

*The Sociology
of Social Conflicts*

LOUIS KRIESBERG

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For *DANIEL* and *JOSEPH*
and their generation

Preface

As a teacher of social conflicts and as a partisan and observer of them, I have long felt the need for a comprehensive study of conflicts. I felt it was necessary to bring together the main ideas pertaining to each aspect of a struggle or, better yet, to consistently relate these ideas. This might mean disproving some, reinterpreting others, and specifying and synthesizing still others.

I have tried to meet these needs in this book by presenting a comprehensive analysis of all kinds of group conflicts. Instead of describing certain kinds of conflicts or particular aspects of struggles, this book provides a framework for analyzing all kinds of disputes, struggles, fights, and contentions. The framework is relevant for conflicts between groups in organizations, communities, societies, and even between national governments. For illustrative purposes, the discussion focuses upon some recent struggles: women's liberation, the cold war, the Arab-Israeli conflict, collective bargaining, student protests, and the fight for racial equality.

In presenting a comprehensive framework, I hope to raise important and neglected questions. We shall ask about de-escalation as well as escalation, outcomes as well as bases, and noncoercive as well as coercive means of conducting struggles. We will ask why fights differ in consequences, in origins, and in violence.

In answering these questions I have tried to be systematic and specific. Nevertheless, competing ideas and interpretations have not been ex-

cluded. I have sought to counterpose plausible ideas and to assess them. I have tried to be honest and open about the theoretical and evidential difficulties with the positions taken. Rather than gloss over the problems, I have directly discussed them and given my best current judgment.

The general orientation of this work is sociological, but I have not hesitated to draw upon theoretical and empirical work from political science, anthropology, economics, psychology, and history. I have also examined and analyzed sample surveys, newspaper accounts, census, and other kinds of data to probe some of the ideas examined in the illustrative cases.

The comprehensive scope of this effort necessarily leaves out many details. More significantly, many issues are inadequately resolved. I hope that my efforts will stimulate and facilitate the work of others to overcome those failures. I hope to continue in that endeavor myself.

Acknowledgments

This kind of book requires the author (and the reader) to draw upon personal experiences. I have drawn much from my own engagement in a variety of social conflicts and the several roles I have played in them. I owe a debt to those with whom I have fought as allies and adversaries and to the discussions with them about the struggles.

I have necessarily taken ideas and evidence from a wide range of sources, for conflicts pervade all social relations and every kind of social interaction is important to particular struggles. I am indebted especially to my teachers and fellow students at the University of Chicago, and to my colleagues at Columbia University's Department of Sociology and Bureau of Applied Social Research; at the University of Cologne; at the University of Chicago's Law School, Sociology Department, and National Opinion Research Center; and at Syracuse University's Youth Development Center and Sociology Department.

I have learned much about particular conflicts and the social processes implicated in them from casual comments and heated discussions with many persons. It is difficult to cite all of them but I wish to acknowledge some who have so informed me, particularly, Seymour S. Bellin, Irwin Deutscher, Blanche Geer, Warren C. Haggstrom, Everett C. Hughes, Lois Ablin Kriesberg, Martin Kriesberg, S. M. Lipset, S. M. Miller, Lee K-Thorpe, Charles V. Willie, and George Wiley.

This book emerged from the seminar on social conflict I gave over several years and I learned much from the reactions and comments of

the participants. For aid in gathering, preparing, and analyzing data for this book I wish to express gratitude to Syracuse University's Educational Policy Research Center and the Computing Center; to The Roper Public Opinion Research Center; and to colleagues at Tel Aviv University, Hebrew University, and The Israel Institute of Applied Social Research. I want to thank Mary Belle-Isle for her conscientious typing of much of the manuscript. Several persons have read one or more chapters of this book; for the observations made, I thank Mark Abrahamson, Irving Kriesberg, Allan Mazur, David Nachmias, Manfred Stanley, and Sidney Sufrin. Since I have persisted in what others have sometimes regarded as errors, they are not responsible for what I say in this book—I am.

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Variations Among Social Conflicts

All about us are social conflicts. They are inherent in human relations. But this does not mean that every social relationship is entirely or even partly conflicting *all* the time. Nor does it mean that every underlying conflicting relationship will be expressed with the same degree and kind of hostility or violence. Conflicts vary in their bases, their duration, their mode of settlement, their outcomes, and their consequences. This book is about such variations. The focus of concern is upon the development of specific social conflicts, of fights and struggles, rather than upon the role of conflict in social life. It is about contentions between groups of people, and not within specific groups or between individuals acting alone. Finally, we are more concerned with struggles in which coercion and violence are likely or possible, than with ones which are so highly regulated that coercion and violence do not occur.

The major questions we seek to answer are within these realms. We are inquiring about the conditions that produce violent fights. We want to know what makes groups believe that they have incompatible goals. We want to know how aggrieved groups seek justice. We ask why some groups do, and others do not, attain what they seek. We want to learn the consequences of conflict for the contending parties and for the larger system of which they are a part, even if those consequences are not desired or anticipated by any of the parties.

In trying to answer these and related questions we will assume that all conflicts have some things in common. We assume it possible and even

useful to consider the similarities as well as the differences among class, community, international, and industrial struggles. Having said that, it is also necessary to point out that there is a wide variety of social conflicts. In order to begin to answer the questions we have raised, it is necessary to distinguish among the different types of conflict and the several aspects or stages in the course of a struggle. In this chapter we will discuss the several types of conflicts and general orientations toward contentions. This discussion will provide the basis for characterizing social conflicts and for the analysis in the rest of the book.

EVALUATIONS OF SOCIAL CONFLICTS

Conflicts are exciting. People certainly are drawn to their study because of that stimulation as well as from intellectual curiosity. Other persons may be drawn to study social conflicts because they want help in deciding what stand to take on an issue. Many others, to a greater or lesser extent, are partisans in a social conflict. Whatever the stimulus or incentive to study conflicts, two major evaluative orientations may be discerned among students of social strife.

Some persons are concerned about the disruptiveness or violence of fights. They see a larger collectivity or system which is threatened or injured by conflict and wish to discover ways of mitigating its disruptive character. Thus, some people may be troubled by the prospects of international wars or interracial violence. For them conflict tends to be evaluated negatively. On the other hand, some persons are concerned about the injustice or repression of some category of persons and, siding with that collectivity, they are interested in learning how such people may form conflict groups and successfully end or reduce their oppression. These persons would tend to view such conflicts as necessary and even desirable.

I have suggested two positions a student of social conflict may take: that of the larger system to which the partisans belong or that of one of the partisans (Gamson, 1968). I have also suggested that the latter students would consider conflict necessary or even admirable while the former would consider it regrettable or even evil. A strong evaluative position may be a powerful motivation for study and analysis, but it also may distort the analysis. The dangers of evaluations corrupting the analysis can be lessened if one keeps in mind alternative viewpoints and a wide range of conflicts.

Even if one takes a partisan perspective it is possible to regard conflict as undesirable. It depends upon who is causing the trouble. Consider the shifting evaluations of community strife. During the early 1950s in the U.S. many persons concerned with community conflict felt it to be

unhealthy and dangerous. The prototypical conflict seemed to be attacks from the political right upon the good liberal establishment which was being innovative in the schools or was trying to introduce fluoridation into the cities' water systems (Coleman, 1957). In the 1960s community conflicts more often referred to the attempts of the poor and the blacks to gain greater influence in decision making (Haggstrom, 1964). People who were sympathetic to the community controversies of the 1950s are likely to have been unsympathetic to those of the 1960s. Or consider international conflict. Partisans of countries relatively satisfied with the status quo are likely to view international war as reprehensible: they would not accept the legitimacy of a "just war" or a "war of national liberation."

Even taking a system perspective does not mean that one must regard conflict as harmful and evil (Coser, 1956; Simmel, 1955; Sumner, 1952). Thus many persons believe that conflict, properly institutionalized, is an effective vehicle for discovering truth, for attaining justice, and for the long-run benefit of a society as a whole. For example, the American judicial system is based upon the adversary principle. The struggle between the lawyer for the prosecution and the lawyer for the defense, conducted within the court, is considered to be the best way of obtaining justice. Similarly, both management and trade unions in the U.S. now generally feel that the struggle between them, conducted through collective bargaining, serves the interests of the entire society, as well as their own.

Evaluations of conflict in general or of specific struggles depend upon many considerations: for example, upon the unit with which one identifies, upon the issue in contention, and upon the means used in attaining a given outcome. To unconsciously accept a particular evaluation toward a struggle handicaps its analysis and understanding. One safeguard against such implicit assumptions is to keep in mind the many grounds of evaluation and consequently the alternative judgements of the conflict. We cannot simply put aside our own evaluations, but we can avoid ignoring alternative assessments. Another way to avoid some of the risks of examining conflicts from too narrow a point of view is to use a comparable framework of analysis. One of the tasks of this book is to provide such a framework.

DIMENSIONS OF SOCIAL CONFLICTS AND CONFLICT BEHAVIOR

This analysis of aspects of social conflicts and conflict behavior should serve several purposes. It will indicate disagreement among students of social conflict; this will facilitate the comparison and reading of different

writers on the subject. It will provide the basis for distinguishing different kinds of conflicts and the stages in the course of a struggle. It will also underlie the definition of social conflict used in this book and indicate how that definition is related to other definitions in the field and to the framework presented within this book (Fink, 1968; Angell, 1965).

Awareness. A fundamental aspect of social conflicts is the awareness of the parties that an incompatibility exists. Most writers about social conflict regard consciousness by the parties that they are in contention as an essential element in the definition of a conflict. (Coser, 1956, p. 8; Weber, 1947, pp. 132-133). Thus Park and Burgess state:

Conflict is always conscious. Indeed it evokes the deepest emotions and strongest passions and enlists the greatest concentration of attention and of effort. Both competition and conflict are forms of struggle. Competition, however, is continuous and impersonal. Conflict is intermittent and personal (Park and Burgess, 1921, p. 574).

This kind of formulation is also followed by Boulding who defines conflict as a form of competition in which the competing parties recognize that they have mutually incompatible goals (Boulding, 1962).

Even formulations of social conflict which emphasize its subjective character often assume that there is an underlying, objective, conflict situation. Presumably, mutually incompatible interests exist whether or not the parties are aware of them. Some writers broaden the definition of conflict to include such objective conditions (Dahrendorf, 1959). Thus, a conflict may be latent and unrecognized by partisans but still exist. Recognizing the distinction between the objective and subjective conflict, some writers have elaborated the various combinations of their relationship (Bernard, 1957). Thus, if one assumes two parties who may or may not be in objectively in a conflict situation; both may *believe* they are, or one may, or neither side may. As shown in Table 1.1, this yields six possibilities. For example, the first possibility includes cases in which both parties correctly perceive that they are in an objective conflict situation. In cell three are instances in which neither party believes they are in conflict, although they are. Instances in which one party but not the other believes they are in conflict and they actually are not are in cell five; this is one kind of "unrealistic conflict."

The relative frequency of instances in each cell is an empirical matter. Some persons argue that "conflicts" often or usually are "unrealistic" in the sense that the parties are not in an objective conflict situation. Such disputes, it might be argued, are the result of agitators creating the belief in a conflict situation. It might also be argued that unrealistic conflicts