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The Handbook of Social and Political Conflict

Edited by Sergei A. Samoilenko and Solon Simmons

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The Handbook of Social and Political Conflict

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1

Introduction

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A Chaos of Disciplines

Where and with Whom Should I Study?

Let's start this book with a thought experiment. Imagine you are trying to give advice to a young person who is going to college and has an interest in politics and the social sciences, particularly about when things go wrong. In other words, they would like to somehow study social and political conflict. How would you advise them? What discipline should they choose, and with whom should they study? The answer is not easy.

You could advise them to study political science or maybe sociology. Of course, psychology is pretty good for the study of the personal sources of conflict, and much of the best material on conflict and communication can logically be found in communication departments. Law is a fine path, too, and arguments could be made for philosophy, gender or African American studies, or religion. Economics traditionally assumed conflict away but now has adopted an approach of its own, and there are even specialty disciplines like conflict resolution, specifically designed to intervene in cycles of violent conflict. In short, there are dozens of paths to study this thing we call social and political conflict, and none has an exclusive claim over the others as the best of ways.

Among the various leading approaches is the field of sociology, and one famous sociologist who was interested in this problem of disciplinary heterogeneity, Andrew Abbott of the University of Chicago, developed a theory that borrowed an idea from the physicals sciences to describe the unruly patterns of contact between the various social sciences. He called his approach *the chaos of disciplines* in a book of the same name and argued that there is no clear sense of progress in any aspect of the social sciences, the study of conflict included. Instead, the study of any area of social life was historically anchored in a few principles that divided groups of scholars. Over time, these scholars further divided with respect to those principles, leading to a chaotic pattern of overlapping and inherently convoluted sciences, each claiming expertise in areas that other groups also claimed as their own.

This chaos model is a fairly useful way to characterize the study of social and political conflict because it allows us to see and the sooner you convey this to your aspiring undergraduate students, the better off they will be as they navigate the chaos. This handbook is specifically designed for that open-minded and curious student—the one who is not interested in solely

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committing to a single approach but would instead like to wrap their arms around the whole scope of the field, no matter how eclectic and seemingly contradictory that project proves to be.

Churches, Sects, and the Secular Worldviews of the Academy

The essays in this volume draw from scholars with a wide range of disciplinary approaches, including various forms of inter-, multi-, and trans-disciplinary orientations within those disciplines. One way to think about what makes a discipline in the social sciences a discipline per se is to consider it as an inclusive worldview, not unlike the sort of worldview that might characterize a religious perspective. Almost all social sciences are formally non-religious (regardless of the beliefs of its practitioners), but the scope of the perspective developed in a field as broad as psychology, economics, or political science can be every bit as grounding for a secular thinker as Calvinism, Buddhism, or Taoism would be for a religious person.

It's true that the claims of empirical social science fall short of ultimate concerns by design, but the discipline provides a framework for interpreting nearly all aspects of social life that are relevant for a secular thinker. In this way, we might think of the social sciences as a grand narrative tradition that posits its own founders and ancestors, methods of belief affirmation, and manners of ritual engagement in support of a particular worldview. It is easy to overstress this point, but as they develop over time, perhaps akin to Abbott's fractal patterns, disciplines become more and more like churches.

If we stay with this simile for a while, we can borrow another idea from an even older sociologist (you can begin to see our disciplinary biases/where our training was) named Ernst Troeltsch, whose specialty was the sociology of religion. Troeltsch remains famous for an argument he made alongside another German sociologist, Max Weber, through which he distinguished two broad institutional patterns for organizing Christian belief. The first is what he called a church, and the second is called a sect.

This church-sect model has come under various criticisms over the years, but its general pattern remains clear. Churches tend to be large and universal, whereas sects are small and more particular. Churches are conservative and established, while sects are innovative and volatile. One is born into a church without much choice, whereas one joins a sect as a matter of personal conviction. Finally, religious experience in a church tends to be regular and institutionalized with clear patterns of hierarchical authority, whereas experiences in a sect are more varied, less rigid, and subject to charismatic authority enforced by informal or idiosyncratic sanctions.

Our new freshman setting out to study the social sciences might learn a lot from drawing a comparison to this church-sect distinction. For instance, there are established churches within the social sciences: economics, psychology, anthropology, sociology, and political science. There are also upstart sect-like fields like the various "studies," from cultural studies to gender, queer, and Chicano studies. And there are various forms of combination and hybridization of church-like and sect-like social science specializations.

In fact, fields like communication tend to grow like new sects at the intersections and interstices of established fields like sociology, rhetoric, and public speaking. Once these fields break out of established molds, they often lose their sect-like character and solidify into church-like models of their own. These kinds of processes are critical for the fledgling student of social and political conflict to understand, who will only begin to grasp the broad contours of their subject matter when they can see how ideas, methods, and patterns of interaction are passed back and forth across disciplinary divides.

This complex ecology of worldviews about social and political conflict poses a challenge not only for the new student of the field but also for the seasoned scholar. It's simply impossible to square every circle or to dot every i and cross every t. There are always loose ends, unknown arguments, foreign findings, and the like that are less a function of how complicated the subject matter is and more about how complex the various traditions of thought are about that

subject matter. It is not at all strange for one to happen upon a massively cited, presumably seminal article or book on a topic that they've specialized in for decades, only to find that it has somehow remained overlooked or unknown to them. Similarly, senior scholars often find that their work is situated by a blind reviewer in a school of thought that the author has never heard of before. If you place too much stock in disciplinary identity in the study of conflict, you will quickly become a provincial, even if locally celebrated zealot.

A Chorus of Concepts

In an effort to manage this chaos, we have settled on a strategy for selecting topics that are appropriate for this strange and chaotic context. Our plan was to avoid the distractions of disciplinary distinctions entirely. Instead, we would focus only on concepts, particularly novel ones, that speak to some aspect of conflict that the concept is intended to explicate. Like words, these concepts can travel across bodies of literature and conversations, often passing into the lexicon of a new field unnoticed, with scholars using them unaware of their origins.

For most of the twentieth century, researchers and practitioners from fields as diverse as sociology and anthropology, political science, communication, history, economics, and even English have been interested in the study of social and political conflict and in its practical applications. However, most available readers and anthologies were designed for relatively narrow circles of scholars, even those that aspired to see beyond disciplinary boundaries. Accordingly, many of these collections are less useful than they could be in a globalizing academic marketplace that places more value on solving real-world problems than on disciplinary purity.

This handbook responds to the demand for a practical and comprehensive collection of scholarship that transcends disciplinary boundaries. It consists of recent and original essays that satisfy the growing interest in social and political conflict, preparing any bright student interested in ideas about conflict, peace, power, and justice with a set of methods translating seemingly diverse concepts with origins in specialized disciplines into a common, if complex, transdisciplinary language.

The authors selected for this volume were tasked with providing an essay on a concept that they thought was important for this expansive version of the field we explore here. The language we circulated was relatively broad:

> We invite scholars from any discipline or field to contribute a concise essay (3000–4000 words) on any concept, keyword, or scientific term that is critical for the study of social and political conflict. The test for choosing a concept is to isolate a critical term or concept that you would insist that any recent graduate student in your field should know.

The result was an impressive array of somewhat diverse yet deeply complementary concepts. Not all of these concepts are well-known; in fact, some are making their debut in this volume. However, they all provide a sense of the current state of the field of conflict studies. They don't necessarily fit into a single plan, but taken together, these individual voices make for an intriguing choir of concepts that form a unique perspective on the field.

Antinomies of Conflict Thought

In What Ways Do Theories Differ from One Another?

It is clear from a casual inspection of ideas in the conflict space that there are major gaps in how people think about conflict, but in what way do they differ? One of the lessons of Abbott's chaos theory is that there is no simple progress in science. At best, it cycles in wild gyres, back and forth

between polarities that seem to endure. We might think of them as antinomies or laws that, despite contradicting one another, continue to exist. They are sort of like Zeno's paradoxes; based on our assumptions, reason suggests that Achilles can't ever catch the tortoise, but of course, Achilles is faster, and he wins the race. Our logical, puzzling minds lead us into traps that life and practice necessarily extricate us from. As Wittgenstein put it, as we live, we are flies out of the bottle. The antinomies we put forward here (which, in many ways, are only suggestive) speak to that tendency of the social sciences to track life as it is lived and find ways out of the bottle by advancing the evolving debates within the space opened by these polar plausibilities. The four presented here seem to be particularly vital for the study of social and political conflict.

The Antinomies

Peace Versus Confrontation

There are those who think about conflict in terms of cooperation and then those who see competition as the most natural mode of existence. One side will not let go of the idea of larger patterns of cooperation, the opportunity for everyone to just get along and live in friendship, whereas the other side accedes to the realities of power and the reality of moves in what are necessarily competitive games. We see this tension running throughout the contributions in this volume.

Why is this tension so critical? Let's begin with the reason we study conflict in the first place. Unless you happen to be deeply antisocial, you don't study because you like conflict itself; rather, you study it because you are interested in how it is resolved. Either you hope to see a wrong righted or have an interest in something deeper, something we might call peace.

The problem with the study of peace is that everyone who sets out to study it tends to find themselves studying conflict instead. Thus, the goal is often lost. As in journalism, if it bleeds, it ledes; that is, problems eclipse solutions. Problems are inherently more interesting. I like to describe this with what I call the Humpty Dumpty problem.

Just to remind you, Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall. He fell down and broke into pieces because he was an egg. No one was happy about him breaking, and the problem of fixing him became a central issue for the community, but not even the most organized and powerful forces controlled by the king, his horses and men, could repair him.

What is the deeper lesson of Humpty Dumpty? Think of it as causal asymmetry. The things that cause the problem often can't be simply reversed to fix it. For example, just because you have identified the most reliable correlates of war doesn't mean that you have any clue about what the correlates of peace are. The variables that describe why Humpty fell may well not be the ones that describe how he was put back together.

Social systems don't follow rules like Boyle's Law for gases, which concerns the tendency for temperature to increase with pressure at a fixed volume. For an ideal gas, you can raise the temperature by increasing the pressure. If you want to lower the temperature, you can simply hold the volume constant and lower the pressure. Pressure is a variable for both increasing temperature (breaking Humpty) and lowering temperature (putting Humpty back together again). In conflicts, these two processes might have nothing to do with one another.

Therefore, in this book, you will see authors struggling in the space of this antinomy between peace and confrontation. All of our authors are surely interested in peace, but many of them only study it as a side-effect of confrontation.

Mechanism Versus Culture

From the origins of social analysis, there are those who stress the lawlike character of patterns of conflict—x causes y under given conditions, always and everywhere—and those who see the world as socially constructed. When we can specify the mechanism that explains exactly how a

machine works, we feel as if we can control it, and there is nothing we want to control more than conflict. Leaving things open to the complex of social construction is inherently anxiety-provoking. This is a live debate in the papers collected here.

Is it fair to claim that the reason the mechanism versus culture debate is so critical in the study of social and political conflict is that no other issue in the world is more important than conflict? First, consider this issue of peace and conflict in the overall scheme of global problems.

Perhaps the best summary of these challenges is the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals framework. Of the goals outlined there, the 16th goal, peace and justice, seems humble, far down the list, and a bit of an afterthought compared to hunger, economic growth, and education, but think about Paul Collier's famous claim that "war is development in reverse."

None of what you care about is possible when conflict becomes general. Secure in glass towers in New York or marble halls in Washington, peace and strong institutions seem nice to have in comparison to the fifteen goals that come before it, but we need only remember September 11, 2001, to remind ourselves that even in those rarified environments, conflict is the dominant concern for all us when it arises on a grand scale.

This is where the mechanism issue reemerges. Many of our most impressive technological innovations owe something to war, and one of history's greatest ironies is that the Nobel Peace Prize was funded by the profits from the invention of dynamite. Air travel, mass communications, nuclear power, and the like were all pushed forward in times of war. Conflict focuses the mind. And when we want to control something, we seek a mechanism. We become engineers.

However, as mentioned above, social systems are not like air pumps. Purposes always intervene, and these feel to us as if they are freely chosen. Try as we might, we can't unthink the intuition that we have free will, which allows us to project our purposes into the world. Taken multiplicatively and collectively, these purposes become something like what we often describe as culture, which implies that culture escapes the mechanism, at least to a certain degree.

This tension between free will and necessity plays out in the social sciences as the antinomy of mechanism and culture. It explains the gap between scholars who are derided as positivists and those who advocate for social complexity and social construction. Because we care so much to get conflict right, the mechanists always have a prominent seat at the table, but because we know that we, ourselves, are free, our cultures (themselves nothing more than the emergent product of that interdependent freedom), therefore, must also be free. Therefore, cultural explanations never disappear no matter how powerful the arguments of the mechanists become.

As it seeks external legitimacy, social science tends to drift toward the comfort of reductionistic positivism, only to burst back out into the blue sky of imaginative constructionism. More than any of the other tensions, this antinomy runs through all the arguments in this book, but you may easily miss it if you don't look for it carefully.

Efficiency Versus Justice

One of the most divisive issues in the study of conflict is between those who favor more modest and attainable goals and those who maintain a focus on ideals and ultimate ends. This tension is evident both in the arguments our authors make and in their choice of research subjects. On the one side, authors assume an imperfect and imperfectible human nature as did Thomas Hobbes. For these thinkers, the perfect is the enemy of the good. On the other side, authors assume great potential for progress, never taking their eyes off the prize.

We can think of this dichotomy between efficiency and justice as referring back to the now classic conversation arising from economic theory regarding bounded rationality and satisficing rather than maximizing. In one mode, conflict theorists tilt toward the ideal and maximum possible gain. In the other, authors will calibrate their research questions to intermediate and practical goals, which might fall short of their ideals in the short run.

This divide between instrumental and modest scholars, on the one hand, and more idealistic scholars, on the other, might best be illustrated in the kind of work that foregrounds questions of social justice and power, especially around ascriptive status inequalities like gender identity, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and the like. In these settings, the writings of Michel Foucault proliferate. Social justice concerns often confront young scholars who might feel drawn to work that can do good and make the traditional areas of disinterested work seem tame or even counterproductive.

It is within the space of this tension that criticisms of neutrality and objectivity arise, following a different train of critique from the traditional scientific method. Maximalist scholars, or simply those with an affinity for the ideal, might prefer to focus on big questions and self-reflective models of research that decenter the researcher's authority and introduce questions of so-called positionality and privilege. Here, in this highly self-critical mood, new and occasionally exciting models of participatory research breakthrough and combine with varieties of critical theory and advocacy.

Of course, these more engaged models of scholarship are easy to criticize from within the paradigm of traditional research, in which one is still rewarded for positing more modest research questions and for compartmentalizing one's political views in relation to the research, but these tensions endure even in the overall political-tinged functions of the various disciplinary approaches: security studies leaning in the direction of statist conservatism and African American studies in the direction of identity politics, for example.

Nothing in the informal constitution of a discipline demands conformity with a certain political view, but even the most rigorous of the social sciences has its social and political functions. In this sense, the question of power and justice can never be entirely removed from the political scene. Much as Gramsci would have recommended, politically relevant viewpoints stage their own long marches through the disciplines, turning historians into specialized cultural critics and international relations scholars into national spokespersons.

Most of the authors in this volume tend to avoid overt political stances in their writing, but this last of the three antinomies plays out across the following pages, whether we intend it or not.

The Energy of Enduring Tensions

Where all this leaves the student of social and political conflict is quite open. Most scholars appear to find it easy to ignore these fractalizing tensions and behave as if they can draw straight-line developments to their research questions in their various literature reviews, but at a certain point, the question of the coherence of it all tends to arise, usually in university-wide events or in second-level tenure and promotion-committee discussions.

Funders increasingly demand interdisciplinary collaboration, but few seem to have much of an idea of what this would really mean because the disciplines themselves have folded in on themselves, becoming more like churches or sects. The more church-like the discipline becomes, the more it tends to incorporate the various sect-like innovations that emerge within it, presenting to the world an [discipline] of everything model. Hence, an economist can be a global expert on war, a geographer on social norms, an English professor on Marxism, and so on.

In order to keep one's head straight in this world in which the nineteenth-century brands of social science have come to clash with various waves of their twentieth-century competitors, it's worth coming back to the antinomies and concepts like those detailed in this volume. If disciplinary boundaries are always permeable and contested, the concepts that pass back and forth across these boundaries tend to be more durable, even if their meaning might shift in translation. These tensions between collaborative and adversarial models, between various forms of mechanistic materialism and imaginative constructionism, and between value-neutral and engaged forms of scholarship cut across all the social sciences, especially those that deal in some way with the highly contested arena of social and political conflict.

In This Volume: The Concepts

How Is This Book Organized?

Because this book was born from an elective process through which scholars proposed concepts that they thought would best fit our requirements, the book is somewhat eclectic in its mix of ideas, but in many ways, it is also potentially visionary. The best way to read it is to turn to specific concepts that seem to be of interest and read them alone.

And yet, the book as a whole and within sections attempts to maintain coherence in its overall structure. Without doing violence to the intention of the authors, we have imposed a narrative structure on the book and the entries that form its various sections.

A Five-Act Structure

The first section of the book takes up what might be the central problem of the study of conflict today, which is the breakdown of consensus and political polarization. We can think of this as the underlying problem addressed in this section and the theme that will develop over its course. The papers in this section range from the study of polarization itself to the theory of intergroup emotions from a neuroscientific perspective to novel forms of moral outrage to explorations of culture wars and illiberalism, and finally to extremist aggression.

The second section moves beyond the experience of escalation itself to the systems of power and the rhetorics of control through which conflict behavior is managed. This section begins with a broad focus on the rhetoric of social conflict, moves to a theory of securitization, and then turns to the mechanisms of social ostracism, cancel culture, and the spiral of silence before concluding with the chapters on bureaucracy and distributed governance.

The middle section of the book examines the themes of narrative, world-building, and imagination. The section begins with the studies of structurational divergence and moral conflict, transitions to reflection on the role of framing in political conflict, and then to a general introduction to the concept of *gossip* as it applies to social conflict. It then extends narrative approaches and worldbuilding to the study of song as a form of imaginative projection.

The fourth section pivots back to adversarial modes of conflict engagement. The section begins with the concept of *the trickster* as a means of exploring the ways that innovation in media environments can disrupt, transgress, and subvert established habits and institutions with both beneficial and adverse effects. The section then shifts to explicit uses of persuasive attack, character assassination, and ridicule in the field of politics. The middle portion focuses on the roles of technology, artificial intelligence (AI), and visual misinformation in social and political conflicts. The section then concludes with a chapter on information warfare as a theoretical construct and an operational practice.

The final section ends on a lighter note under the title "Resilience, Humanity, and Hope." The section begins with the discussion of contrast between escalation and de-escalation, a statement on the classic concept of *positive peace*, then shifts to community peacebuilding, human rights, rights advocacy for women before pivoting to inoculation and critical media literacy. The section comes to a close with a provocative piece on the concept of the end of war.

Conceptual Clusters and Modules

Consistent with our chaos of disciplines approach to the contemporary study of conflict, there is no single throughline in these chapters, but they do provide an image of the perspectival diversity that any serious interdisciplinary scholar faces when planning a research agenda in the field. What we have here are not necessarily schools or proto-disciplines but rather clusters of ideas and

discipline-crossing conceptual modules, which can be adapted to new contexts as they are narrowed. We also see the need for new vocabulary as old situations give rise to new interpretations. Though many of these concepts may not survive, they point to the way that the transdisciplinary study of conflict lives and evolves in our ever more complex discursive environment.

The Roots of the Social and Political

Where Is the Line Between Social and Political Conflict?

There is one last conceptual knot to untangle before bringing this introduction to a close, and that has to do with the title of the book itself. What is it that makes social conflict one thing and political conflict another?

In the most reductive sense, we might say that social conflict is the sort of tension that is suitable for the sociologist to study, while political conflict is the domain of the political scientist. There was never really a time when this kind of collegial specialization made sense, and as the overarching argument of this introduction should make clear, it is not at all helpful today. There is a sociology of anything you like and a political science, too. As we have said, every church and sect of social science studies any old topic they like as well, framing it from what might be called a sociological perspective, a cultural studies perspective, a legal perspective, and so on.

There is no one way to answer the question of where to draw the line between the social and political, but all you need is to subtract one of these two from the book's title to convince yourself that there is a difference. A *Handbook of Social Conflict* or a *Handbook of Political Conflict* would feel very different if they were combined.

Root Narratives

To help us make sense of what precisely differentiates political from social conflict, we can turn to a recently developed theoretical framework called root narrative theory. Root narrative theory, recently the subject of a book by one of us, is based on the idea that any politically relevant argument about what should be done in public life has a narrative structure. This means that there is a protagonist and an antagonist, and there are stakes to the conflict between the two. These stakes are defined by social power, which in the story is assumed to have been abused by the antagonist. The goal of the story is to overcome or undo the abuse of power, which is seen as an injustice. If this is accomplished, there is a happy ending, which results in the realization of a political value.

Because the entire story is set in motion by an injustice performed by the antagonist abusing a specific form of social power, there are as many root narratives as there are forms of abusive social power. For various reasons based on comparative historical sociology, the theory has assumed that there are four forms of social power (military, political, economic, and status), thus comprising four root narratives. Accordingly, there are also four root political values. This is illustrated in Figure 1.1, which displays the form of abusive power wielded by the antagonist and the political value that results when that abusive power is overcome.

Armed with this theoretical nomenclature, we are now in a position to differentiate between social and political conflict. When an account of a given conflict focuses on the abuse of political power and the threat it poses to the value of individual liberty (bottom-right quadrant), this constitutes a political conflict proper, where political means the abuse of the mechanisms of government. We might also say that when an account tends to focus on the abuse of military power and the threat it poses to state security, this, too, is generally thought of as a form of political conflict, though this is more in the realm of international politics and international relations. Put simply, we can think of any account focusing on military and political power as being concerned with political conflict—the right side of the circle of social power.