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

Randall Collins[a]

Abstract

Conflict escalates through a series of feedback loops. On the micro level, conflict generates conditions for intense interaction rituals, and internal solidarity fuels external conflict. Perceived atrocities reciprocally increase ideological polarization between opponents, while confrontational tension/fear makes violence incompetent and produces real atrocities. Conflict groups seek allies, drive out neutrals, and mobilize material resources. Both sides in a conflict counter-escalate through the same set of feedbacks. Winning and losing are determined by differences between rates of escalation and by attacks that one-sidedly destroy organizational and material capacity. Conflict de-escalates because both sides fail to find conditions for solidarity, cannot overcome confrontational tension/fear, and exhaust their material resources. Emotional burnout sets in through a time dynamic of explosion, plateau, and dissipation of enthusiasm. Defection of allies opens the way for third-party settlement. When both sides remain stalemated, initial enthusiasm and external polarization give way to emergent internal factions—a victory faction (hard-liners) versus a peace faction (negotiators)—creating new conflict identities. Ideals promoted at the outset of conflict become obstacles to resolution at the end.

Keywords

atrocities, counter-escalation, polarization, time-dynamics

[a]University of Pennsylvania

Corresponding Author:
Randall Collins, Department of Sociology, University of Pennsylvania, 3718 Locust Walk, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6299
E-mail: collinsr@sas.upenn.edu

A basic principle of social conflict was stated more than 100 years ago by Simmel ([1908] 1955), and elaborated 50 years later by Coser (1956): external conflict increases group solidarity.

But solidarity also causes conflict (see Figure 1). Solidarity is a key weapon in conflict: groups with solidarity are more capable of mobilizing and fighting, and groups with 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 2004a). Boxes on the left are three major ingredients. Conflict raises the level of each. Face-to-face interaction is crucial for micro-signals and emotions to be sent back and forth, and threat motivates people to assemble. In ordinary interactions, mutual focus of attention and shared emotions drive each other upward in a feedback loop. Conflict is one of the most powerful ways of doing this, as it ensures 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.

The right side of the model in Figure 2 shows 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, that is, identification of good and evil with a group's boundary. 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 I will trace their rise and fall over time. Conflict theory is not the opposite of a theory of human ideals, social cooperation, and solidarity; we do not have a sentimental good theory
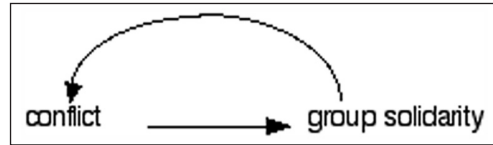

Figure 1. Escalating Conflict

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 will add some more. Conflict and solidarity cause each other to rise, creating the familiar spiral of conflict escalation. Next, I will add what I call the atrocities/polarization loop (see Figure 3).

Atrocities are opponents' actions 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 at the level of conflict talk. This is apparent in small-scale conflicts, such as arguments and trash-talking that precedes fights (Collins 2008). 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 et al. 2001; Rozin and Royzman 2001).

As time goes along, stories about enemy atrocities circulate, mobilizing more people onto our side, increasing the size of our interaction ritual. As conflicts escalate over time,
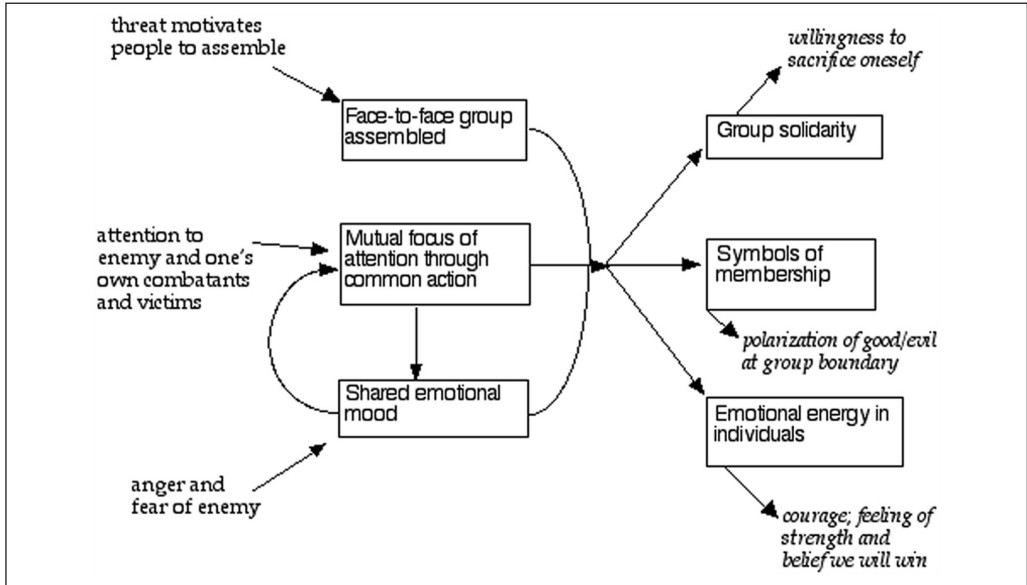
Figure 2. Conflict as an Interaction Ritual: Micro-foundations

some atrocities turn out to be real; but some stories are only rumors, and many are exaggerated. During 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, 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 people in threatening situations stay back from the action, and relatively few actually fight. Even individuals posing as belligerents usually do not get beyond threatening gestures and verbal bluster. Individuals 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 and describe what happens in violence-threatening situations as fully and accurately as possible. We see sufficient detail to allow 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 (e.g., bullet paths and number 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, as well as what opponents, supporters, and bystanders did. 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, that is, cases where violence actually occurs.

Micro evidence of this kind shows 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 tense body postures; facial expressions commonly display fear.
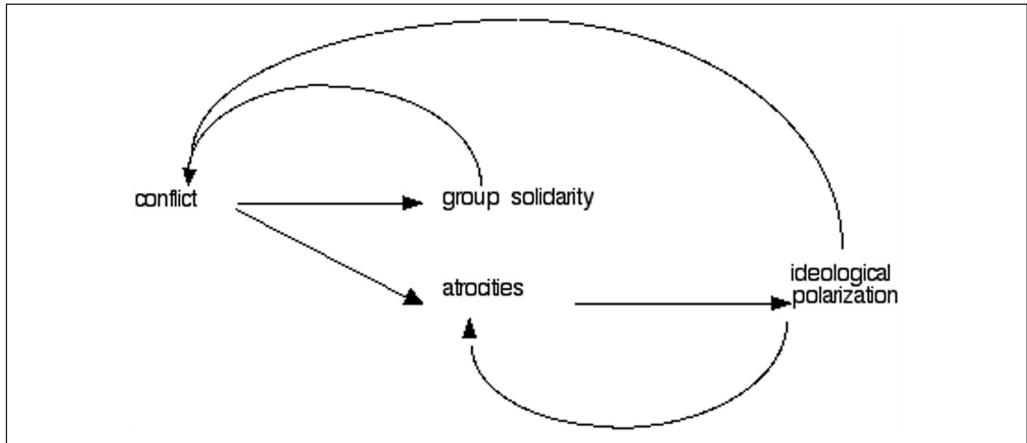
Figure 3. Escalating Conflict: Atrocities and Polarization

Fighters are pumped up with adrenaline and cortisol. Their hearts are beating around 160 beats per minute, at which point 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 elsewhere at greater length (Collins 2008), for violence to actually happen, perpetrators must find a pathway around the barrier of ct/f. A series of such pathways produce 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 damage is done by a group that manages to find an isolated victim.[3] Most violence is thus 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 on occasion, 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 atrocities are what I call "forward panic": an emotional frenzy of piling on and overkill (Collins 2008). This happens when a group engaged in prolonged confrontation suddenly experiences a release of tension because dominance shifts overwhelmingly in their favor. The famous Rodney King beating, captured on a camcorder in 1991, was a forward panic; and so are many instances of police beatings that happen at the end of high-speed chases. The process is also found in one-sided beatings of individuals or small groups caught by bigger groups in riots, and in massacres in military battles after one side has given up. An important micro-interactional feature is that victims have lost all their emotional energy and have 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 2008:421–23). 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

Figure 4. Soviet Propaganda Poster at Outbreak of Korean War, 1950
Translation: "Military adventurism portends nothing but catastrophe for the imperialists!" About to walk off a cliff, U.S. General Douglas MacArthur carries an atomic bomb in one hand and a sign, "American world order," in the other.
Source: Author's private collection.

of killing. From the Israeli perspective, 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 tend to cause atrocities in response. Due to ideological polarization, neither side sees their own actions as atrocities. And this apparent moral blindness, as viewed by the opponent, is taken as proof that the enemy is morally subhuman.

Polarization is an intensification of the Durkheimian process of identifying the group with good and evil as what is outside the group's boundary. Intense conflict unifies a group in a tribalistic ritual, giving the palpable feeling that Durkheim argued is the source of the sacred and the basis for social constructions 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, from a 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 the buildup of emotional polarization; one side broadcasts atrocities the enemy has already carried out, or is about to carry out if we do not forestall them.[5] Similar processes operated in tortures carried out by U.S. guards at Abu Ghraib, where an atmosphere of small group ritualism and even hilarity expressed itself as 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 that it escalates and prolongs conflict. Even if a realistic assessment might show that further conflict is unwinnable, or that 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 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 America's commanding general, Douglas MacArthur, as a blind man about to walk off a cliff. Notice the little toy-like device in his hand: it is an
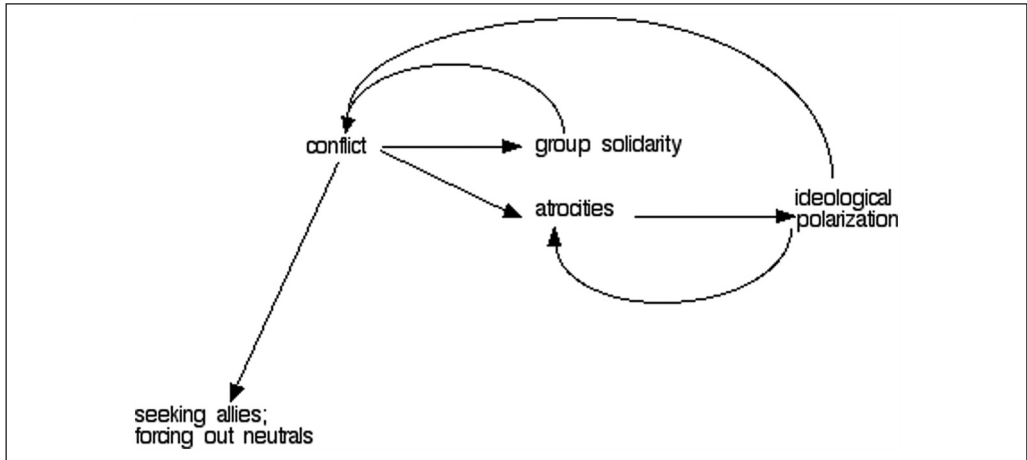
Figure 5. Escalating Conflict: Allies

atomic bomb, which at the time only the Americans had as operational weapons. During this period, the American viewpoint was expressed in newspaper cartoons that caricatured 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 imminent 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 conflicts, groups seek sympathizers and allies (see Figure 5).

Groups seek allies by activating prior network ties and making exchange partners feel it is not only in their interest to join but that it is morally imperative to do so. Partisans try to mobilize networks by appealing to ideals—showing what virtues we represent—and by circulating atrocity stories, showing how evil the other side is. Groups recruit allies by spreading emotional polarization to others who were not originally involved.

A typical move is to magnify the enemy threat to include everyone. The following example comes from messages circulated and recirculated in a cascade of e-mails received by American Sociological Association (ASA)

officials and others in 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 supposedly came from followers of a conservative television commentator, who accused the sociologist 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, the sociologist had received these death threats sporadically over the past year, and there was no imminent danger. As a general pattern, as police reports show, overt death threats are a disruptive tactic and are virtually never carried out; real assassination attempts do not announce themselves in advance. But the nature of e-mail listserves—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 individuals were taking part in the demand for action. (Analyzing the messages in retrospect, I found that fewer than 10 individuals created the bulk of material.)[6] 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. This 1930s poem implies that if we do not take action, we will end up in a Nazi concentration camp. The action 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. In fact, in a few days, current ASA officers wrote a statement of support and counterattack, 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 eight e-mails and one phone call from conservative critics. A much larger reaction was not in direct communication with their opponent, but among 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 seven times—was also the most extreme. He gave the address of the ASA offices, pointed out that it had a glass façade, and 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"). 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 with 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 posts discussed Tea Party tactics, endorsing their successful electoral action, and some explicitly rejected 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 and added a post praising the Tea Party's superiority to unruly mobs; he made one more ambivalent appeal for violence and then gave up. The remaining 80 posts turned to criticizing and insulting Left activists and sociologists in general.[7]

This period of counter-attack lasted a little more than 24 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 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 analytic perspective.

I add one more quote from the initial e-mail cascade that illustrates the pattern of mobilizing allies in a conflict by declaring that the polarization boundary is absolutely dichotomous and thus attempting to drive out neutrals:
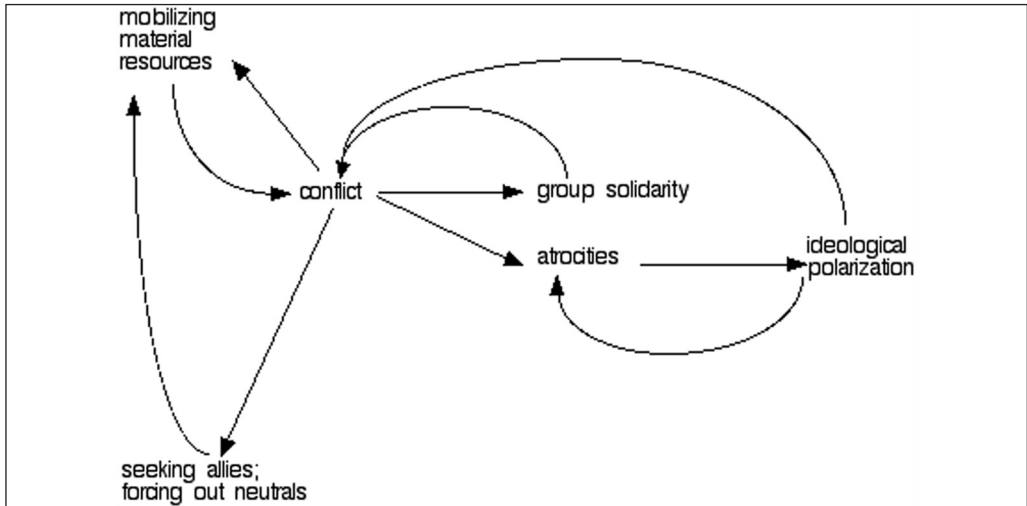
Figure 6. Escalating Conflict: Material Resources

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

It is typical of the polarization process not to 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 from 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 individuals who are more distant. And it is a tactic that appears during early phases of intense polarization; later on, 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.

We can predict whether third parties will become allies of one side or the other, and with what degree of enthusiasm or reluctance, or whether they will remain neutral. As Black

shows in *The Social Structure of Right and Wrong* (1998), 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 (see Figure 6). These resources include the numbers of activists, fighters, and supporters who take part in the effort; money, as you well know from fundraising campaigns; full-time organization, if the conflict is to last for any considerable period of time; and weapons, if the conflict is violent.

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 groups 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 (e.g., journalistic sympathy or Internet activity).[8]

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 flowcharts, each escalating in response to the other. Hence the title C-escalation, for counter-escalation (see Figure 7).
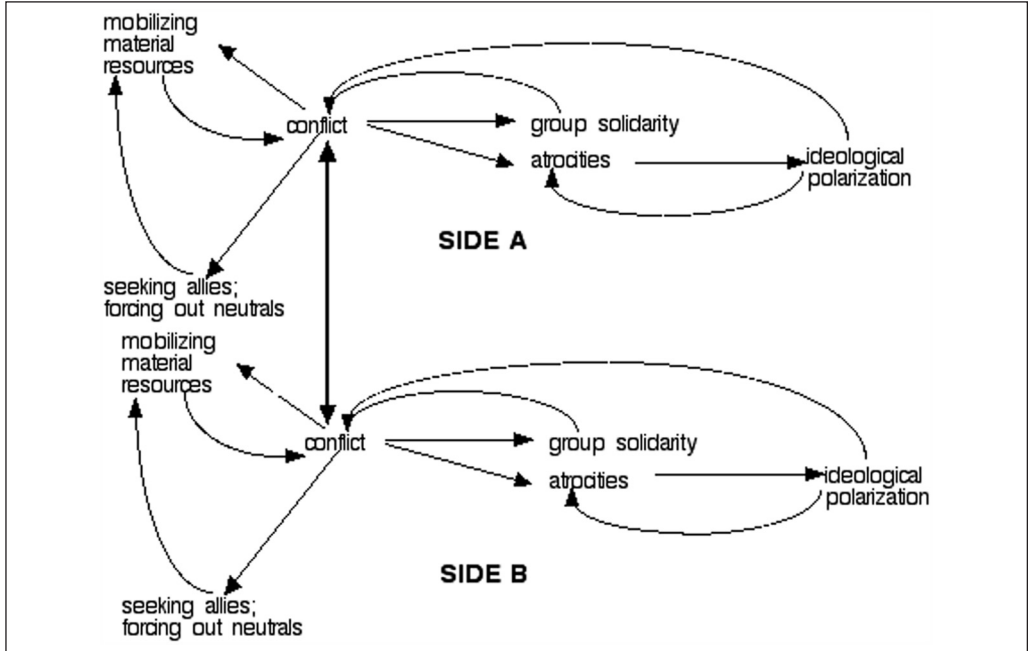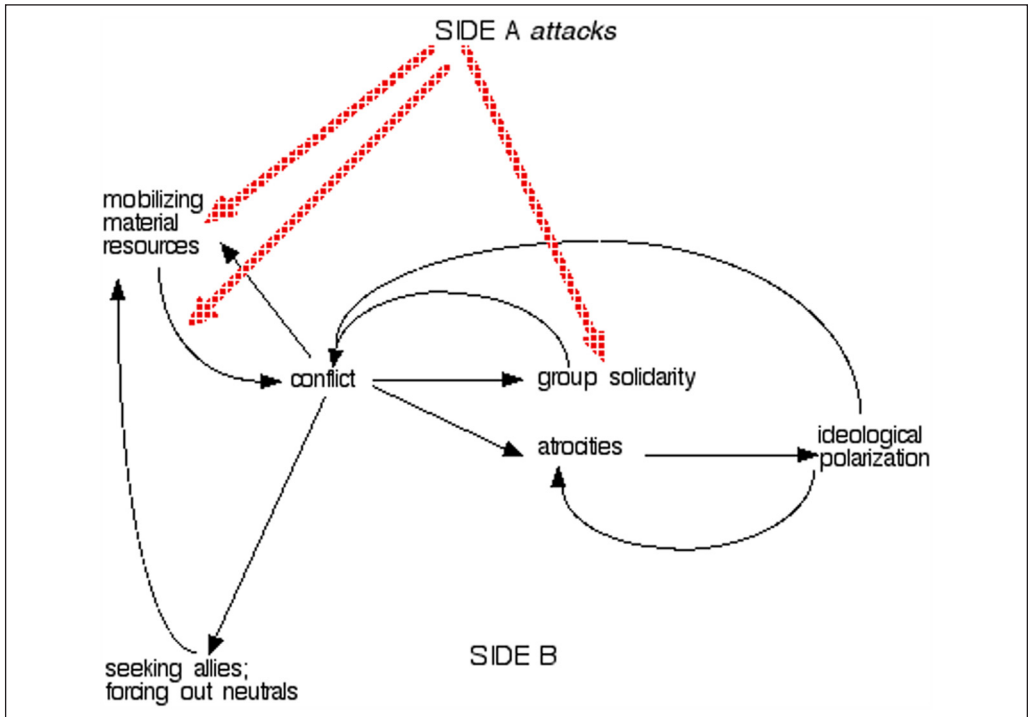
Figure 7. C-Escalation (Counter-Escalation)

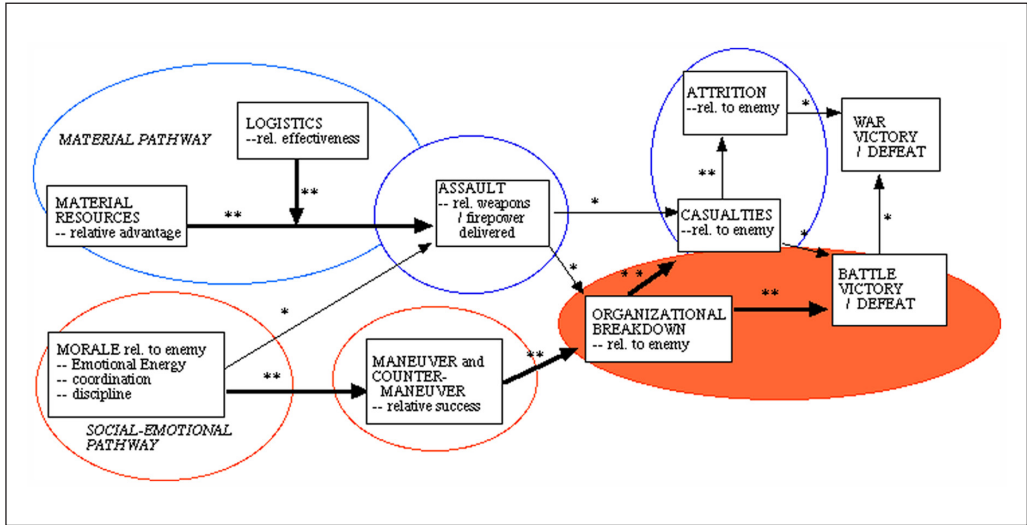**Figure 8.** Winning, Losing, Stalemate

Figure 9. Battle Victory and Defeat
Source: Collins 2010.
Note: ** = strong causal path; * = moderate causal path.

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; one side goes positive and the other side negative, or they go 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 on the conflict. There are three main paths (see Figure 8):

(1) Attack the enemy's group solidarity. This is done by breaking up their organization. By taking the initiative or momentum, the enemy is put in a passive or indecisive position. In terms of micro-sociology, it means dominating the emotional attention space.
(2) Attack the enemy's material base, physically destroying their resources.

(3) Attack enemy logistics and supply lines, cutting them off from moving people, supplies, and weapons to sustain the conflict.

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

The bottom of Figure 9 is the social-emotional pathway, starting with morale, which is to say emotional energy and group solidarity. Napoleon famously said that in war, morale is to 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
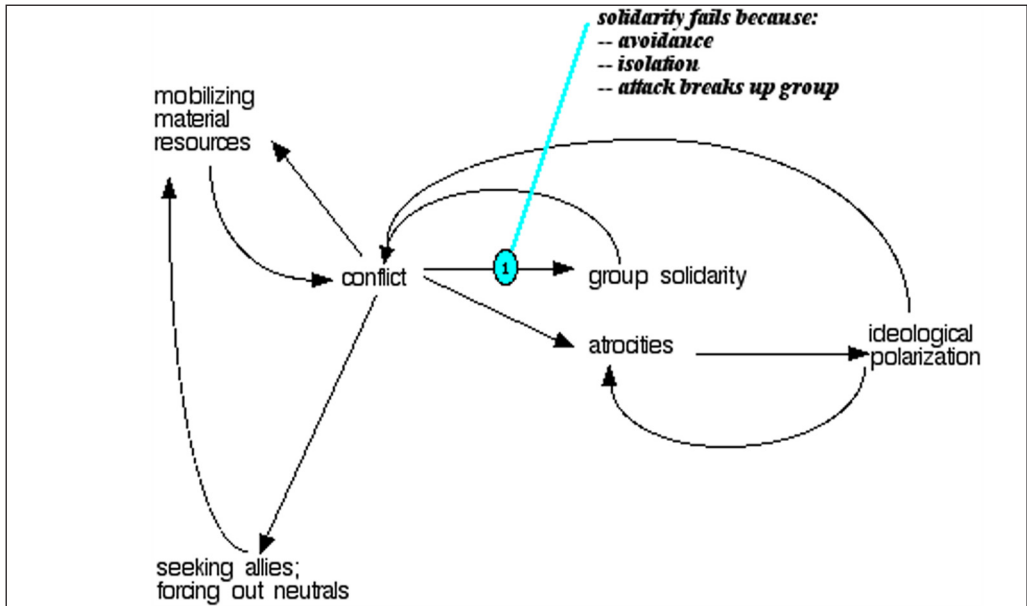
Figure 10. De-escalating Conflict: Solidarity Fails

enemy organization, rather than through destroying their army by sheer firepower. In asymmetrical battles, one side experiences organizational breakdown while the other side retains its organization; and such asymmetrical breakdown precedes the bulk of casualties. That is, most casualties happen after an 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 on October 6, 2000, we see a typical pattern in riots: four men are attacking one soldier, who is covering his head and trying to escape. The attackers wield a stick, a tire iron, and their bare hands. 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).

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 now come to a series of figures showing how conflict can de-escalate. In winning or losing, it is largely a matter of how one side successfully attacks key components of the enemy's ability to escalate. In de-escalation, 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
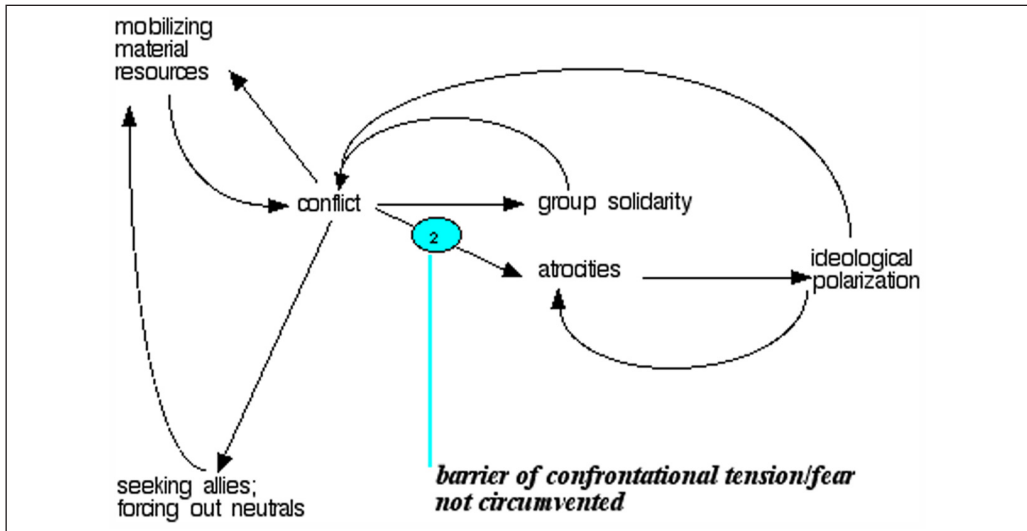
Figure 11. De-escalating Conflict: Confrontational Tension/Fear

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 attacks break up the group or prevent supporters from assembling (see Figure 10).

Second, violent conflict has a special difficulty to overcome: confrontational tension and fear in face-to-face encounters (see Figure 11). Verbal accounts by individuals who have performed violence tend to focus on their own anger and motives. They usually give 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, participants' faces express fear, not anger (Collins 2008). In photos of riots and other crowd violence, only a small number of individuals are actually performing any violence. This is typical of virtually all close observations of fighting—most of the group is incapacitated by fear. Whatever individuals 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 people break through the barrier of confrontational

tension/fear into successful violence, but here I want to emphasize a key point: in most violence-threatening situations, violence does not occur. Violence does not escalate because it cannot get past this point.

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. Micro-details are displayed in a photo in Collins (2008:365). The photo 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. Details of how to avoid escalation are visible here: both sides 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 emotional energy falls off.[9] This is practical advice from micro-sociology: you can keep a confrontation from escalating by keeping it at the level
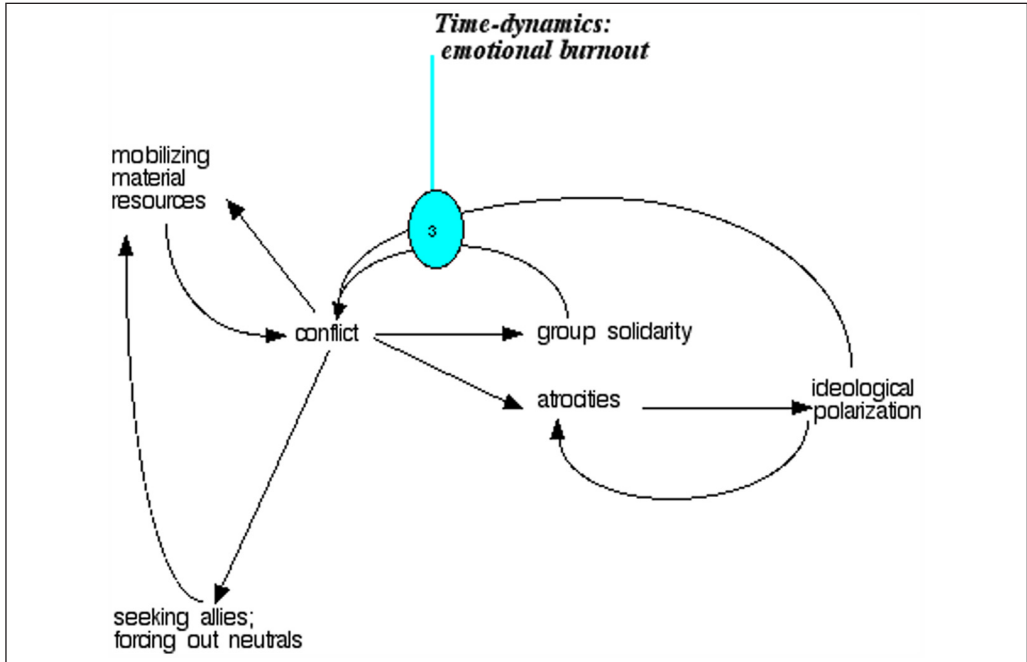
Figure 12. De-escalating Conflict: Emotional Burnout

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 with asymmetries, so that the equilibrium is broken.

Third, the entire set of feedback loops among solidarity, polarization, and conflict can de-escalate through emotional burnout. This is an area—the time-dynamics of various kinds of conflict—we are just beginning to research (see Figure 12).

Conflict produces solidarity, but how long does this solidarity last? Right after the attacks of September 11, 2001, I realized this would be an opportunity to find out (Collins 2004b). 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 more than a year. The first two weeks saw an explosion of flag displays, which rapidly reached its peak.[10] These symbols of the group remained

at a plateau for three months, at which point discussions began: is it okay to take our flags down now? After three months, solidarity displays began to dissipate, falling off after six months into a distinctly minority expression, with occasional blips thereafter on commemorative dates (see 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 vary with different kinds of conflict and with 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—that is, conflicts on the size of entire nations. There are other correlates, such as suppression of dissent during the explosion phase, and the tendency toward atrocities and paranoid rumors during the three-month plateau (Collins 2004b). Wars are almost always greeted by an initial burst of enthusiasm, which wanes within six months. This is not to
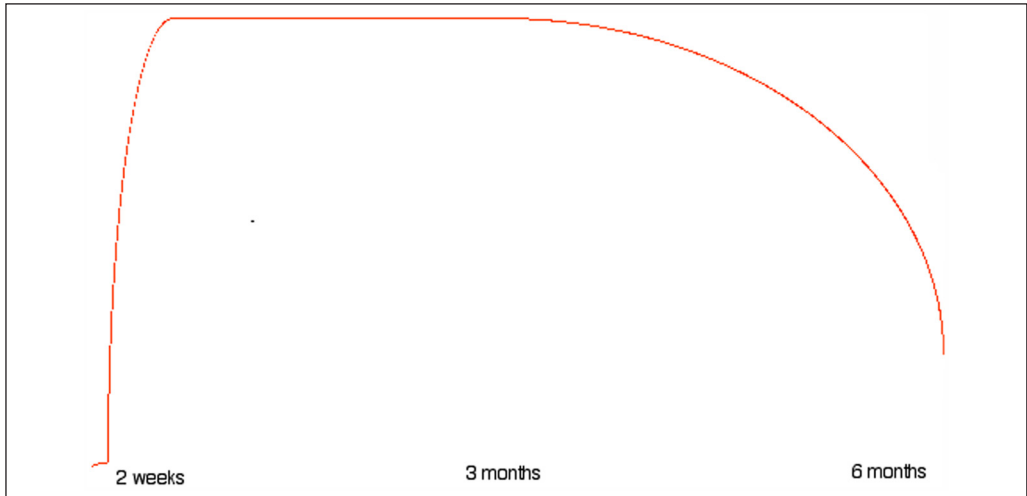
Figure 13. Time-Dynamics of Conflict Solidarity: Explosion, Plateau, Dissipation
Source: Drawn from data published in Collins 2004b.

say that wars cannot continue longer, but they enter into another emotional phase—in which participants are increasingly just grinding through—accompanied by internal emotional splits that I will discuss shortly.

Smaller scale 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.[11] 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 social movements at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth 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, that is, 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 goods to front line activists (see Figure 14). Wars wind down when it becomes materially too costly to carry on—more precisely, when both sides wind down resources at approximately the same rate, because a big disparity between 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, eat, and eventually get back to their economic routines. Small-scale conflicts lack the institutionalized organization to deliver material resources that keep larger conflicts (e.g., wars and social movements) going.

In principle, the third route to de-escalation is the opposite of the fourth route. In the former, material resources to keep fighting
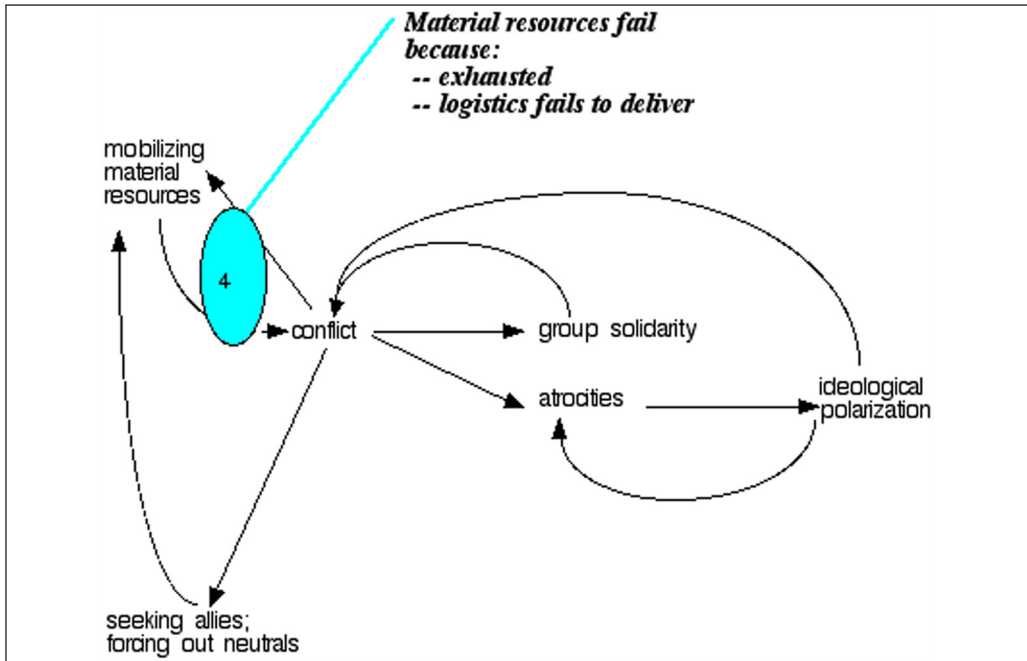
Figure 14. De-escalating Conflict: Material Resources Fail

may still exist but participants are emotionally burned out; in the latter, participants 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 the emotional burnout path—indeed the whole set of de-escalation processes on the right side of the model—tends to outweigh the material route on the left. But material weakness can lead to a successful attack by the other side, resulting in destruction of one's organization and capacity to assemble for group rituals. By this route, one then loses moral resources.[12]

Fifth and finally, alliances that earlier supported a conflict fall away. Here neutrals reappear. As Black (1998) and 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 steps that eventually bring disengagement. Neutrals, despised at the beginning, now take the idealistic high ground; and mutual atrocities accumulated

during the conflict begin to cast a pall on continuing polarization (see Figure 15).[13]

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 C-escalation phase. During de-escalation, variables go into reverse. Instead of assembling, the group disperses. Mutual focus of attention is broken, as individuals pay more attention to non-members of the conflict group. Worse yet, participants may even fraternize with the enemy. Emotional burnout is the opposite of collective effervescence; it reduces the shared emotional mood.

On the outcome side, group solidarity declines. Because 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 is seen as less demonic, our images of ourselves become less omni-righteous, less puffed up with our own virtues and collective omnipotence.
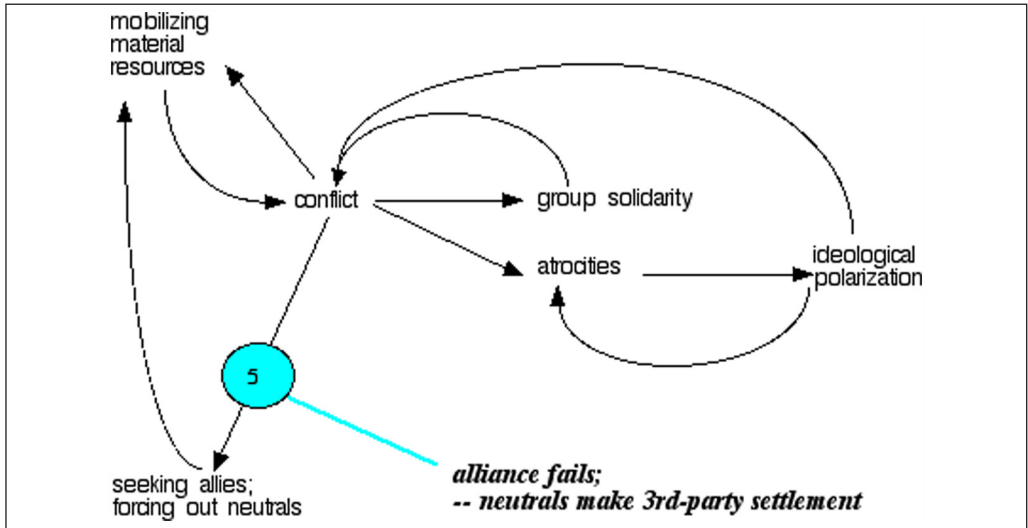
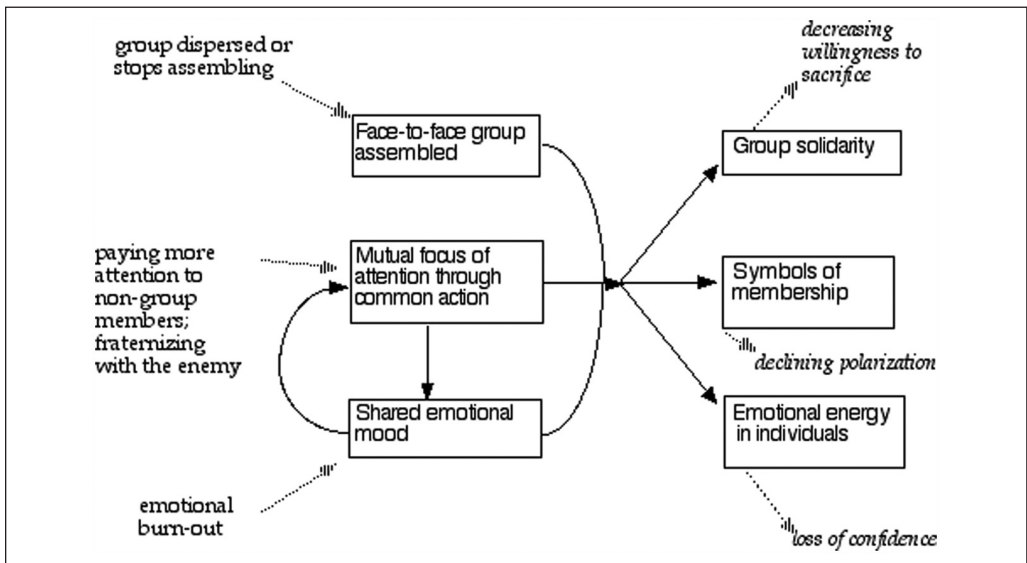**Figure 15.** De-escalating Conflict: Third-Party Settlement

Figure 16. De-escalating Conflict: Micro-Foundations

Emotional energy falls away. Because high emotional energy 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 and latter parts of my theory. The middle is asymmetrical: it is what one side attempts to do 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 participants who feel they can still win. In the latter phase of a protracted conflict, a new set of factions thus 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 discussions about the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, the peace, or disengagement, faction's reasons can be a mixture of ideals, burnout, and material costs. The war faction's motives and ideals are also mixed, but above all they cling to 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 seen at the beginning of the conflict. The conflict between victory and peace factions can go either way; think of Churchill and Roosevelt in WWII, or the disgruntlement over U.S. foreign policy from the Vietnam War to the present. I am not preaching about this one way or the other, but stressing an analytic point: if the strength of various processes in the conflict model remain fluctuating long enough within a central range, this internal conflict will emerge.[14] 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 preexisting 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. In the latter phase of a prolonged conflict, however, 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. A more advanced theory of conflict will tell us more about the process of emergent factionalization, that is, conflict creating its own identities as it goes along, based more on tactics than on ideologies and interests.[15] We are beginning to see this, for example, in Walder's (2009) work on Chinese Red Guard factions and Klusemann's (2010) work on splits and mergers among revolutionary movements as they struggle for dominance in revolutionary attention space.

CONCLUSIONS

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 is not true that men are unemotional; they are 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 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, keep the fight going. For the de-escalators, losses are turned into symbols of our unstoppable drive toward 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, a 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 escalation and polarization if we hope to win and cause change in the world, but there are always unintended consequences. 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.[16]

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.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. Such data is becoming widely available from mobile phone cameras, security videos (CCTV), and freelance journalists' telephoto lenses. The era of 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 proliferation of tape recorders. For an example of analyzing sequences of violent incidents—most significantly, how they abort or de-escalate—using CCTV footage from British pubs, see Levine, Taylor, and Best (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 leads to punishment for disrespect or a defense of honor. A 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 dynamics of confrontational tension and fear.

3. On a larger scale, this is true of military tactics as well; tactics aim for local superiority, hitting the enemy with superior numbers or weaponry. 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 populations (see Biddle 2004; Collins 2010).

4. In sixteenth-century Europe, dueling developed as a substitute for vendettas. Death or injury in a duel could not be avenged; duels were thus a step toward limiting violence to self-contained individual incidents (Collins 2008; Spierenburg 2008).

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

6. 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 to 15 percent of the total recipients. Of these, six individuals posted more than once, and their e-mails were most often appended to other e-mails, so that I saw some of them dozens of

times. The prime movers were five individuals, one of whom posted seven times, the others three or four times each. (The sociologist who was the target of the attacks was not one of the posters.) Of the 42 senders, 23 wrote 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 made ideological and emotional statements. The overall impression at the time was an enormous outburst; in all, the messages received totaled 317 pages. The core messages, however, were only 20 to 30 pages of this total. The e-mail cascade thus gives an impression of being about 10 times larger than it actually is.

7. My conclusion is: if online 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 that actually come about. It may be that most incipient protests abort, as this one did. This is also the pattern for most kinds of violence-threatening incidents.

8. My hypotheses are as follows: Sanctions (i.e., 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; its effect is to keep the conflict going, however, 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 from 1945 to 2005 received outside funding or arms; with the end of the Cold War around 1990, such conflicts ended at a higher rate because the balance of funding by opposing geopolitical blocs greatly declined (Schlichte 2009).

9. The photo shows other people in the background, both Israelis and Palestinians. None of the bystanders have the intense emotional expression of the two protagonists. As is typical of the standoff phase of crowd confrontations, the protagonists' 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.

10. The peak level of flag displays was never more than 38 to 46 percent of residences and 10 percent 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 also see this in opinion polls showing support for leaders in times of crisis; support typically reaches about 83 to 90 percent and never much higher (except in totalitarian regimes) (see Collins 2004b).

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

12. The model applies to all kinds of conflict across the size dimension, from the smallest micro to the largest macro. Micro-interactions among individuals and small groups usually cannot escalate very far because 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 on the conflict unless there is a larger structure, such as a gang or clan, to exact revenge. But even these semiformal structures tend to be rather ineffective at continuing vendettas, and their hostility remains more often at the level of bluster than of actual fighting (see Collins 2008:231, 489; Spierenburg 2008).

13. Neutrals' effectiveness has its own time-dynamics. In general, third-party intervention as peacemakers is most effective when a conflict is in its emotional burnout phase, or one or more of the other de-escalating processes have already taken effect. Once armed peacekeepers are introduced in a violent conflict, enthusiasm for their intervention also appears to be subject to time-dynamics (yet to be measured); in about three months, 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 a conflict's prevailing dynamics. If a conflict has not already greatly de-escalated, especially by falling solidarity and emotional exhaustion, the material aid neutrals bring to a 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 time-dynamics of conflict.

14. How long these processes 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 source of the most extreme atrocities and ideological polarization, and a pathway to genocide.

15. 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 20 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).

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

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Randall Collins is Dorothy Swaine Thomas Professor of Sociology at University of Pennsylvania. His current research includes comparative study of organized crime; the transformation of war in the age of Information Technology; and the future of capitalism. He writes a blog on sociological topics: http://sociological-eye.blogspot.com/.