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Conflict as Change

MICROCON Research Working Paper 66
Michalis Lianos

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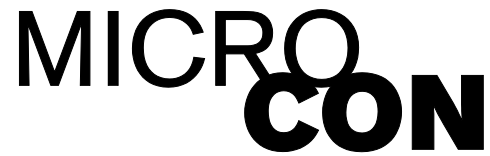
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Michalis Lianos

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Abstract

This paper further develops the study of the link between conflict and sociality, following on my previous analysis of "Conflict as Closure" (2011). It addresses the 'normality' of conflict as a product of human sociality and seeks to bring the entire research of the Microcon project to bear upon the sociological understanding of collective violent conflict. In doing so, the paper develops an explanatory thesis according to which conflict is an effort to accelerate social change based on a previously existing or an *ad hoc* community link. The thesis explains both the relation between closure and change and the specificity of conditions that favour or prevent the breakout of conflict. In this context, it develops a clear argument on the aetiology of peace in late modernity as a structural consequence of social fragmentation into pursuing individual biographical projects of change.

Conflict as Change

We view conflict as an irregular condition that breaks with 'normal' sociality. But conflict is everywhere in its various forms. Office blocks, factory floor shops, villages, neighbourhoods and often households are full of it. Courts and other institutions are there to stop or avert it, armies to conduct it and all individuals experience it from the very early days as they crawl on a playground. Although rarely violent, conflict is an omnipresent mode of human interaction, an organised disposition of individuals and groups, who can shift into a conflict mode from one moment to another with remarkable sense of timing and precision when an invisible signal says so. Those who have been part of crowds in conditions of tension know how overdetermined each individual is by others, how football fans may turn into fighters, peaceful protesters into rioters and groups of friends into camps attacking each other. Despite its importance, little is known of this process. On the contrary, it is all the more naturalised by the fact that we only look at its consequences as external observers expressing regret.

This is a very odd state of affairs for the social sciences in particular. Taking the phenomenon to be obvious and its consequences to be highly unnatural is certainly not the best way of studying conflict. We need to ask why we are all equipped with that pristine comprehension of the mechanics of conflict. What is the role of that comprehension in our social lives? Why is the mutual understanding of conflict one of the universal aspects of human sociality? Could conflict be just another operational face of human collectivity?

A digression is necessary here. If we need to look at conflict, it is useful to get a better idea of how collective aggression works. The literary consensus around "crowd madness" does not stand to empirical examination. Crowd violence is not irrational. It is rather a concrete expression of how socioeconomic and cultural closure (Lianos 2011) leads to outbursts of aggression. For example, Tolnay & Beck (1995: 27) note the conditions that drove racial segregation in the American South in the 1910s: "Reinforcing the caste boundary and affirming white racial superiority diminished the odds that an alienated white lower class might unite with blacks to challenge the privileged position of influential whites". They also note that "A few weeks [after the 1919 Chicago riot] an unknown black man travelling by train through Georgia […] boasted to his fellow travellers that he was from Chicago, and that the blacks of Georgia should do what the blacks of Chicago had just done. He was taken from

the passenger train by a mob of enraged whites and hanged from a small tree near Cochran for his incendiary comments".

Crowds are not blind homogeneous collectivities (McPhail 1991). They are mostly patchworks of smaller units that may or may not adhere to a dynamics of violent conflict (idem, 2008). Closely linked people remain together and maintain interaction over crowd formation and movement (Cornwell 2003). However, the dynamics of conflict is constructed as an interaction game between actors who built up opposition. For example in the context of a policed protest, power may change the initial positioning of the majority of the protestors:

> […] there is a dynamic whereby police assumptions concerning the homogeneity of the crowd, and police practices which impose a common fate on all crowd members lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy on a collective scale. That is, the initially heterogeneous crowd becomes homogenous. Moreover, to the extent that police action is seen as not only indiscriminate but also illegitimate (e.g., denying the right to protest and using offensive tactics to disperse the crowd) then the entire crowd will unite around a sense of opposition to the police and the authorities they are protecting. This will be reflected in behavioral changes—notably, a willingness to enter into conflict with the police. It will also be reflected in psychological changes. That is, those who initially saw themselves as moderates change their understanding of their relationship with the authorities and hence their own identity. Being treated as radicals, they came to see themselves as radical. In addition, the emergence of a common radical self-categorization within the crowd leads to feelings of consensus and to expectations of mutual support which empowers crowd members to express their radicalism and to take on the police. (Drury & Reicher 2009: 713)

> More generally, this model applies to all conditions of what the authors call the "Elaborated Social Identity Model":
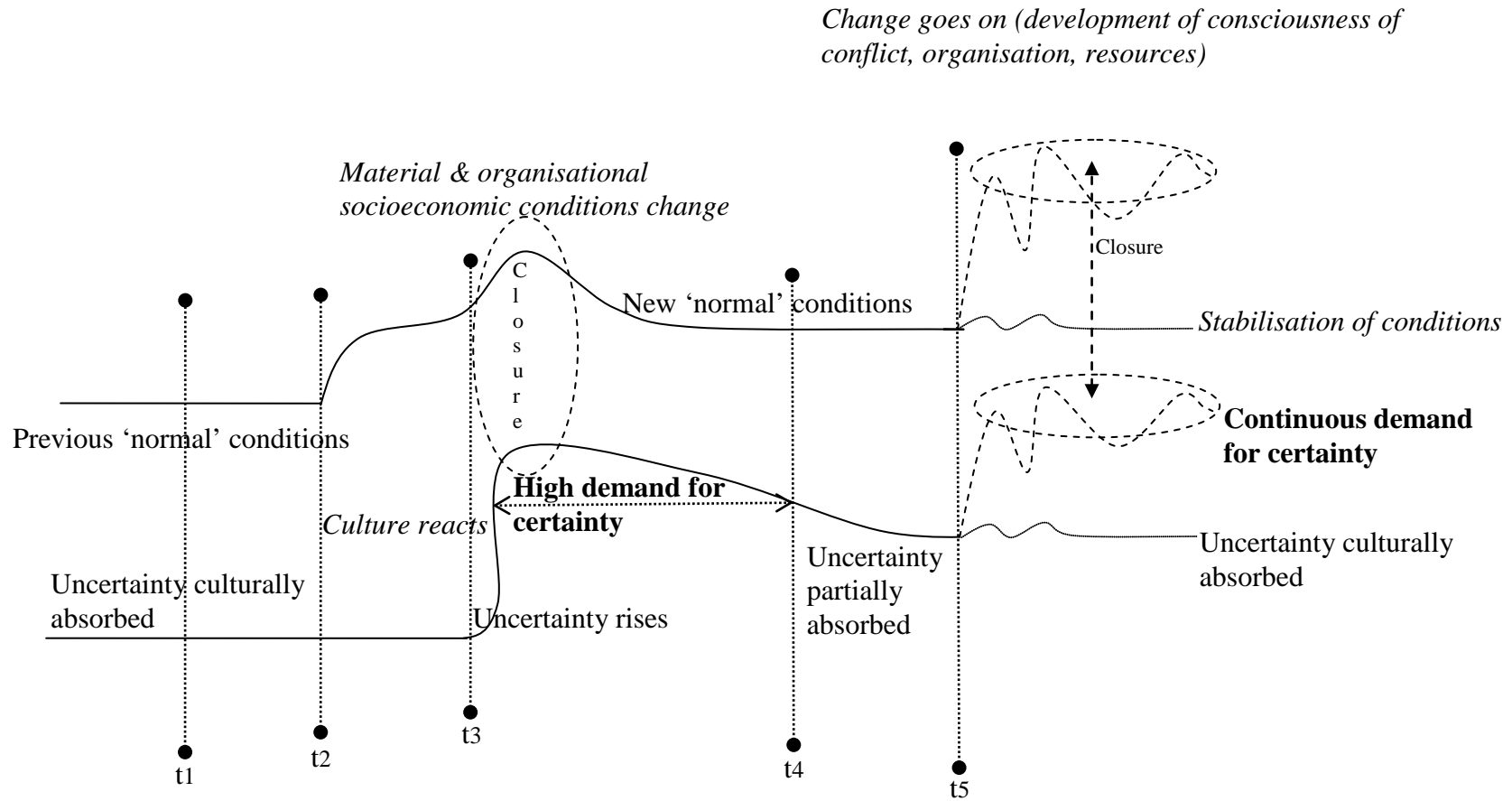
"people's sense of their social position (social identity) changes to the extent that, in acting on their identity (participating in a crowd event), they are repositioned as a consequence of the understandings and reactions of an out-group (treated as oppositionalists by the police), and this repositioning leads both to a new sense of identity and new forms of action (oppositional violence)." (ibid.)

People are seen as possible violent opponents and they may become so as they are *empowered by the collectivity surrounding them*. Their position changes in proportion to the possibility of changing their view of themselves from peaceful disagreement to violent conflict. Closure leads to a game of reciprocal symbolic escalation that artificially augments claims to power, domination and prevalence. Other solutions, much more peaceful, are always possible but they are set aside by the mutual determination of positions as increasingly incompatible and inimical. This process is not irrational either, if we look at it from the point of view of representing closure at an operational level. When cultural and social conditions favour closure, various conflicts test continuously the potential of making that closure materialise as a dominant collective choice.

Collective empowerment is from that point of view an accentuated misunderstanding that works. It brings the parties from a temporary rivalry expressed in terms of public order to violence constituted as conflict. Rebel groups of all kinds are firstly cast as a problem of restoring order by the police or the army, not as durable challengers of established power. But as governments seek to suppress them rather than to achieve compromise, their identity changes and the binary representation of reality gathers momentum. Support and rejection need to become clearer, and intermediate positions disappear. The question is why this process develops. Conflict is visibly present in the form of rivalry and tension whenever closure is possible. Each time a collective action, e.g. a protest march or a strike, expresses conflict, closure is put to the test. Will it be strong enough for the misunderstanding of positions to take place? In most cases, this will not be so and the conflict will be local, temporary, limited to a specific issue and non-violent. But in the rare cases where closure will make the collectivity strong enough, the threshold will be overcome and violence will trigger

a new phase that may or may not be durable. In terms of the conflict timeline, things can now be represented as follows:

Fig.2: Dynamics of Conflict Duration

Change goes on (development of consciousness of conflict, organisation, resources)

Material & organisational socioeconomic conditions change

C
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r
e

New 'normal' conditions

Closure

Stabilisation of conditions

Previous 'normal' conditions

Continuous demand for certainty

Culture reacts

High demand for certainty

Uncertainty culturally absorbed

Uncertainty rises

Uncertainty partially absorbed

Uncertainty culturally absorbed

t1

t2

t3

t4

t5

Duration is a factor that depends on the continuation of the conditions in which conflict arises. At the same time, the availability of resources to the challenging party will also determine the degree of organisation of the conflict. Obviously, guns, vehicles, helicopters or a real, fully deployed rebel army, will not structure conflict in the same way as regular street protests or riots. High or low conflict intensity is another important differentiation which will depend on several socioeconomic and situational parameters. International and geopolitical issues will also affect at this stage the structure of the conflict. There are entire fields of law, sociology and political science that deal with these aspects, so I will not develop them here. However, the general scheme remains unaffected that closure in combination with the accentuated demand for certainty maintains the conflict alive and it will end only if one or both of these essential conditions is not satisfied. Through this dynamics it is possible to understand why the self-proliferation of conflict is likely. The stakes increase for the parties involved as defeat will certainly entail an aggravation of their previous position. At the same time resources are being used at a frenetic pace in order to conduct and sustain conflict while many resources are simultaneously destroyed because of it. Households suffer stress, loss of income, displacement or even loss of life and react accordingly. It is possible to enter in some cases a 'normality' of conflict with resources and territories being divided among sides in a way that increases duration and sometimes communities being largely instrumentalised into permanently providing human and material resources for the perpetuation of conflict.

All these probabilities that we see materialise around the globe rise within the dynamics described here. But what is the dynamics of decline for conflict? How does conflict as a social phenomenon end? By which processes does it lead to the establishment of some peaceful normality? We have seen that in a sense conflict never fully ends, since there are always small minorities to hold ideologies of closure that permanently test the conditions for conflict to arise. However, it ends in the sense that it does not occupy considerable parts of a society and that there exists no violent challenge to the established normality. There are several ways to look at this phenomenon but it is certainly a good start to admit that so long as people, particularly young males, are alive on both sides, the conflict can continue. The idea that a conflict may simply 'run out of steam' is sociologically unacceptable, for it is conscience that makes peace an option or the outcome of lack of options. People must *believe* that there is an end to which they conform, otherwise they fight to the death. To come to this conclusion, they must feel quite certain that the conditions that surround them mean that conflict came or

should come to an end; or they must believe that there are alternatives to conflict which allow them to pursue their aspirations. A continuous line links these two possibilities: either the aspirations expressed via conflict cannot be any longer pursued at that time or they can be pursued in other, more peaceful, ways. Certainty on the one hand and openness on the other hand will put an end to conflict and this is in line with the analysis so far. But what is revealed to us at this point is that certainty and openness – or uncertainty and closure – regulate one essential aspect of the collectivities involved, i.e. their aspiration for change.

From this point of view, conflict is the reaction of a collectivity that seeks change more rapidly than the conditions seem to allow. The orientation of that change may be the same or different from what future opponents would like to see. For example, enlightened middle classes may approve of specific changes in the long run but do not wish to see these changes happen very fast, revolutionise society and endanger their place in it. Lower classes on the other hand may feel that the time is right to pursue exactly the same changes but rapidly, precisely because it is that rapid pace that is likely to change their place in society. These social aspirations for rapid change interact with the two parameters that regulate it: uncertainty and closure. If very little can be offered in terms of certainty regarding these aspirations, the issue becomes a matter of alternative routes to pursue. Lack of openness is precisely what may bar these routes and lead to the pursuit of change via confrontation and possibly violence. Ideologies of polarisation will be adopted to handle the organisation of conflict and give the social aspirations involved the definitive qualities of a legitimate, just and necessary transformation of the world, a utopia worth fighting for. *Conflict should be understood therefore as the aspiration for faster change than conditions allow, in a context which makes that rapid change seem the only possible choice*.

Implicit in this understanding is the condition of opportunity, which is often wrongly taken to be a *conscious evaluation* of possibilities as being advantageous. But collective social interaction does not function along the lines of rational preparation in view of agreeing whether conditions constitute an opportunity or not[1]. With regard to conflict, opportunity *is*

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[1] This is not to deny the possibility that small groups may plan and carry out actions that are meant to trigger conflict. Such actions are in fact tests of uncertainty and closure, and may partially succeed or fail, depending on the state of these two dimensions. Another useful clarification is that planned attempts to seize power, such as a *coup d'état*, can be explained by this theoretical framework only to the degree that they lead to conflict. For it is perfectly possible to seize power via tactical means and meet with mere passive acceptance by the collectivity involved.

the convergence of belief around uncertainty and closure. The existence of the circumstances that allow for the polarisation of the social world – and this includes of course both one's strong points, such as resources, and the weak points of the adversary – exist only as representations on which the decision for action is being made. Although one should not deny the importance of structured preparation, planning and leadership in pre-conflict conditions or movements (McPhail 2008), these are aspects that seek to capitalise on representations that are favourable to conflict rather than generate such representations *ex nihilo*. Opportunity, either in the form of "greed" or in any other form is the collective understanding of the situation as leading to conflict.

Change and Legitimacy of Outcomes

Conflict is a matter of pace in social change. This in itself means that it is also a matter of direction of social change because *the time* when a specific social change happens or fails to happen makes for a different course of history. For example, an abrupt change in stratification, cultural beliefs or the economic mode, if combined with other concurrent changes, say a global financial crisis, will give a totally different outcome than it would have given if it happened slowly over decades as part of the consequences of that financial crisis. Through fast pace, conflict is meant to produce a visibly different world in the field that it takes place. The social value of conflict is underestimated because of its frequent ineffectiveness to produce a 'positive' outcome and the terrible consequences that it often has. But conflict always produces legitimacy in the sense that it accentuates claims to power on both sides and reinforces systems of belief that envisage the world in a particular manner. Conflict along ethnic or religious lines for example, even when it fails to establish the challenging party as a dominant one, reinforces ethnicity or religion as a legitimate framework of comprehending the social world. *In this sense, conflict never fails* since it obliges everyone to consider and practice the world via the categories along which the conflict is structured. That is often misunderstood as a mistaken and backward view of the world, whereas it is in fact a product of social forces that do not have the conditions to envisage the world differently. What distinguishes ethnic conflict in Belgium from ethnic conflict in Rwanda is certainly not an abstract "will to peace" but the fact that late modern, capitalist individuality sidelines closure over ethnicity via the individuating processes that we have explained (Lianos 2011). Inversely, poor economic and organisational conditions favour

collective representations around communal aspects such as ethnicity, religion or territoriality. These communal aspects are in pre-modern or non-late modern settings the only ties robust enough to conceive of the social world in terms of closure and to strongly represent the legitimacy and necessity of rapid change. For, if the late modern individual will support conflict to see her "individual liberties" continue and prevail, the non-late modern community will expectedly support conflict to see community belonging continue and prevail. This is often misunderstood as an identity-bound phenomenon only in the second case, but it is in fact as identity-bound in the first one. The only difference is that identity in the first case is constituted via individuality and not via community. From that point of view, conflict paradoxically seems to be a highly relativistic process bringing into intimate, rival contact any aspects of social belonging that are established, independently of their content. Structurally speaking, conflict is a social process that checks with history if power is in the right place or can be redistributed. This is why, horrible as the process may be, the outcome of conflict is always legitimate. Power is asserted or reasserted and devastation, disaster and trauma become parts of a regrettable past without seriously affecting the legitimacy of the present. 'Terrorists' end up 'freedom fighters' or Ministers and vice versa, sanguinary oppression campaigns become objects of "pardon and forget" ceremonies, victims – dead or alive –have as only right the vacuous magnanimity of abstract speeches on a 'painful past' and the world goes on without the outcome of conflict being seriously challenged. Like any other social process, conflict is not a rational process but a condition defending its own representation of rationality.

From the point of view of its ending, conflict is a legitimising process. It asserts peace. It presents its outcome as the best possible one, given the circumstances. (Partial) winners and losers come under a regime of power practices and compete within the limits of peace as closure tendencies are kept at bay and certainty increases over what that regime entails, socially, politically, economically and culturally. Although, uncertainty may be high in some cases, a condition often described as "instability", the end of a conflict does produce a representation of where power lies and for what reason. People start to invest in possibilities that are compatible with that representation. Households and other actors adjust their strategies in order to make the most of the new situation, thus participating in enhancing the legitimacy of the new conditions. Peace, as such, now constitutes change and every actor needs to develop his strategy in order to benefit from it. This process is more than a wilful social change. It combines the deterministic chaos of social relations as it produces some

outcomes that bear close relation to the intended outcomes and many others that, albeit foreign to what was intended, become equally legitimate. For example, displaced populations that were caught in the middle of conflict are obliged to create new conditions and populate new areas or change other societies, outcomes that were not at all part of the conflict agenda. One can look at unintended consequences like refugee and migrant movements due to conflicts, as parts of the geometry of power that legitimises outcomes which would otherwise have been as incomprehensible as they are tragic. Conflict legitimises both change and horror as it works its way towards a new peaceful regime. Even when that way lasts for many long years and brings ineffable destruction, it leads to a new historical legitimacy, which from a social point of view asserts the character of conflict as a normal part of sociality, not a suspension of it. It is simply because the outcomes of conflict are historically legitimised that we think of peace as a sufficient and desirable social condition. Few of us would prefer to live in a world in which the French Revolution has not taken place.

Modern and late modern sociality, however, has the pretention and the duty of seeking to avert suffering in many forms, ranging from accident to illness and from environmental damage to conflict. Social processes in late modern society include an element of design and conscious orientation towards the decrease of all suffering. It is therefore only an apparent paradox that both conflict and our efforts to avert and stop it are parts of 'normal' human sociality. What may make these efforts more efficient is the initial admission that conflict is a process of change, not an irrational reaction to matters that could have been settled more peacefully. Understanding conflict as the social aspiration for rapid change, and the conditions of uncertainty and closure that surround it, brings us much closer to designing interventions that can at the same time predict, quell and avert conflicts. Such interventions need to be just in increasing certainty and decreasing closure. That can mostly be done by seeking to bring about the outcomes of conflict before conflict takes place, not by focusing on the internal mechanics of the conflict itself. It depends on the specific circumstances what initiatives and resources will be effective in rapidly dealing with the demand for certainty and the credibility of alternatives that will break up closure into a series of parallel possibilities to pursue. But the essential recipe is the same: dance faster than the music in producing change. The only way to avert a conflict is to offer other possibilities of pursuing change so as to make conflict appear an exaggerated and unnecessary response to prevailing conditions.

Belonging, Sacrifice, Division

Conflict cannot be a disruption of 'normal' sociality but a part of it. The fact that is initially experienced as a 'non-routine' situation resembles thousands of other situations for which standard parts of our sociality prepare us, such as heavy weather conditions, public feasts, protests and manifestations or fleeing dangerous places. From that point of view, conflict is not a failure of social mechanisms but a successful guarantee that sociality will always supply opportunities for change. A good way of understanding this aspect is by looking at a rare form of social behaviour which emerges when conflict is not yet likely or power between the conflicting parties is too unbalanced, to the point where the weaker party might be in danger of abandoning the fight. It is interesting that under these circumstances instigation to start or continue with the conflict is given in the form of sacrifice. Self-immolations, hunger strikes and other forms of self-harming behaviour are individual acts that address a collectivity as a community that needs to think and act in terms of pursuing change via resistance to violence or violence as such. Were violent conflict not a tool of social change, such behaviour would be not only 'irrational' but meaningless to those that it addresses. It is not. Opponents to oppressive regimes, terrorists, freedom fighters, pacifist monks and even civil servants[2] – to name but a few, display that form of protest as an offering to the community that will inspire others to achieve change through conflict (Andriolo 2006). As Bobby Sands put it:

> I'm going to die, make no two ways about it. I know I am
>
> dying and I want to make it clear what I am dying for. It's
>
> not about a suit of clothes or a food parcel. I'm dying to
>
> make sure that the struggle continues, that the struggle
>
> lives! (Feldman 1991: 243)

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[2] There is an "Observatory for Stress and Forced Mobility in France Telecom – Orange" which counts the tenths of suicides and attempted suicides by workers of that utility in France. There were 27 suicides and 16 attempts in 2010. http://www.observatoiredustressft.org/images/stories/recensemt_suicides_27_oct_2011.pdf , accessed 12 November 2011.

For this form of action to be meaningful, human sociality must contain a pre-existing 'thermostat' for considering conflict. If hostile action is not enough, altruist sacrifice may influence closure and the pursuit of change just as well. We are strangely now in the Maussian territory of gift where self-elimination is the ultimate, albeit unilateral, form of offering; for one cannot reciprocate and is for ever indebted. This remains true even when the party concerned is committed to peaceful resistance, as it is in Tibet. "All the [Tibetan] monks I ask say they understand why their fellow clerics immolated themselves breaking Buddhist vows against the taking of life. 'They did this not as individuals but for the Tibetan people', says a 20-year-old monk. 'I admire their courage' "[3]. There is little need to belabour the point when one knows how Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation on 17 December 2010 became the catalyst that sparked the series of revolutions known as the "Arab Spring". The most significant deduction to draw from this type of motivating sacrifice is that it seeks to address a community and stimulate its values and belonging around the axis of conflict or struggle. If it is possible to use self-destruction in order to incite others to do exactly the opposite, this means that community belonging and conflict are very tightly linked.

Such a link would seem reasonable both from an evolutionary point of view and from a collective identity angle. Social diversity cannot be adequately expressed in community settings because there is no difference between belonging to the community and complying with community norms. In that context, it is necessary to have an efficient solution which makes possible the modification of the status quo. It is at the same time inevitable that such a solution breaks with community belonging. Thus, it creates by definition a, partially or totally, new community identity for those who do not belong any longer. This is probably how we came to have a social form that constitutes at the same time a demand for change and an identity challenge.

Consequently, conflict can be seen as a demand for change through division, therefore a mechanism for creating new sub-communities that generate belonging via that division. It is quite expectable from this point of view that when change is sought within an established collectivity, violence is the only way to polarise it around new lines of belonging. The perfect example here is civil war, where it is necessary to rapidly redetermine a part of "Us" as Others. Notoriously, violence is used to swiftly destroy any neutral ground so that recourse to

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[3] *Time magazine,* 14 November 2011, "Burning Desire for Freedom" by Hanna Beech, p. 22.

the unifying, often national, identity becomes impossible. The new criterion of belonging might be ethnic, racial, ideological, historical, political, moral or even aesthetic but division in terms of creating new communities of belonging is indispensable in the pursuit of change. A safe conclusion is therefore that inasmuch as tightly knit communities are concerned, *conflict is the main efficient way of representing and pursuing change and violence the fastest way of realising conflict*.

The problem is then inversed. Instead of viewing conflict as inefficient destruction, we would need to wonder how we can match its great efficiency via processes that are not destructive. The multiple forms and models of peaceful negotiation are of course attempts to do precisely that and they do contribute to pacification. However, they can only work in environments where third parties, such as international organisations, can control the conflicting parties and this means that change will not be a competition of force and endurance between the conflicting parties but an outcome compatible with the views and the interests of the third parties involved. This configuration can contribute to long-lasting conflicts with varying periods of intensity (a good example is the Palestinian/Israeli conflict). This is not to suggest that a genocide or a political pogrom are better solutions because they bring conflict to an end much more efficiently, but it shows why violent means are still 'spontaneously' preferred by the conflicting parties over peace-oriented mediation. Violence between the conflicting parties guarantees, so to speak, that the outcome is clear and legitimate in the sense that it represents sheer power rather than a more or less plausible appeal to reason, beliefs or values.

Conclusion

The functional 'preference' for violent conflict is thus a consequence of community and identity dynamics, that is, a consequence of belonging to collectivities which increasingly perceive their coexistence to be impossible and their resources, territory or culture to be undividable. Seen from this angle, collective violent conflict is an expression of the social bond when an aspiration for change appears both necessary and possible. The objective of accelerated social change can be pursued through violence when there is enough cultural

convergence between individuals. Change appears then as an opportunity to a number of people that share a community link.

Inversely, it is very difficult to pursue change through violence when individual consciousness is fragmented into a multiplicity of opinions, preferences and objectives that serve the progress of personal biographies. The resistance of late modern social organisation with regard to violence is in fact built upon the normative weakness of institutions which serve individual users in their competition and collaboration with each other. Late modern institutions and organisations do not pursue, or even support, a unified project but provide the means of real or imagined opportunities of individual advancement. Change is accordingly increasingly inconceivable as a collective claim but appears to come about contingently as a result of perpetual movements in individual positionings. Efficient organisational fluidity trumps closure and the fragmentation of collective issues disperses the rare remnants of prescriptive collective representations. Cultural concentration is impossible and collective violence is replaced as a means of conflict by political party preferences and, given their inefficiency, by individual tactics of pursuing socioeconomic competition. It may be the case that peace is not as "natural" as it seems and that its social cost is to be found in the tremendous pressures of fuelling an adequate selfhood in late modernity.

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