The Structure of International Conflict

C. R. MITCHELL

THE STRUCTURE OF INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT

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THE STRUCTURE OF INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT

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To my parents, with much
love and affection

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'. . . With the utmost reluctance we have been driven to begin active hostilities against your late ally, the Edinburgh and Glasgow Railway. All attempts on our part to bring about an agreement for an equitable decision of traffic common to the two lines are resolutely opposed . . . [The Edinburgh and Glasgow] . . . has commenced a series of aggressions. We shall discontinue hostilities when our opponents treat us with fairness . . .'

Letter to shareholders from the directors of the Caledonian Railway Company (1854)

Foreword

The Structure of International Conflict has been written mainly to introduce undergraduate students in the social sciences to the ideas of conflict research, and to its approach to the analysis of disputes between humans, and between human groups or organisations. More particularly, it seeks to apply some of the findings of conflict research to analysing the nature of international conflicts, illuminating structures and processes that appear in conflicts, irrespective of the idiosyncratic factors that normally occupy the attention of more traditional studies. Hence, it is not a book about a single dispute, such as the Nigerian Civil War, nor a review of lethal conflicts since 1945. Rather, it aims at gathering together ideas and theories from different disciplines about various aspects of human conflict, and integrating them into a coherent framework that will assist in the understanding of future conflicts, as well as those that have already developed, been fought out and terminated.

The idea of such a book occurred to me almost ten years ago, at a time when the 'behavioural revolution' was beginning to make some impact on the study of International Relations in the United Kingdom. Anyone studying the discipline at this time could not help but be influenced by the ideas of two scholars in the United States, namely Karl Deutsch and James Rosenau, and I should acknowledge gratefully a long range intellectual debt to both of these writers (whether they would wish to see their influence result in this present volume is quite another matter!). More immediately, I owe far more in terms of ideas, intellectual stimulation, constructive criticism and encouragement from my colleagues at the old Centre for Analysis of Conflict at University College, London, namely; Reg Austin, Michael Banks, John Burton, Tony De Reuck, Frank Edmead, John Groom and Michael Nicholson. Without their influence and stimulation, and that provided by my psychological mentor Bram Oppenhein from the LSE, this present work would never have been started. More recently I have benefited from conversations, discussions and arguments with my two immediate colleagues at the City University, Peter Willetts and

Keith Webb, both of whom have opened my eyes to areas and ideas in political theory and comparative politics that I had been ignoring, or of which I had been totally ignorant. I am very grateful to both of them. I am more than grateful to my old friend Richard Little of Lancaster University who spent much time and effort with various draft chapters of the manuscript, and through his ideas and suggestions prevented the book from being more incoherent than it is.

Given the long gestation of this book, innumerable secretaries in various institutions from University College to City University have worked on different dafts, and I am duly grateful to all of them. I would particularly like to thank Norah Vas at City University, however, for her efficient and timely work on the tables and diagrams for the final draft of the work.

The final production of *The Structure of International Conflict* would not have occurred without the help of my wife and tolerance of my daughter, Emily, both of whom put up with long bouts of anti-social behaviour on my part to help me finish. In a more basic sense, however, the book is as much Lois's as mine, for her sensible comments and criticisms frequently underlined gaps or obscurities in the text, and caused me to look again, and usually to rewrite. The book would have been much less comprehensible without her help.

Introduction

Men have thought and written about the subject of conflict and war from Kautilya to the present day, while the phenomenon of organised violence has had a continuing interest for historian and philosopher, as well as for the statesman and man of action. However, it is only over the last three decades that scholars have engaged in an interdisciplinary approach to investigating the causes of conflict, violence and war and the problems of maintaining – indeed, defining – a condition of peace. Such work is known under a variety of labels, such as 'conflict studies', 'peace research', or 'conflict analysis'. In this present study the broad title of *conflict research* will be used, to convey the idea that the focus of a wide ranging research effort is on the phenomenon of 'conflict', wherever this might be found.

An initial difficulty in introducing conflict research as a new field of study is the changing and ambiguous use of labels, and the resulting problem of achieving an acceptable definition for a term such as 'conflict'. In everyday language, it tends to be associated with physical violence, but this 'common language' meaning of conflict is not the one generally adopted by conflict researchers (nor by this study), who are interested in a wider range of situations than those merely characterised by violent behaviour. Conflict research uses a broad approach to the question of what constitutes a conflict, one which attempts to encompass many of the features of terms used synonymously with 'conflict', such as 'competition', 'disharmony', 'tensions', 'antagonism', 'friction', 'hostility', 'struggle' or 'controversy'.

Moreover, any study of conditions precipitating human conflict leads on to consideration of the nature of co-operation, so conflict research also, perhaps paradoxically, demands of its practitioners an equal interest in the absence of conflict as in its presence. Hence, there is a dual interest in conflict and co-operation within the field.

Although this present study concentrates upon recent developments, we should warn against the assumption that little interest was taken in the subject of social or international conflict before the middle decades of the twentieth century. Robin Williams (1972) has condemned what

he calls the 'Columbus complex' in sociology, which holds conflict theory to be an invention of the 1950s, ignoring the vast legacy of sociological concepts, hypotheses and data in existence. Although conflict research 'came of age' in the United States in the mid-1950s, its intellectual roots go back to pioneering scholarship of the 1930s and 40s (Richardson, 1960; Wright, 1942; Sorokin, 1937), to the peace movements of the inter-war years and, some would argue, to European philosophers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. What was unarguably innovative in conflict research during the 1950s was its eclectic and interdisciplinary approach to the study of all social conflicts, wherever these might occur.

A. BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

One of the major spurs to renewed endeavour in the 1950s was the Cold War and the nuclear threat, which made a new intellectual effort to understand the causes and dynamics of war both pressing and immediate. A number of unique features in the work which resulted from this stimulus made the movement qualitatively as well as quantitatively different from previous intellectual enterprises, and while it would be misleading to assign common aims, methods or characteristics to the heterogeneous group of scholars who would claim to be part of 'the conflict research movement', nevertheless there are strands which are common to most, if not all, workers in the field.

1. CONFLICT AS A LEGITIMATE FOCUS OF ENQUIRY

The first of these 'common strands' is a fundamental belief (and it can be no more than a belief at this stage) that 'conflict' can be extracted and studied separately from the rest of purposeful human behaviour, both individual and group.

The intellectual rationale for this belief is simply that there are no limits to how social phenomena (the 'referent' world) may be split up for study: any class of phenomena may be isolated from the remainder of perceived reality in order to facilitate closer examination. One may analyse a traffic system in a country town, while ignoring the workings of the town's industry served by a large part of that traffic system. One may study relationships within a family, to the exclusion of the father's relations at work or his childrens' life at school. One may focus upon

the physiology of the brain and leave aside problems connected with the other (but highly related) parts of the body – respiratory system, nervous system, or circulatory system. It is important to recognise that there is no single 'right' way of analysing the real world, just ways that are more or less useful for different analytical and practical purposes.

Conflict research starts from the position that political and social processes can usefully be studied as various combinations of conflict and co-operation. Conflict researchers thus believe that conflict, while occurring at quite different social levels (from inter-individual to international), nevertheless has sufficient common attributes to justify its study as a distinct field. It is assumed that it is useful to take 'reality' and isolate all those aspects which relate to the concept of conflict, even if this involves putting into one broad category such apparently diverse phenomena as the Russo-Japanese War of 1903–5, communal strife on the island of Cyprus, the Watts Riots, an industrial strike, and a fist fight between two individuals. It is argued that the common as well as the unique exists in all these diverse phenomena, and that the common is such as to make comparative investigation worthwhile. Naturally, the common elements shared by phenomena must be more than superficial to warrant the development of any new field of study. A grapefruit and a basketball are both round and have pebbly skins, but this obvious physical resemblance is worth little when problems of common structure and behaviour of both objects arise. 'Conflicts' as a social phenomenon must prove to have more than superficial qualities in common to justify their analysis as a class of things, and in part this study represents an effort to focus on these more-than-superficial commonalities, and show that conflict is more than just a '. . . promising theoretical focus . . .' (Mack, 1965, p. 336). A point that follows from our argument that conflicts are fundamentally similar phenomena occurring throughout society is that a war is a special case of this general phenomenon, and should be treated as a sub-class rather than a unique category in its own right.[1] Findings about conflict at other levels may thus be helpful in developing insights into the causes, processes and outcomes of international war. To take an extreme example, it may be that a study of the processes operative in a conflict among New York cab-drivers' organisations could conceivably contain elements similar to those present in a conflict between independent, sovereign states (Cassady, 1957).

Conflict researchers whose parent disciplines have been Politics or International Relations have pointed out that this represents a radically