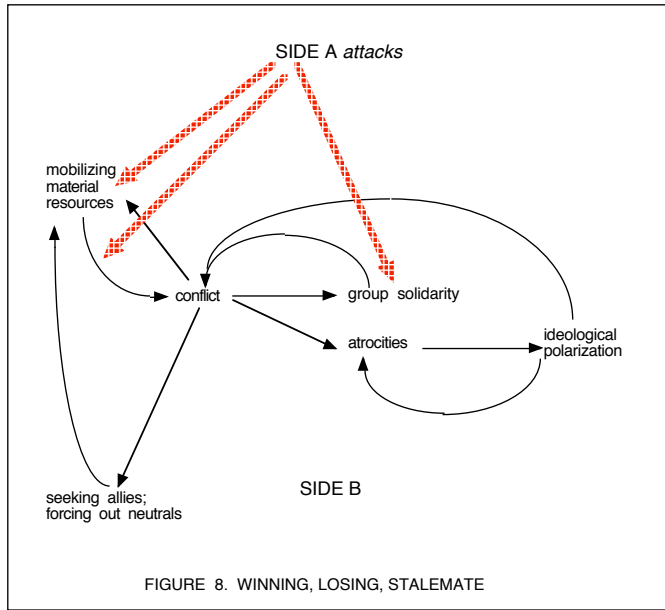
(1) Attack the enemy's group solidarity. This is done by breaking up their organization; by taking the initiative or momentum, thereby putting them in a passive or indecisive position. In terms of micro-sociology, it means dominating the emotional attention space.

(2) A second path is to attack the enemy's material base, physically destroying their resources.

(3) A third path is to attack enemy logistics, their supply lines, cutting them off from moving people, supplies and weapons to sustain the conflict.

I will illustrate this from a more elaborate model of victory or defeat in military battle (Collins 2010). War is one of most extreme forms of conflict, but in modified form the general patterns apply to lesser conflicts. The flow-chart has two main pathways: at the top is the material pathway; it starts with materials resources, the numbers of troops and weapons, and the logistics to deliver them into action; these result in actual firepower delivered; and eventually to casualties and overall attrition. [Figure 9]
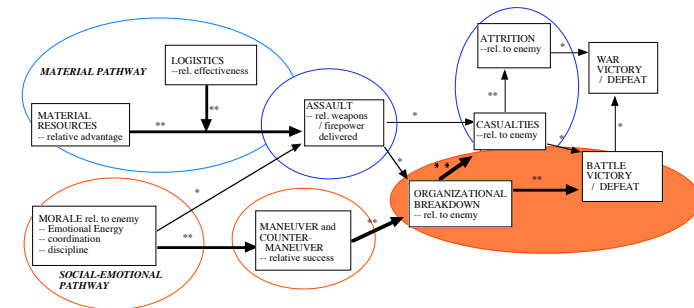

FIGURE 9. BATTLE VICTORY AND DEFEAT

** = strong causal path
* = moderate causal path

source: Randall, Collins.: 2010. "A Dynamic Theory of Battle Victory and Defeat." *Cliodynamics 1: 3-25.*
http://escholarship.org/uc/irows_cliodynamics

The bottom is the social-emotional pathway: starting with morale, which is to say emotional energy and group solidarity. Napoleon famously said that in war the morale is to the material as three to one (Markham 1963). Why is this the case? I argue that superior morale largely affects the ability to maneuver and rapidly respond to enemy maneuvers without losing one's own coherence. The key point of my model is that victory comes chiefly through breaking down enemy organization, rather than destroying their army by sheer firepower. In asymmetrical battles, organizational breakdown

happens to one side while the other side retains its organization; and such asymmetrical

breakdown precedes the bulk of the casualties. That is, most casualties happen after the

organization has broken down; defeated troops have lost their solidarity and their ability

to resist, and this is when they get killed or captured (Collins 2008: 104-112).

We see the same process on the micro level. In a photo from my collection, taken

during the overthrow of the Serbian nationalist leader Milosevic October 6, 2000, we see

a typical pattern in riots: four men are attacking one, who is covering his head and trying

to escape. The attackers wield a stick, a tire iron, and their bare hands. But the retreating

soldier is the only one with a gun, the pistol still in his holster. Physically he has superior

force, and could kill the others. But he is isolated from support, and has lost momentum,

falling into a passive mode as his attackers advance. Emotional dominance precedes and

determines physical dominance. This pattern is documented in all areas of the micro-

sociology of violence (Collins 2008: 71-2, 102-04, 156-89).

Victory and defeat are reciprocals of each other. But there is another possibility.

Physical destruction and loss of social capacity may remain sufficiently balanced on both

sides so that conflict goes on for a long time. This is stalemate. How long it goes on and

why has not been carefully studied. But at a point yet to be specified, stalemate begins to

send the C-escalation process into reverse.

DE-ESCALATION

We come now to a series of slides showing how conflict can de-escalate. In

winning or losing, it is largely a matter of how one side successfully attacks the key

components of the enemy's ability to escalate. In de-escalation, the variables fall for a

variety of reasons, not necessarily from opponents' action; and this decline happens at a

rate where both sides lose their ability to sustain the conflict.

First: solidarity may fail because people avoid the conflict group. Small scale

quarrels and fights are especially likely to de-escalate in this way, as most people stay out

of the fight. On a larger scale, a movement may fail to keep up attendance at

demonstrations. The conflict group may remain isolated and small. It is also possible that

enemy attack breaks up the group or prevents supporters from assembling. [Figure 10]

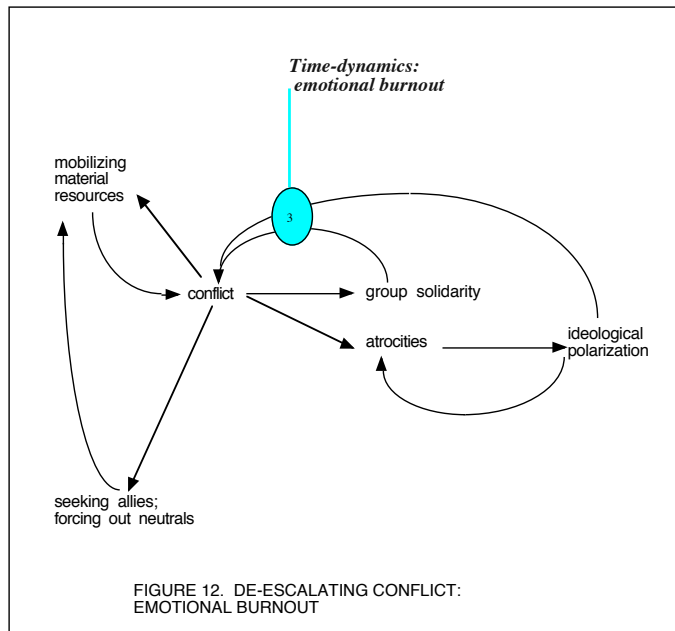FIGURE 10. DE-ESCALATING CONFLICT:
SOLIDARITY FAILS
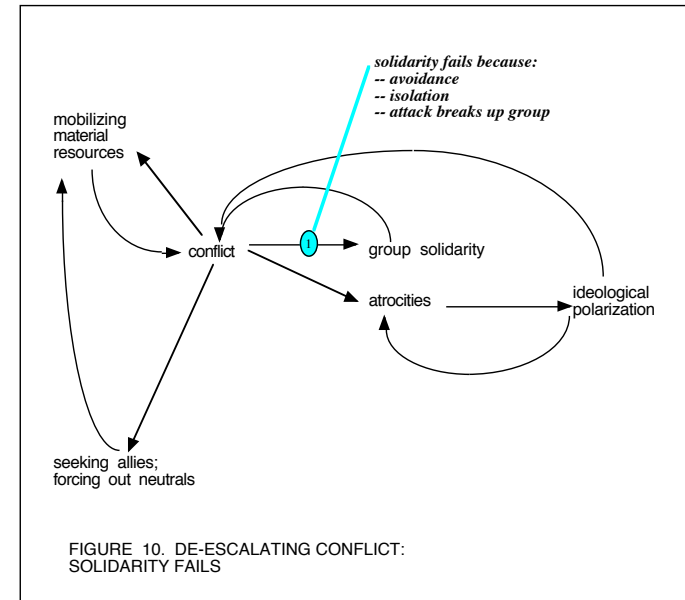
Second: violent conflict has a special difficulty to overcome: confrontational

tension and fear in face-to-face encounters. [Figure 11] Verbal accounts by persons who

have performed violence tend to focus on their own anger and motives, usually giving

moralistic and polarized accounts of their rationale, implying that violence was

inevitable. Here visual evidence of violent situations is especially valuable as a

corrective. Photos typically show that at the moment of violence itself, the expressions on

participants' faces are fear, not anger (Collins 2008: 42-5; 413-430). In photos of riots

and other crowd violence, only a small number of those in the picture are actually

performing any violence; this is typical also of virtually all close observations of fighting-

- most of the group is incapacitated by fear. Whatever they say their reasons for violence

are, their verbal accounts tend to hide this crucial reality. My book on violence gives the

micro-situational conditions under which the barrier of confrontational tension/fear is

broken through into successful violence, but here I want to emphasize a key point: in

most of violence-threatening situations, it does not come off. Violence does not escalate

because it cannot get past this point (Collins 2008: 361-369).

FIGURE 11. DE-ESCALATING CONFLICT: CONFRONTATIONAL TENSION/FEAR
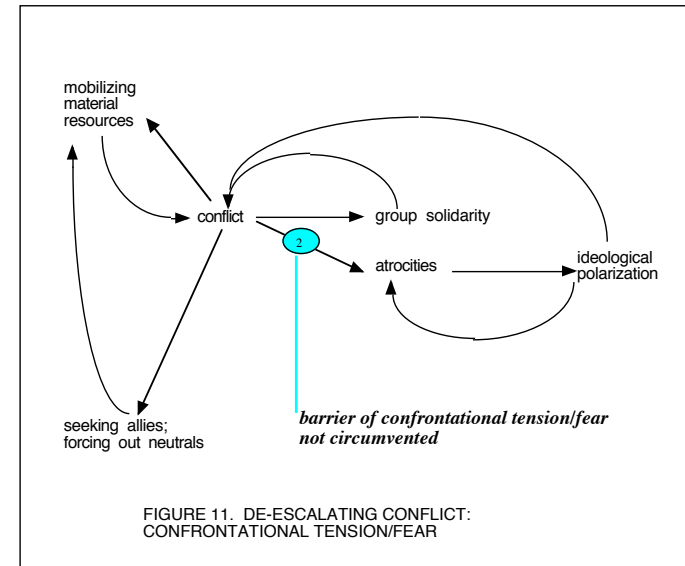
Most face-to-face threats consist of bluster, angry words and gestures. This is not

necessarily a bad thing, because many fights become stalled at the point of mutual

equilibrium. The micro-details are displayed in a photo in Collins (2008: 365). It shows

an Israeli soldier and a Palestinian militant, in angry confrontation on the Temple Mount

in Jerusalem, the scene of many bloody incidents. But not this day; the angry quarrel

eventually subsided without further escalation. The details of how to avoid escalation are

visible here: both sides exactly mirror each other's gestures and emotional intensity. The

two individuals are in a stare-down contest, their faces almost touching, brows expressing

anger, mouths open and shouting. But they are in equilibrium. Neither one escalates

ahead of the other. Neither side has established domination of the emotional attention

space; neither has the emotional energy advantage, and eventually their EE falls off. [8] This is practical advice from micro-sociology: you can keep a confrontation from escalating by keeping it at the level of stalled repetitions, until it de-escalates quite literally from boredom. This is easiest to accomplish in small-scale confrontations; the larger the number of people, the more likely there will be some places where there are asymmetries, so that the equilibrium is broken.

Time-dynamics:
emotional burnout

mobilizing
material
resources

conflict → group solidarity

atrocities

ideological
polarization

seeking allies;
forcing out neutrals

FIGURE 12. DE-ESCALATING CONFLICT:
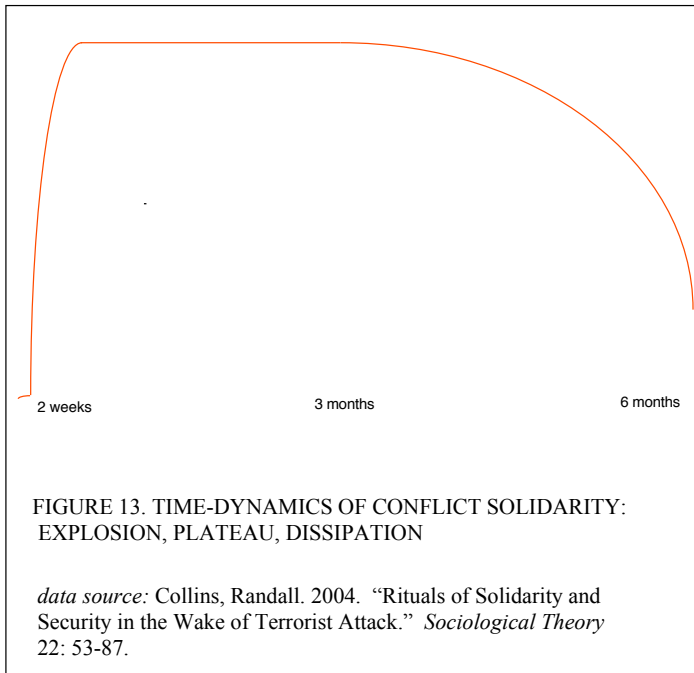EMOTIONAL BURNOUT

Third: the entire set of feedback loops among solidarity, polarization, and conflict can become de-escalated through emotional burnout. This is an area we are just beginning to research, the time-dynamics of various kinds of conflict. [Figure 12]

Conflict produces solidarity, but how long does it last? Right after the 9/11/2001 attacks, I realized this would be an opportunity to find out (Collins 2004a). The first two days, people acted shocked and bewildered, but on the third day, they hit on a collective response: displaying American flags, on cars, windows, and clothing. I counted the number of flags in various places, repeating observations for over a year. The first two weeks were an explosion of flag-displaying, rapidly reaching its peak. [9] These symbols of the group remained at a plateau for three months; at which point there began to be discussions: is it okay to take our flags down now? After three months, solidarity displays began to dissipate, falling off into a distinctly minority expression by 6 months, with occasional blips thereafter on commemorative dates. [Figure 13]

Solidarity over time has the shape of a fireworks rocket: very rapid ascent, a lengthy plateau, and a slow dissipation. The actual length of these time-patterns may well vary with different kinds of conflict, and with some other variables; here we need more comparative research. The three-month plateau and six-month dissipation fit such things as popularity spikes for political leaders at times of dramatic turning-points in massive conflicts-- i.e. conflicts on the size of entire nations. There are other correlates, such as the suppression of dissent during the explosion phase, and the tendency towards atrocities and paranoid rumors during the 3-month plateau (Collins 2004a). Wars are almost always greeted by an initial burst of enthusiasm, which wanes within six months; not to say that wars cannot continue longer, but they enter into another emotional phase, increasingly just grinding it through, accompanied by internal emotional splits that I will discuss shortly.

FIGURE 13. TIME-DYNAMICS OF CONFLICT SOLIDARITY:
EXPLOSION, PLATEAU, DISSIPATION

data source: Collins, Randall. 2004. "Rituals of Solidarity and
Security in the Wake of Terrorist Attack." *Sociological Theory*
22: 53-87.

Smaller scales of conflicts-- social movements, and smaller yet, riots and contentious assemblies, on down to brawls and quarrels-- have specific time-dynamics of their own. I suspect that the shape of the curve is similar for escalated conflicts-- rapid explosion, plateau, slow dissipation-- but that some last for weeks or days instead of months, or only for hours or minutes. [10]   A preliminary hypothesis is that the size of the group that becomes successfully mobilized determines how long the entire time-dynamic takes. The extent of mobilization, in turn, is affected by structural conditions: the historical process of state penetration into society, breaking down local enclaves,

fostering communications and transportation, and providing a central arena for political activity and a unifying focus of public attention. It was this process of state penetration that Tilly [1995, 2004; see also Mann 1993] found at the basis of the invention of the social movement at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries. Linking these causal levels together, I suggest that the extent of state penetration determines the size of the group that can experience itself as a collective actor, a Durkheimian unity; and it is the size of this sustained collective attention that determines the length of the time-dynamics plateau of widespread symbolic/emotional solidarity.

Fourth: we shift now to the left side of the model, which is where material and larger macro-conditions come in. Conflict de-escalates when material resources are no longer available to sustain it. This may happen because the resource base is exhausted; or because logistics channels fail to deliver the goods to the front line activists. [Figure 14] War winds down when it becomes materially too costly to carry it on-- more precisely, if both sides wind down resources at approximately the same rate, since a big disparity between the sides gives one of them the opportunity for victory. At a smaller scale, riots tend to be short, usually confined to a few days, because rioters have to go home and eat, and eventually to get back into their economic routines; small-scale conflicts lack the institutionalized organization to deliver material resources, that keeps larger conflicts going such as wars and social movements.

FIGURE 14. DE-ESCALATING CONFLICT:
MATERIAL RESOURCES FAIL
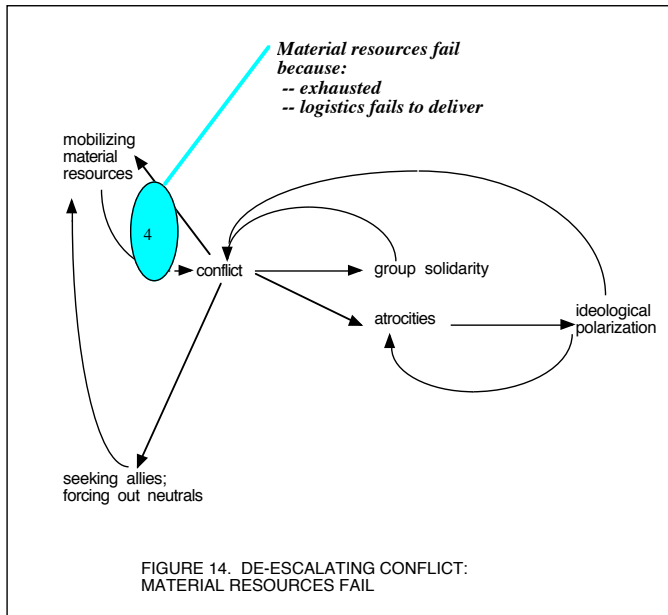
In principle the third route to de-escalation is the opposite of the fourth route: in the former, material resources to keep on fighting may still exist but participants are emotionally burned out; in the latter, they may still want to go on, but materially they cannot. These are ideal types, and they interact in various ways; like Napoleon's three to one ratio of morale to material, it may turn out that if we can measure this, the emotional burnout path-- indeed the whole set of de-escalation processes on the right side of the model-- tend to outweigh the material route on the left. But material weakness can lead to other side's successful attack, resulting in destroying one's organization and capacity to assemble for group rituals and by that route losing one's moral resources. [11]

Fifth and finally: the alliances which earlier supported a conflict fall away. Here neutrals reappear. As Donald Black (1998) and Mark Cooney (1998) have shown in their work on third parties, neutrals, equidistant from both sides while maintaining contacts with both, are in the crucial position to negotiate the steps that eventually bring disengagement. Neutrals, despised at the beginning, now take the idealistic high ground; and the mutual atrocities accumulated during the conflict begin to cast a pall on continuing polarization. [12] [Figure 15]

FIGURE 15. DE-ESCALATING CONFLICT:
THIRD-PARTY SETTLEMENT
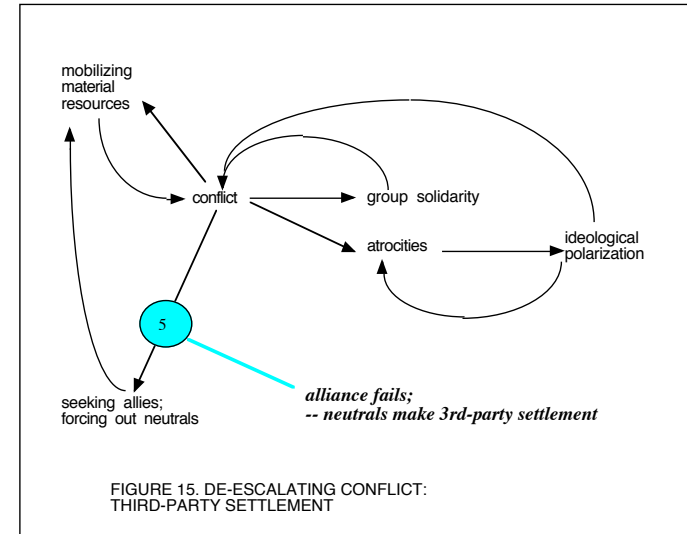
Much of what I have said about de-escalating conflict can be put in terms of micro theory. Figure 16 again displays the Interaction Ritual model, used earlier to show how conflict generates solidarity during the escalation phase. During de-escalation, the

variables go into reverse. Instead of assembling the group, it becomes dispersed. Mutual

focus of attention is broken, as individuals pay more attention to non-members of the

conflict group; worse yet, they may even fraternize with the enemy. And emotional

burnout is the opposite of collective effervescence, reducing the shared emotional

mood.

FIGURE 16. DE-ESCALATING CONFLICT: MICRO-FOUNDATIONS
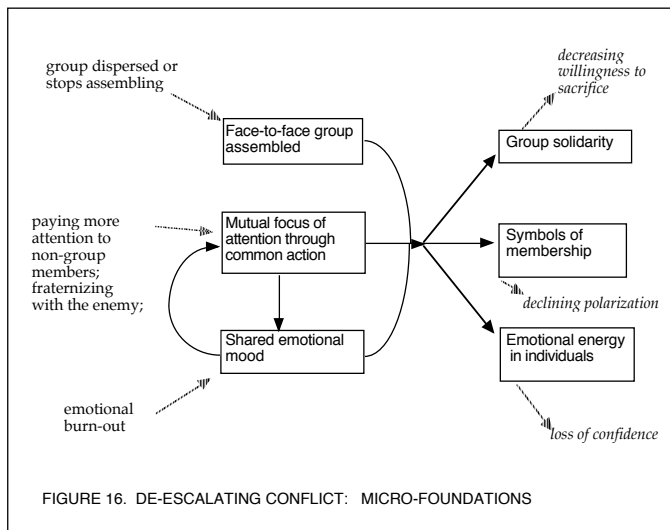
On the outcome side, group solidarity declines. And since solidarity is the source

of idealism, individuals become less willing to sacrifice themselves for the group.

Symbols of membership lose their intensity. Ideological polarization declines; the

opponent becomes perceived as less demonic, our images of ourselves becomes less

omni-righteous, less puffed up with our own virtues and collective omnipotence. And

emotional energy falls away; since high EE means high confidence and enthusiasm, we

lose confidence in our cause and pursue it with less energy. We are less exalted by the

group, returning to the pragmatics of everyday life.

Victory Faction versus Peace Faction

As we near the end, I want to emphasize a contradiction between the middle part

of my theory and the latter part. The middle is asymmetrical: it is what one side attempts

to do in order to gain victory, to impose defeat on the other. The latter part is

symmetrical: de-escalation happens when both sides undergo degradation of their

emotional and material resources, at a rate equal enough so that both become willing to

end the conflict. This is a contradiction in real life, not just in theory. As de-escalating

processes increase, the main obstacle to peace is those participants who feel they can still

win. Thus in the latter phase of a protracted conflict, a new set of factions appears: on one

side, the hard-liners or militants, the victory faction; on the other, the peace party, the

negotiators, the de-escalators. As we see in recent discussion about the Iraq and

Afghanistan wars, the reasons of the peace faction or disengagement faction can be a

mixture of ideals, burnout, and material costs; the motives and ideals of the war faction

are also mixed, but above all cling to the emotions and ideals of the phase of high

solidarity through external conflict.

This new level of internal conflict muddies the purity of near-universal solidarity

at the beginning of the conflict. The conflict between victory faction and peace faction

can go either way; think of Churchill and Roosevelt in WWII, or the disgruntlements of

US foreign policies from the Vietnam War to the present. I am not preaching about this

one way or the other, but stressing an analytical point: if the strength of the various

processes in the conflict model remain fluctuating long enough within a central range, this internal conflict will emerge.[13] Theory should give the conditions for whether militants or compromisers prevail. On the theoretical level, a key point is that external conflict generates emergent lines of internal conflict. Hard-liners and compromisers are not the same as Left and Right; they are not rooted in pre-existing identities such as classes or religions or ethnicities; they come into being because of the time-dynamics of conflict itself. They are so to speak latent possibilities in the structure of conflict space over time.

Hard-liners and compromisers are identities that do not easily fit into ideological categories; but in the latter phase of an prolonged conflict, it is this axis that takes over the center of attention. This is the time-period for the angriest accusations about traitors and sell-outs, and counter-accusations of blind fanaticism. More advanced theory of conflict will tell us more about the process of emergent factionalization, conflict creating its own identities as it goes along, based more on tactics than on ideologies and interests.[14] We are beginning to see this, for example, in the work of Andrew Walder (2009) on Chinese Red Guard factions, and the work of Stefan Klusemann (2010) on splits and mergers among revolutionary movements as they struggle for dominance in revolutionary attention space.

CONCLUSION

We are not just theorists and researchers; we live through such conflicts ourselves. Does being aware of sociological processes help us navigate the real world?

Here is the most popular poem to come out of World War I. It was written by a Canadian soldier who died on the Western Front in the last year of the war. It is a

sentimental poem-- maudlin, hokey. It's not true that men are unemotional; they're just emotional about different things than women. Men are sentimental about violence.

In Flanders fields the poppies blow

Between the crosses row on row...

We are the Dead. Short days ago

We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,

Loved and were loved; now we lie

In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:

To you from failing hands we throw

The torch; be yours to hold it high.

If you break faith with us who die

We shall not sleep, though poppies grow

In Flanders fields.

[John McRae, written 1915. Emphasis added.]

The poem reenacts the most effective of all conflict rituals: the funeral of a dead comrade-in-arms. My collection contains photos of motorcycle police mourning a fellow cop shot in action; they look the same as the photos of Hells Angels in their funeral

procession; the same as photos of gang members making their gang signs over the grave of one killed in a drive-by. The message is the same: solidarity with the dead, to keep the fight going. What count as losses, for the de-escalators, are turned into symbols of our unstoppable drive towards victory.

I come down on being a sociologist. If there is anything we have to offer, it is clarity about a complex and dynamic situation. Polarization is the great enemy; it is false clarity, false simplification to one bundle in which we pack all the negative stereotypes about our opponents, and another bundle in which we pack self-righteous praise of our collective selves. Polarization is thinking through the categories of our insults. It makes for poor sociology; and generally it makes for unrealistic and inhumane action.

Yes, sometimes we have to plunge into the phase of escalation and polarization, if we hope to win and cause changes in the world, although there are always unintended consequences. But we need to be aware of what we are getting into, and be ready to pull ourselves back into sociological clarity when the first emotional binge is over. [15]

Above all, we have to be sociological about ideals, our own as well as everyone else's. Ideals are part of social reality; interaction rituals make us ideal-making creatures, attached to our symbols. But ideals and solidarity are the strongest weapons of conflict, and the main forces that drive conflict in the C-escalation phase. Ironically, ideals and principles make conflict worse; merely pragmatic and self-interested conflict is easier to negotiate. In the de-escalation process, solidarity and ideals are the greatest obstacles. That is what sociological sophistication is about.

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Notes

[1] Such data is now becoming widely available from mobile phone cameras and security videos (CCTV), as well as from freelance journalists' telephoto lenses. The era of the realistic observation of what actually happens in violence began with camcorders in the early 1990s, in the same way that conversation analysis began in the late 1960s with the proliferation of tape recorders. For an example of analyzing sequences of violent incidents— and most significantly, how they abort or de-escalate— by using CCTV footage from British pubs, see Levine *et al.* 2011.

[2] In contemporary youth culture, violent persons often say they were disrespected by the victim, and that they were defending their honor. But micro-detail shows that such individuals are violent only when there is a particular situational configuration; not every conflictual encounter is taken as a necessity for punishing disrespect or defending honor. Statement of motives for violence is not a sufficient explanation for what happens; often it is an ideology that obfuscates what actually happens. Above all, popular rhetoric is oblivious to the dynamics of confrontational tension and fear.

[3] On a larger scale, this is true of military tactics as well, since tactics aim for local superiority, hitting the enemy with superior numbers or weaponry. The use of stealthy and hidden weapons such as IEDs (improvised explosive devices) and terrorist bombings, are an adaption of the same technique by weaker forces whose only advantage is hiding in civilian population. See Collins 2010, and Biddle 2004.

[4] The development of dueling in sixteenth century Europe came as a substitute for vendettas. Death or injury in a duel could not be avenged, and thus duels were a step towards limiting violence to self-contained individual incidents (Spierenburg 2009; Collins 2008: 193-241).

[5] Horowitz (2001) shows that deadly ethic riots are always preceded by rumors. In the case of Rwanda in 1994, a Tutsi refugee army was actually approaching across the border while Hutu militants carried out an 11-week-long massacre of Tutsis, and rumors abounded of alleged Hutu massacres by Tutsis. On this case and the larger dynamics, see Mann (2005).

[6a] What seemed like an avalanche of e-mails came in to the ASA office, or to myself, during the peak period. Most were headed by long lists of addressees and cc's, up to 100

or more per message. I did not attempt to winnow down the overlap, then or subsequently; a reasonable estimate is that at least several hundred people were contacted. The senders totaled 42 individuals— perhaps 10-15% of the total recipients. Of these, 6 individuals posted more than once, and their e-mails were most often appended to other emails, so that I saw some of them dozens of times. The prime movers were 5 individuals, one of whom posted 7 times, the others 3 or 4 times each. (The sociologist who was the target of the attacks was not one of the posters.) Of the 42 senders, 23 were very brief statements of support: "Me, too." "I agree too." "Sign me up." "ditto." Another 13 posted only once, half of them concise suggestions of practical ways to spread the petition drive or other actions; the other half gave ideological and emotional expressions. The overall impression at the time was an enormous outburst; the total of all the messages received was 317 pages. The core messages, however, were only 20-30 pages of this total. The e-mail cascade thus gives an impression of being about 10 times larger than it actually is.

[6] My conclusion is: If on-line discussion gives a window into the process of conflict mobilization, it illustrates how difficult it is to set violent action in motion, especially among anonymous individuals who do not form a network of personal acquaintance. Data of this sort also protects us against sampling on the dependent variable, investigating only the protests which actually come about; it may well be that most incipient protests abort, as this one did. That is also the pattern of most kinds of violence-threatening incidents.

[7] Hypotheses: sanctions (legal threats in international courts, and economic embargos) do not appear to be effective, because their time-dynamics are very long-term, whereas most

other C-escalation components are much faster. Direct military intervention can sway the balance in the medium run; but its effect is to keep the conflict going, if the opposing side has equivalent military resources, or outside military support is given to both sides. A large majority of armed groups in internal conflicts during 1945-2005 received outside funding or arms; with the end of the Cold War around 1990, such conflicts ended at a higher rate, because this balance of funding by opposing geopolitical blocs greatly declined (Schlichte 2009: 121-3).

[8] The photo also shows other people in the background, both Israelis and Palestinians. None of these has the intense emotional expression of the two protagonists in the foreground. As is typical of the standoff phase of crowd confrontations, their behavior waits on a trigger from a small number who change the focus of attention by violent action. In this case, the trigger did not occur.

[9] This level was never more than 38-46 % of residences and 10% of cars. Mass solidarity is carried by substantial numbers, but it does require unanimity, as long as oppositional expressions do not disturb the dominant expression. We see this also in opinion polls showing support of leaders in times of crisis; typically these reach about 83-90%, but except in totalitarian regimes, never much higher. Sources in Collins 2004a.

[10] My point is not how long individuals bear grudges— a topic needing empirical investigation in its own right— but how long overt conflict is mobilized at various levels of intensity.

[11] The model applies to all kinds of conflict, across the size dimension from the smallest micro to the largest macro. A reason that micro-interactions among individuals and small groups usually cannot escalate very far is that they lack the formal organizational

structure to get over to the left side of the model; hence whatever material resources they immediately possess will tend to be exhausted, and the conflict will come to an end. This is so even if the conflict becomes extremely violent: if an individual is killed in a quarrel, the bodies are lacking to carry it on unless there is a larger structure, such as a gang or clan, to exact revenge. But even these semi-formal structures tend to be rather ineffective at continuing vendettas, and their hostility remains more often at the level of bluster than of actual fighting. Evidence in Collins (2008: 231, 489); Spierenburg (2008).

[12] The effectiveness of neutrals has its own time-dynamics. In general, third-party intervention as peace-makers is most effective when a conflict is in its emotional burnout phase, or one or more of de-escalating processes 1-4 have already taken effect. But once armed peace-keepers are introduced in a violent conflict, enthusiasm for their intervention appears also to be subject to time-dynamics (yet to be measured); in about three months, the peacekeepers themselves may become regarded as the enemy. Even purely altruistic third parties, who merely offer humanitarian aid, and avoid coercive power, can find their good intentions overridden by the prevailing dynamics of the conflict. If the conflict has not already greatly de-escalated, especially by falling solidarity and emotional exhaustion, the material aid they bring to the conflict zone may simply be appropriated by whichever party remains best organized and committed to continue the fight; in this case humanitarian aid becomes part of the material resource loop, keeping the conflict going (Kaldor 2001; Oberschall and Seidman 2005). The practical lesson is that humanitarian aid organizations cannot ignore the time-dynamics of conflict.

[13] How long they have to remain in this range for the split to emerge is one of the time dynamics to be established. Schlichte (2009) shows that in a prolonged stalemate, where a state cannot rely on the loyalty of its army for repression, it tends to create militias using more extreme tactics, which eventually spin off into independent movements. This reminds us that stalemate can lead the victory faction to escalate internally rather than externally. This is one of the sources of the most extreme atrocities and ideological polarization, and a pathway to genocide.

[14] Such identities are far from trivial, since they can live for a long time after the particular conflict that spawned them is settled. For instance, the Bolsheviks took their identity from a tactical split inside the revolutionary workers movement in Russia in 1903 and kept their distinct identity for twenty years. Emergent factionalization is one of the key dimensions along which conflict structures and restructures groups and identities. For a related analysis, showing historically how party politics began with a distinction purely internal to the political field— the Ins and the Outs— and later expanded to incorporate exogenous interest groups and ideological movements, see Martin 2009: 283-320.

[15] Max Weber threw himself into the war effort in the first months of enthusiasm of World War I, but then he returned to being a sociologist and worked for a negotiated peace and for a way to reconstruct a democratic post-war Germany [Radkau 2009].