

# Randall Collins: Conflict & Geopolitical Theory

Conflict theory has a long history in sociology. Without question, Karl Marx's work in the early to mid-1800s formed the initial statements of this perspective. As you know, Marx was centrally concerned with class and the dialectics of capitalism. He argued that capitalism would produce its own gravediggers by creating the conditions under which class consciousness and a failing economy would come into existence. In this juncture between structure and class-based group experience, the working class revolution would take place.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Max Weber formulated a response to Marx's theory. Weber saw that conflict didn't overwhelmingly involve the economy, but that the state and economy together set up conditions for conflict. Of central importance to Weber's scheme is the notion of legitimation. All systems of oppression must be legitimated in order to function. Thus, one of the critical issues in the question of conflict is legitimation. Weber also saw that class is more complex than Marx initially supposed, and that there are other factors that contribute to social inequality, most notably status and party (or power).

Since that time a number of efforts have been made to combine different elements from one or both of these theorists to understand conflict. One of the most notable efforts in this vein is that of Randall Collins. In 1975 Collins published *Conflict Sociology*. His goal in the book was to draw together all that sociology had learned about conflict and to scientifically state the theories in formal propositions and hypotheses. The end result is a book that contains hundreds upon hundreds of such statements. Without a doubt this book represents the most systematic effort ever under taken to scientifically explain conflict.

My reason for beginning this *Web Byte* with an academic review isn't to heap praises on Collins. But, rather, I want to contextualize what you're about to read. In 1993, Collins reduced the hundreds of theoretical statements from his 1975 work to just "four main points of conflict theory" (p. 289). Anytime a theorist does something like this, the end statement is theoretically powerful. In essence what Collins is saying is that most of what we know about conflict can be boiled down to these four points.

## Conflict & Emotion

To get to this kind of statement, Collins (1975) draws on the work of Weber, Durkheim, and Goffman to argue that symbolic goods and emotional solidarity are among the "main weapons used in conflict" (p. 59). This is a unique and powerful addition to the conflict perspective. Most conflict theories are oriented toward the macro-level. Stratification is generally understood as operating through oppressive structures that limit access and

choices (the idea of the “glass ceiling” is a good example); and power is conceived of as working coercively through the control of material resources and methods of social control. Collins, on the other hand, lets us see that the conflict around stratified resources has a strong symbolic character. Resources aren’t simply material. Both stratification and conflict require symbolic supplies and emotional investment in order to work. Collins also attunes us to a different side of conflict. Conflict doesn’t just happen between warring factions. Conflict is dependent upon and occurs in subtle forms within the realm of face-to-face interactions and rituals. Collins also sensitizes us to a different mode of conflict: the internalization of symbolic meanings expressed through belief in accepted legitimations.

## Four Main Points in Conflict Sociology

*One: the unequal distribution of each scarce resource produces potential conflict between those who control it and those who don’t.*

The basic outlines of the three types of scarce resources are given by Weber: economic resources, which may be broadly understood as all material conditions; power resources, which are best understood as social positions within control or organizational networks; status or cultural resources, which Collins understands as control over the rituals that produce solidarity and group symbols.

*Two: potential conflicts become actual conflicts to the degree that opposing groups become mobilized.*

There are at least two main areas of mobilization: The first is emotional, moral, and symbolic mobilization. The prime ingredient here is collective rituals. This is one of Collins’s main contributions to conflict theory. Groups don’t simply need material goods to wage a battle; there are also clear emotional and symbolic goods. As Durkheim says (1912/1995), “we become capable to feelings and conduct of which we are incapable when left to our individual resources” (p. 212). The more a group is able to physically gather together, create boundaries for ritual practice, share a common focus of attention, and common emotional mood (see Chapter 5), the more group members will

1. Have a strong and explicit sense of group identity
2. Have a worldview that polarizes the world into two camps (in-group and out-group)
3. Be able to perceive their beliefs as morally right
4. Be charged up with the necessary emotional energy to make sacrifices for the group and cause

The second main area for mobilization concerns the material resources for organizing. Material mobilization includes such things as communication and transportation technologies, material and monetary supplies to sustain the members while in conflict, weapons (if the conflict is military), and sheer numbers of people. While this area is pretty obvious, the ability to *mobilize* material resources is a key issue in geopolitical theory, which we consider in the last part of this *Web Byte*.

There are a couple of corollaries or consequences that follow these propositions. If there are two areas of mobilization, then there are two ways in which a party can win or lose a conflict. The material resources are fairly obvious. Material resources get used up during conflicts. People die, weapons are spent, communication and transportation technologies are used up, break down, or are destroyed, and so on. A conflict outcome,

then, is dependant not only upon who has the greatest resources at the beginning of a war, but also upon who can replenish these supplies.

A group can also win by generating higher levels of ritual solidarity as compared to their enemies. Collins gives the example of Martin Luther King. King obviously had fewer material resources than the then ruling establishment, but the civil rights movement was able to create higher levels of ritualized energy and was able to generate broad-based symbolic, moral appeal. Of course, a group can also lose the conflict if they are unable to renew the necessary emotional energies. Emotional energy and all the things that go with it—motivation, feelings of morality, righteous indignation, willingness to sacrifice, group identity, and so on—have a decay factor.

Symbols and ideas aren't themselves sacred or moral, nor do they actually "carry" sacredness or morality, they only act as prompts to evoke these emotions in people. As we noted earlier, people are the carriers of emotional energy. It is necessary, then to renew the collective effervescence associated with the symbol, moral, or group identity. If collective rituals aren't continually performed, people will become discouraged, lose their motivation, will entertain alternative views of meaning and reality, and become incapable of making the necessary sacrifices.

*Three: conflict engenders subsequent conflict.*

In order to activate a potential conflict, parties must have some sense of moral rightness. Groups have a difficult time waging war simply on utilitarian grounds. We have to have some sense of moral superiority, some reason that extends beyond the control of oil or other material good. As a result, conflicts that are highly mobilized tend to have parties that engage in the "ritualized exchange of atrocities." This is, as Collins says, the negative face of social solidarity. This is a somewhat difficult subject to illustrate for you, because if you hold to or believe in one side in a conflict, its definition of atrocities or terrorism will seem morally right. The trick is to see and understand that there has never been a group that has entered into a conflict knowing or feeling that they are wrong. For instance, the people who flew the airplanes into the World Trade Center felt morally justified doing so.

We can think of many, many examples from around the world, such as the Croats and Serbs, and the Irish Catholics and Protestants. The history of the United States is filled with such illustrations. For example, there is still debate concerning the reasons and justifiability of the use of nuclear weapons during WWII. Whatever side of the debate people take, it is undeniable that retribution was and is part of the justification. As President Truman (1945a, 1945b) said,

The Japanese began the war from the air at Pearl Harbor. They have been repaid many fold. And the end is not yet. With this bomb we have now added a new and revolutionary increase in destruction .... Having found the bomb we have used it. We have used it against those who attacked us without warning at Pearl Harbor, against those who have starved and beaten and executed American prisoners of war, against those who have abandoned all pretense of obeying international laws of warfare.

In addition to satiating righteous indignation and affirming social solidarity, ritualized retributions are used to garner support. We can see this clearly in the United States' use of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, Israel's use of the holocaust, the antiabortionists' conceptualization of abortion as murder, and the various civil rights groups use of past atrocities. Atrocities thus become a symbolic resource that can be used to sway public opinion and create coalitions.

*Four: conflicts diminish as resources for mobilization are used up.*

Just as there are two main areas of conflict mobilization, there are two fronts where demobilization occurs. For intense conflicts, emotional resources tend to be important in the short-run, but in the long-run material resources are the key factors. Many times the outcome of a war is determined by the relative balance of resources. Collins gives us two corollaries. One, milder forms of conflict tend to go on for longer periods of time than more intense ones. Fewer resources are used and they are more easily renewed. This is one reason why terrorism and guerilla warfare tend to go on almost indefinitely. Civil rights and relatively peaceful political movements can be carried out for extended periods as well. Two, relatively mild forms of conflict tend to deescalate due to bureaucratization. Bureaucracies are quite good at co-optation. To co-opt means to take something in and make it part of the group, which on the surface might sound like a good thing. But because bureaucracies are value and emotion free, there is a tendency to down play differences and render them impotent. For example, one of the things that our society has done with race and gender movements is to give them official status in the university. One can now get a degree in race or gender relations. Inequality is something we now study, rather than the focus of social movements. In this sense, these movements have been co-opted. "This is one of the unwelcome lessons of the sociology of conflict. The result of conflict is never the utopia envisioned in the moments of intense ideological mobilization; there are hard-won gains, usually embedded in an expanded bureaucratic shell" (Collins, 1993, p. 296).

The second front where conflicts may be lost is deescalation of ritual solidarity. A conflict group must periodically gather to renew or create the emotional energy necessary to sustain a fight. One of the interesting things this implies is that the intensity of conflicts will vary by focus of attention. Conflict that is multifocused will tend not to be able to generate high levels of emotional energy. The conflict over civil rights in the United States is just such a case. The civil rights movement has splintered because the idea of civil rights isn't held by everyone involved as a universal moral. That is, the groups involved don't focus on civil rights *per se*; they focus on civil rights for their group. For example, there are those working for the equal rights of African Americans who would deny those same rights to homosexuals.

## **Geopolitics**

There are two things that I want to point out before we consider geopolitical theory. The first is that geopolitical processes happen over the long-run. These forces take time to build up and aren't readily apparent, especially to most of us living in the United States. In this country we have difficulty thinking in the long-term. We are focused on the individual and immediate gratification, and even the economic planning that is done is oriented toward short-term portfolio management. Geopolitical theory is sociology in the long-run. It explains how nations grow and die. The processes and dynamics can't be seen by just looking at our daily concerns. We have to rise above our self and look historically.

The second thing I want to point out is that geopolitical theory focuses on the state rather than the economy. Generally speaking, world-systems theories, like that of Immanuel Wallerstein (Chapter 9), focus on the economy. Collins understands the world system in more Weberian terms, where the nation-state is the key actor on the world stage. Nation-states are relatively recent inventions. Up until the sixteenth century the world was not organized in terms of nation-states. People were generally organized ethnically with fairly fluid territorial limits, as with feudalism. Feudalistic states were based on land stewardship established through the relation of lord to vassal. Its chief

characteristics were homage, the service of tenants under arms and in court, wardship, and forfeiture. A nation-state, on the other hand, is a collective that occupies a specific territory, shares a common history and identity, is based on free-labor, and sees itself as sharing a common fate.

## The State

In Weberian terms, the state is defined as exercising a monopoly over the legitimate use of force within and because of a specific geographic territory. First and foremost, nation-states have a monopoly on force. In fact, one of the main impetuses behind the nation is the ability to regularly tax people for the purpose of creating a standing army. Previously, armies were occasional things that were gathered to fight specific wars. A standing army is one that is continually on standby; it is ready to fight at a moment's notice.

Notice that nation-states are organized around the *legitimate* use of power. Thinking about power in terms of legitimacy brings in cultural and ritual elements. If power is defined as the ability to get people to do what you want, then legitimacy is defined in terms of the *willingness* of people to do what you want. In order for any system of domination to work, people must believe in it. Part of the reason behind this need is the cost involved in the use of power. If people don't believe in authority to some degree, they will have to be forced to comply through coercive power. The use of coercive power requires high levels of external social control mechanisms, such as monitoring (you have to be able to watch and see if people are conforming) and force (because they won't do it willingly). To maintain a system of domination not based on legitimacy costs a great deal in terms of technology, money, and manpower. Additionally, people generally respond in the long-run to the use of coercion by either rebelling or giving up—the end result is thus contrary to the desired goal. Authority and legitimacy, on the other hand, imply the ability to require performance that is based upon the performer's belief in the rightness of the system.

With nation-states there is an interesting relationship between force and legitimacy. According to Collins (1986), this legitimacy is a special kind of emotion: it's "the emotion that individuals feel when facing the threat of death in the company of others" (p. 156). Legitimacy isn't something that is the direct result of socialization, though it plays a part. Rather, legitimacy is active; it ebbs and flows and is stronger at some times than others—people feel more or less patriotic depending on a number of factors, most notably ritual performance. The governments of nation-states are painfully aware of the active nature of legitimacy. Legitimacy provides the government's right to rule. Though also associated with economic prosperity and mass education, nationalism, the nation-state's particular kind of legitimacy, is dependent upon a common feeling that is most strongly associated with ritualized interactions performed in response to perceived threat. This threat can be internal, as in the case of minority group uprisings, crime, and deviance, but it is most strongly associated with externally produced threat and shock.

The other defining feature of the nation-state is the control of a specific geographic territory. One of the reasons that a standing army came about was to defend a specific territory. As humans first became settled due to agriculture, it became increasingly necessary to defend the territory and internally organize a population that was increasing in both size and diversity. The geographic contours of this territory are extremely important for Collins, both in terms of geopolitical theory and his micro-macro link. Collins (1987) argues that the idea of property "upholds the macroworld as a social structure" (p. 204). The reason behind this is that property is the fundamental backdrop against which all interaction rituals are produced. Further, geographic space is

not simply the arena in which interactions take place; it is one of the fundamental elements over which people struggle for control, thus making space a strong ritual focus of attention. Thus, on one level, the explicitness and increased size of the territories associated with nation-states have important implications for the production of interaction ritual chains and macro-level phenomena in general.

## Geopolitical Dynamics

Territory is also important because specific geopolitical issues are linked to it. All forms of political organization come and go, including nation-states. Nations are born and nations die. Sociology in the long-run ought to explain—and predict, if it is scientific—the life course of a nation. The geopolitical factors that predict and explain the rise and fall of nations are linked to territory. There are two territorial factors: heartland and marchland advantages. *Heartland advantage* is defined in terms of the size of the territory, which is linked to the level of natural resources and population size. The logic here is simple. Larger and wealthier territories can sustain larger populations that in turn provide the necessary tax base and manpower for a large military. Larger nations can have larger armies and will defeat smaller nations and armies. *Marchland advantage* is defined in terms of a nation's borders: nation-states with fewer enemies on their immediate borders will be stronger than other nations with similar heartland advantage. Marchland nations are geographically peripheral; they are not centered in the midst of other nations.

Taken together we can see that larger, more powerful states have a cumulative resource advantage: nations with both heartland and marchland advantage will tend to grow cumulatively over time; and the neighbors of such nations will tend to diminish. Eventually, as smaller nations are annexed, larger nations confront one another in a “showdown” war, unless a natural barrier exists (such as an ocean). Natural barriers form a buffer between powerful states and will bring a stable balance of power. On the other hand, nations that are geographically central and have multisided borders will tend to experience internal political schisms and conflict that can lead to long-term fragmentation.

The key to geopolitical theory and the demise of heartland/marchland nations is *overexpansion*. A nation can overextend itself materially and culturally. One of the important features of warfare is the cost involved with keeping an army supplied. The further away an army has to go to fight, the greater the costs involved in transporting goods and services to them. This issue becomes important as the size of the army increases past the point where it can forage or live off the land. A critical point is reached when a nation tries to support an army that is more than one heartland away (if there is another nation or more in between the two warring factions). A nation-state can also overextend itself culturally. Remember that legitimacy is a cultural good. The further a nation moves away from its ethnic base, the more its legitimacy is strained. In other words, as a nation increases its social diversity there is an increase in the number and extent of tension points. There are more areas of potential disagreement within a diverse population rather than a homogeneous population, especially if other ethnic groups are brought into society through warfare or other measures of forced annexation.

Collins gives us an example of these geopolitical forces in the case of the USSR. On Christmas day in 1991, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic officially collapsed. Five years prior, Collins (1986, pp. 186 – 209) published a book with a chapter entitled “The future decline of the Russian Empire.” Collins's prediction of the fall of the USSR was based on geopolitical theory. The historical expansion of Russia illustrates the first two principles of geopolitical theory.

The expansion began with Moscow, a small state with a marchland advantage. Fighting fragmented rivals, Moscow made slow cumulative growth. By 1520, Moscow had annexed all of ethnic Russia. By the late 1700s, Russia had expanded across Siberia and the Southern Steppes and was a strong military power in Europe. Russia further expanded by taking advantage of Napoleon's wars, the fall of the Ottoman Empire, and China's prolonged civil wars—this further expansion was based on geopolitical factors. In the end, the USSR was the largest country on the globe, consisting of 15 soviet socialist republics whose territories reached from the Baltic and Black seas to the Pacific Ocean, an area of 8,649,512 square miles, eleven time zones, and, most importantly, sharing common boundaries with six European countries and six Asian countries.

Knowing geopolitical issues, the problems facing the USSR are obvious. The nation was overextended both culturally and economically. It no longer held heartland advantage: in terms of total population, the enemies of the USSR outnumbered them 3.5 to 1; and in terms of economic resources, it was 4.6 to 1. Additionally, because of its successful expansion, the USSR no longer had a marchland advantage. It had done away with all weak buffer states and only faced powerful enemy nations in all directions. Further, the USSR had to exert militarily control over its Eastern European satellites, which were two and three times removed from the heartland. All told, it had to defend borders totally 58,000 kilometers, or over 36,000 miles. Additionally, the USSR contained at least 120 different ethnic groups. As Collins (1986) projected, "if Russia has shifted from a marchland to an interior position, it may be expected that in the long-term future Russia will fragment into successively smaller states" (p. 196).

## Summary

- In order for conflict to become overt, people must become mobilized through the material resources for organizing, and they must be emotionally motivated and sustained, feel moral justification, and they must be symbolically focused and united. Once conflict begins, it tends to reproduce itself through a ritualized exchange of atrocities. The back and forth exchange of atrocities reproduces and boosts emotional motivation and moral justification, and it creates further representative symbols for additional ritual performances. After time, conflicts are won or lost primarily as the two different kinds of resources are gained or lost.
- Nation-states are based on the legitimate use of force and territorial boundaries. Legitimacy is a product of ritual performance. The rituals that produce nationalism, the nation-states specific form of legitimacy, occur most frequently in response to the perception of threat. Threat can come from outside, as from other nations, or inside, as with social movements. Because nationalism, as with all forms of emotional energy, has a natural decay factor, it is in the government's best interest to keep the perception of threat somewhat high.
- The other defining feature of nation-states is territory, and territory, like legitimacy, carries its own set of influences, specifically heartland and marchland advantages. Heartland advantages concern material resources: natural resources, population size, and tax base. Marchland advantage is an effect of national boundaries and the number and distance from enemy territories. The key variable in geopolitical theory is overexpansion, a condition where a nation overextends its reach materially (supporting armies too far from the heartland) and culturally (controlling too diverse a population).

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