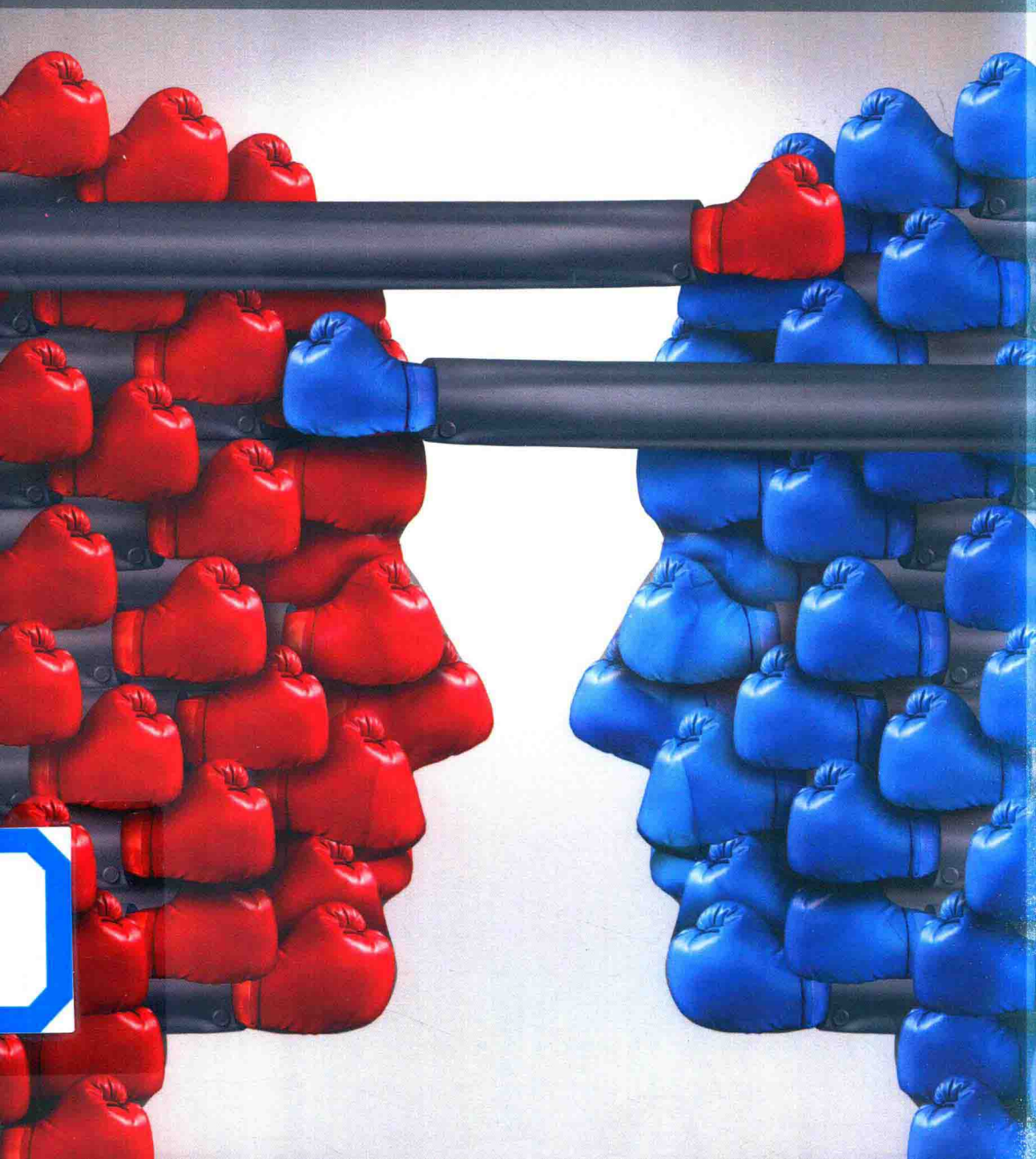


POLITICAL INSULTS

How Offenses Escalate Conflict

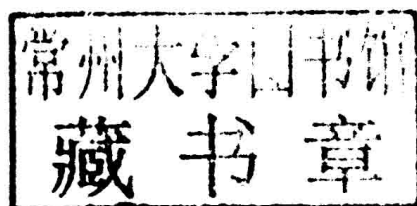
KARINA V. KOROSTELINA



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Political Insults

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Political Insults

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments vii

Introduction 1

1. Deconstructing Intergroup Insult 12

2. Pussy Riot in Russia 31

3. Victory Day Violence in Ukraine 55

4. Murder and Release 73

5. Islands between Two Countries 94

6. Declaration of War 119

7. Dealing with Insult 135

Notes 167

Glossary 189

Selected Bibliography 191

Index of Names 195

Index of Subjects 197

Introduction

Thousands of protesters came to the streets in Cairo, enraged over a little-known film posted on the Internet, and threats by a US preacher to burn the Koran sparked deadly riots in Afghanistan. A street vendor, protesting harassment and humiliation by municipal officials, set himself on fire, thus sparking the Tunisian Revolution and the wider Arab Spring. Five women entered the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow, shed their winter clothing at the altar, and began a performance of a "Punk Prayer," aiming crude language at Vladimir Putin and Kirill I, the Moscow Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church. Elderly veterans were assaulted near World War II monuments, and young people fried eggs on the eternal flame near the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Ukraine. In a dispute over small islands in the Japan Sea, the Japanese government canceled a currency swap with South Korea and recalled the Japanese ambassador; while the South Korean president visited the disputed islands, 40 South Koreans swam to them, and South Korea's coast guard conducted military exercises nearby. The quick pardon by Azerbaijan's president of the repatriated killer of an Armenian army officer sparked outrage in Armenia and Hungary, as well as a diplomatic maelstrom involving NATO and the European Union.

All these events occurred in different countries, reflect different issues, and involve different participants. But they are united by one common feature that shapes the dynamics of escalation of these conflicts: intergroup insult. While insults are a frequent action in interpersonal and intergroup relations, there are surprisingly few references to insults in the academic literature, especially in literature on conflicts. The absence of the systemic study on intergroup insult is even more notable given the fact that even

unintentional insults can result in disproportionate reactions, from dissolution of self-confidence to violent group behavior.

The aim of this book is to create a systemic view of intergroup insults by analyzing their main features, types, forms, and dynamics. My approach to intergroup insult rests on the theories of social identity and power. I posit that intergroup insult is a social act mutually constructed by two social groups on the boundary between them; it is an act that interrupts the shared process of the production of meaning of social reality, reshapes identity, and redefines the balance of power. Both groups—insulting and insulted—can contribute to the construction of insults: the insulting group can produce an insult intentionally, or its actions can be unintentional, while the insulted group can recognize actions of the out-group as an insult or fail to recognize them as offensive. The combination of these actions generates four *types* of insults: *congruous*, *attributed*, *futile*, and *potential*.

The insulting side can have different motivation for insults; similarly, the insulted side can attribute various intentions to them. Based on an analysis of identity and power relations between groups, I define six forms of insult. An *identity insult* strips an out-group of positive identity and increases in-group self-esteem. A *projection insult* attributes negative features or intentions to the out-group and justifies in-group actions. A *divergence insult* strengthens intergroup boundaries and provides protection from alien values and rules. A *relative insult* denies rights, opportunities, and abilities to an out-group. A *power insult* redefines a balance of coercive power. A *legitimacy insult* legitimizes the in-group and delegitimizes the out-group.

The book also emphasizes the complex nature of the dynamics of intergroup insult. *Transfer of insult* increases the scope of insult by involving more in-group members in its construction. *Sensitizing* involves enlightening of in-group members about the meaning of an out-group insult and its impact on in-group image. *Learned insult* rests on recognition of a particular insult based on the observation of reactions of other in-group members. *Generalization of insult* unites different actions and words of the insulting side based on their similarity to a previous insult. *Conglomeration of insult* strengthens the reaction to insult based on increasing frequency of insults. A *delayed insult* can be recognized at some time after it is uttered; nevertheless it contributes to conglomeration and generalization processes. *Diffusion of insult* refers to a loss of the offensive effect of an insult over time. *Reactivated insult* can invoke memories of the former diffused insults in situations similar to that in which the old offense occurred.

Through the analysis of five case studies in this book I show that particular forms of insult are indicative of specific drivers of conflicts, and require

different approaches by a third party who tries to mediate. This understanding of insult makes it a useful tool in the analysis of conflict dynamics and a resource for practical suggestions in the analysis and resolution of complex conflicts.

INSULTS AS SOCIAL PHENOMENA

Insults are an inevitable aspect of the social relations that face each of us on a daily, or almost daily, basis. Insult is defined as a “behavior or discourse, oral or written, which is perceived, experienced, constructed and, at times, intended as slighting, humiliating or offensive.”¹ An insult can be verbal, a facial expression or gesture, or an action. Insults are perceived by the target as both intentional and illegitimate.² They exist on different levels in society, including interpersonal, intergroup, and international levels, and they result in production and reproduction of social meaning. They change social relations, provoke violence, and contribute to the worst conflicts of history. “Threatened egotism,” a tendency to attack groups perceived as insulting to the in-group, was a major factor in the Holocaust.³ Whether intentional or unintentional, insults have real and potentially lasting effects on society.

Insults can spark broad social actions and international conflicts. The low-budget movie *Innocence of Muslims*, portraying the prophet Muhammad as a fool and a child molester, was planned by Nakoula Basseley Nakoula as an identity insult to Muslims. He targeted the most sacred beliefs about the Prophet and used the most unacceptable vices in Muslim culture to portray him. Nakoula posted the short version of movie on YouTube; its airing on several Muslim TV stations contributed to a sensitization of insult among Muslims. It immediately sparked a torrent of anti-American unrest in Arab and Muslim countries because it was perceived as offensive insult. The first round of protests occurred on September 11, 2012 in Benghazi, where a militant group used the movie as a diversion to attack the US consulate. Christopher Stevens, a career diplomat named ambassador to Libya in May, together with three other embassy staff members, was killed in this attack. This violent action was planned as an insult to the US government and a country in general on the anniversary of the September 11 attacks. The insult then became more generalized: protests over the video continued in Egypt, where several men scaled the walls of the US embassy and tore down its American flag. In Kana, Nigeria, tens of thousands of Muslims marched to protest the video, shouting threats and projected insults toward the United States and Israel. US and Israeli flags were dragged through the dirt as a symbolic insulting action. Protests continued in London, where

thousands of demonstrators marched on the offices of Google, demanding that the company remove the insulting film from the Internet.

Insults also can work as triggering points for social transformations and radical change, including revolutions. Like many young people in Tunis, Mohamed Bouazizi was insulted by the local bureaucracy in many forms. Numerous times police confiscated his scales and his produce, and fined him for running a stall without a permit. One morning, in a small confrontation, a policewoman slapped him and, with the help of her colleagues, forced him to the ground. The officers took away his produce and his scale. The fact that the police officer was a woman underscored this power insult: a slap from a woman is perceived as a complete humiliation in Tunisian culture. Seeking justice, Bouazizi went to the local municipality building and demanded a meeting with an official. When his request was denied, Bouazizi poured flammable liquid over his body and set himself alight outside the local municipal office. This action deeply resonated throughout the country, where people were deeply frustrated with the lack of freedoms and were continuously insulted on all levels by the Tunisian bureaucracy. Many young people had lost any hope of finding a job, and the option to emigrate became an illusion with the European Union states closing their borders to Tunisia. According to official government data, the level of unemployment at the time was 18 percent, but the real situation was much worse, especially in the countryside. Nepotism, corruption, and policies of privatization contributed to the wealth of the president, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, but impeded the access of young people to jobs and education. Within hours, Bouazizi's self-immolation became a learned insult and gave a rise to protests in Sidi Bou Saïd; police attempts to settle the unrest only fueled more violent actions. After two weeks, Ben Ali, attempting to reduce the tension, visited Mohamed Bouazizi at the hospital in Ben Arous and reached out to his family, inviting them to the presidential palace. But these actions were perceived as a stronger insult because they were too late and were clearly manipulative. After Bouazizi's death, the protests became widespread, moving into the more affluent areas and eventually into the capital, sensitizing more and more people to Ben Ali's insult. The anger and violence became so intense that Ben Ali fled Tunisia with his family on January 14, 2011, and was given an asylum in Saudi Arabia. The revolution spread beyond Tunisia, taking other authoritarian Arab governments down.

Many scholars emphasize that the construction of insult involves the active participation of all involved parties and can be understood as a dialogic process.⁴ Every insult involves a perpetrator, target, and audience, even when some insults can be attributed solely to the insulting party.⁵

These intentional and unintentional insults can be displayed in play, humor, ritual, blasphemy, and hate speech. Thus, insult can be determined by both a recipient or insulting party, and this process depends on the particular culture or society.⁶

All insults are formed, maintained, and transformed through social relations and help construct reality through social interaction.⁷ These social constructs are written into the fabric of our institutions and practices; thus insults and responses to them are culturally produced. Cultural features such as levels of empathy and social distance influence people's responses to shame, insults, and victimization in general.⁸ An audience is a key aspect of insult: it transforms insult from simple annoyance to violent offense and stigma, as judged by others.⁹

Often culture helps produce or maintain power relations that promote one group over another, and this creates special contexts of insult. Through the use of insult, a dominant group labels and defines what it means for a minority group to exist, and thus insults can be a powerful way of creating group solidarity out of once disparate individuals.¹⁰ A dominant group can insult a minority group by emphasizing differences between their cultures and histories. Conversely, any challenge to a dominant group by a minority group (such as questioning the ethnicity of the Christ figure) can be perceived as an insult or threat because stereotypes are deeply embedded in the group's history, culture, and rituals.¹¹ A history of racism affects interpretations of insult and the production of hate-speech directed toward minorities that can be accepted by the majority.¹²

Liberal societies are committed to free speech but recognize that certain forms of speech are harmful. Through the insult, the intentions to do harm are translated into actual harm. While society builds institutions and practices to protect from certain insults, these attempts, in an almost paradoxical way, contribute to the harming power of the prohibited words.¹³ For example, the punitive requirements of the criminal justice system produce a potential insult rather than compassion for the victims of violent domestic assault. An alternative system that focuses on restorative justice and healing rather than shame and punishment is the only way to reduce violence in the home.¹⁴

Insults are connected with several other social phenomena like impoliteness, humiliation, embitterment, revenge, and incivility. Impoliteness rests on interpretation and the context in which something is said; thus insult can only become offensive through interpretations. Even something uttered politely may be interpreted as an insult given the particular social context within which it occurs.¹⁵ Many social situations are coded with rituals of shame and humiliation. Based on culturally specific codes of

honor, reactions to insults are as much about our care for the presentation of self as they are about the “right” interaction with the other.¹⁶ Similar to humiliation, insults result in powerful emotions and enter into a personal or group history. This dynamic creates the experiences of shame, guilt, and anger as fundamental emotions connected to insults.¹⁷ However, while they both produce negative emotions, humiliation and insults differ from one another. Humiliation as “the enforced lowering of a person or group, a process of subjugation that damages or strips away their pride, honor or dignity,”¹⁸ aims to make the insulted side feel inferior. Insults have wider purposes, including creation of the social boundary between people and the redefinition of legitimacy. The categories of insult include exclusion, stereotyping, obliteration of significant identity details, ingratitude, scapegoating, rudeness, broken promises, being ignored or kept waiting, defamation, and despoiling of idealized objects, persons, or ideas.¹⁹

People can also perceive insult in situations that are not intended to be offensive. Posttraumatic embitterment disorder²⁰ develops when anxiety-provoking events are “experienced as unjust, as a personal insult, and psychologically as a violation of basic beliefs and values. The psychopathological reaction is a prolonged feeling of embitterment.”²¹ The insulting event occupies a major place in the thoughts of the insulted person, and memories about it recur in despair. A person wants to fight back, plans revenge and acts of aggression, feeling at the same time helpless and cornered. This feeling of embitterment can also arise in the context of in-group conflict, influencing the relations between two sides.²² While the concept of embitterment explains why some unintentional actions are perceived as an insult and how these perceptions can lead to a motivation to create new insults, the dynamics of insult itself are not a focus of these studies.

Similarly, a person or group might commit acts of revenge in response to subjective experiences of injustice, victimization, or violation of personal rights and claims,²³ as a response to negative experiences and insults,²⁴ or humiliation or threat to the sense of identity.²⁵ The desire for revenge has been cited in many intergroup conflicts, including Kosovo, Afghanistan, Uganda, and the post-9/11 United States.²⁶ The desire for revenge can be a coping strategy that never results in actions: studies do not show significant interrelations between feelings of revenge and actions of offense and crime.²⁷ Thus, feelings of revenge as a tool of managing personal traumatic experiences can explain some motivations for insult but do not provide insights into the mechanisms of insulting behavior.

Insult usually represents a low level of intensity of aggressive action, thus being similar to incivility analyzed in work settings. Incivility as an interactive event “involves acting rudely or discourteously, without regard

for others, in violation of norms for respect in social interactions.”²⁸ The intent to harm in incivility acts is ambiguous: some acts can be produced with a desire to harm, while others can be a result of ignorance or stress, representing “‘milder’ mistreatment such as condescending remarks or impolite gestures.”²⁹ A series of acts of incivility will have a more significant effect on people and their well-being than a single act. While the concept of incivility helps to contextualize low-intensity violent acts toward other people, it is mostly connected with the violation of norms (of the workplace, for example), perceptions of justice, and social ostracism. As I argue in this book, the concept of insult has a wider causation.

Insults contribute to the formation and reformulation of self-image and identity of all parties, but are especially influential for the identity of the insulted one. In the face of domination and insult, gay male identity is contracted to resist subjection and reformulated as resistance and freedom.³⁰ Insults are also influential to a person’s identity through the creation of a powerful motivation for actions. An insult to status may be used to manipulate a consumer’s motivations to purchase items and increase social status.³¹ Several studies show that insult in interpersonal relations is perceived as more offensive if it creates an unfavorable situational identity by making a person appear weak, incompetent, and cowardly.³² Likewise, a person might aim to dismiss or humiliate another by calling him ugly, ignorant, boorish, boring, or dirty.³³ In intergroup relations more insult-related anger is experienced by people with highly salient in-group identity.³⁴ Often such an insult will lead to a counterattack or retaliation in an attempt to nullify the imputed negative identity. This is done through a show of one’s strength, competence, and courage, or by casting a negative identity on the original aggressor.³⁵ The latter situation produces a desire to take confrontational action against offending groups,³⁶ a willingness to take risk, and an inability to thoughtfully take the other side’s perspective, reconsider the situation, or think about alternatives to aggression.³⁷ In addition, the insult of an in-group is typically received more defensively when it originates from an out-group rather than from another in-group member or a representative of a shared, superordinate identity.³⁸ So the perception of insult as grievously offensive and the readiness of persons to retaliate depends on both the importance and the salience of this identity.

While the meaning of insults is fluid and constantly redefined in different cultural and historical contexts, insults can result in disproportionate reactions, from aggressive and violent behavior to social revolutions. Depending on the nature of conflict, parties can use different forms of insult; these insults are indicative for the core issues of conflict. The study of insults also requires the development of practical suggestions for dealing

with the offenses and the conflicts that involve them. Some research suggests that we ought to do two things in life to fend off insults: first, develop a thicker skin, becoming more like Stoic philosophers; second, become “insult pacifists,” who try hard not to engage in insults and attempt to diffuse their social power.³⁹ The language of apology also can help to reduce or intensify the effects of initial insult. If the out-group expresses shame, then this may exacerbate the insult, whereas guilt will begin to repair the damage of insult.⁴⁰ As I show in this book, different forms of insult are sensitive to specific types of conflict management and require different approaches by a third party who wishes to intervene.

METHODOLOGY

The cases selected for this book focus on multiple insults that are central to the dynamics of conflict, and all occurred during the years 2012–2013, in which the book was written.⁴¹ Thus, much of the data were collected through examination of newspapers, Internet media, polls, documentaries, official documents, and official reports.

The analysis of the data was based on the conceptual definitions of the forms of insults, the matrix of the types of insults, and the conceptual elements of insult dynamics elaborated in chapter 1. To analyze the creation, employment, and impact of insult and the intergroup relations associated with it, I used the method of process tracing,⁴² with events as embedded units of analysis within multiple contexts.⁴³ I analyzed each case in terms of the sequence and structure of events to reveal the causal connections between certain events, constructed insults, produced effects, and reactions of different groups. I focused on the unfolding of events over time, concentrating on a series of insults and reactions toward them as key steps in the conflict dynamics.⁴⁴

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Chapter 1 of this book, “Deconstructing Intergroup Insult,” presents the theoretical foundations of the analysis of intergroup insult, including its main features, types, forms, and specific dynamics. It also includes the conceptual framework for the analysis of the case studies in this book. The chapter stresses that intergroup insult, as a social act constructed mutually by social groups on the social boundary between them, involves (1) the social identity and power positions of both groups; (2) a history of

relations between the two groups, (3) awareness of the insult by one or both groups, and (4) the sociocultural meaning of insult accepted in the specific society and culture(s). It also describes insult as an interruption in the mutual process of the production of meaning of social identity and power. Intergroup insult strips the insulted group of a positive identity and decreases its power.

Chapter 2, "Pussy Riot in Russia," discusses a series of scandals around the Russian Orthodox Church that Russian society perceived as insults. It also discusses events connected with Pussy Riot's protests. Pussy Riot, the feminist punk band, stormed the main altar of Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior and performed their "Punk Prayer," containing crude language aimed toward Russia's president and the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church. By using this divergence insult they protested the collusion between the Russian Orthodox Church and President Vladimir Putin. For the Russian government it was a legitimacy insult. The government-controlled Russian mass media were quick to influence public opinion, insisting that Pussy Riot had insulted a place of worship and the Orthodox faith in general. As a result, three members of the band were convicted of "hooliganism" and sentenced to two years in prison.

Chapter 3, "Victory Day Violence in Ukraine," depicts the role of insults in the conflict over history in Ukraine. Insults in this case included diverse verbal statements and actions, the "war" of regional laws, the beating of war veterans, and frying eggs on the internal flame of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Verhovna Rada (the parliament of Ukraine) passed a law that supported the official use of red flag replicas during the celebrations of Victory Day. The population of Western Ukraine and pro-Ukrainian movements immediately perceived this decision as an insult, and as a result the local administrations of the western regions banned the use of the red flag because it represented the repression of the people under Soviet rule. They also moved to rename Victory Day the Day of Grief, and to invite veterans of the anti-Soviet, underground Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) into schools to tell pupils about its heroic fights against both Soviet and Nazi regimes. On May 9, 2011, a group of World War II veterans and representatives of NGOs came to L'viv from the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine to celebrate Victory Day. Together with a group of Russian diplomats, they were attacked by a Ukrainian nationalist from the ultra-right-wing party Svoboda. Some of the nationalists were prosecuted, and the attack was officially condemned by the Ukrainian and Russian governments. The chapter also discusses another insult: in the capital of Ukraine, young people fried eggs on the eternal flame near the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

Chapter 4, “Murder and Release,” discusses the series of insults connected with the murder of an Armenian soldier by Ramil Safarov, an Azeri army lieutenant, during a NATO Partnership for Peace course at a military school in Budapest. Safarov claimed that he had reacted to Armenian officers who laughed at him behind his back and at the general assault on Azeri people in the war over Nagorno-Karabakh. He was sentenced to life in prison in Hungary, but was extradited to Azerbaijan after the Azerbaijani government gave assurances that his sentence would be enforced. Upon his return to Baku, Safarov was given a hero’s welcome. He received an official pardon from President Ilham Aliyev, was promoted to the rank of major, and was given a flat and all the pay he had lost since his arrest eight years prior. The Armenian government and people perceived this action as a power and identity insult. Hundreds of Armenians protested outside Hungary’s consulates in Yerevan and outside Hungarian embassies in other world capitals by burning Hungarian flags.

Chapter 5, “Islands between Two Countries,” analyzes the disputes over islands in the Japanese Sea known as Takeshima in Japan and Dokdo in Korea, which involve a series of evolving power and legitimacy insults. Japan sees South Korea’s presence on the islands as an insulting “illegal occupation,” referring to historical documents showing that Japan has held sovereignty over Takeshima since the middle of the seventeenth century. South Korea considers these islands its territory and sees Japan’s continued claim to them as an insult, especially as it symbolizes, for South Korea, the unwillingness of Japan to condemn its earlier militarism. The South Korean president, Lee Myung-bak, made a statement that the prime minister of Japan should apologize more clearly for his country’s harsh 1910–45 colonial rule of the Korean Peninsula. This statement was perceived as combining projection and legitimacy insults by the Japanese leadership. The Japanese government subsequently reneged on an agreement to engage in a so-called currency swap with Korea, recalled the Japanese ambassador to South Korea, and started insulting diplomatic tit for tat behavior. In response, Lee visited the disputed islands, 40 South Koreans swam to the islands to mark the anniversary of the country’s liberation from Japan in 1945, and South Korea’s coast guard conducted military exercises near the disputed islands, adding a new power insult to ongoing tension in the territorial row.

Another dispute between China and Japan over territory known as the Senkaku Islands in Japan and Diaoyu in China escalated after a Chinese fishing boat crashed into a Japanese Coast Guard vessel in 2010, resulting in the arrest of the Chinese captain. This eventually led Tokyo’s controversial nationalist governor Shintaro Ishihara to propose buying the islands.