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A MICRO LEVEL ANALYSIS
OF VIOLENT CONFLICT

Conflict as Closure

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Michalis Lianos

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For further information, please contact:

MICROCON: A Micro Level Analysis of Violent Conflict, Institute of Development Studies
at the University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9RE

Tel: +44 (0)1273 872891

Email: info@microconflict.eu

Web: www.microconflict.eu

Conflict as Closure

Michalis Lianos¹

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Abstract: How is violent conflict socially possible? To answer this question, the paper discusses conflict in terms of sociality and develops an angle on the process of sociocultural “closure” that is necessary for any representation of radical polarisation. Social uncertainty is viewed as a regulator of tendencies towards closure, while institutions are understood in terms of promoting individual competition and averting polarisation. By looking at closure against the background of the distinction between ‘modern’ and ‘developing’ societies, it becomes clearer that the potential for closure in different socioeconomic conditions differs significantly. Depending on the extent and density of an institutional web of infrastructure, individualist perceptions of one’s society and one’s future make collective polarisation unlikely. Conflict presupposes closure and closure presupposes a collectivity that can become increasingly centripetal in conditions of uncertainty. Multiple options and choices (or the illusion that they exist) counter that tendency and provide peaceful, albeit not socially just, alternatives. A theoretical scheme for the sociological conception of this dynamics is proposed.

¹ Professor of Sociology, University of Rouen – Haute Normandie

Introduction

Conflict surrounds us in its many forms. From office politics to genocide, it is an identifiable aspect of human behaviour. It can involve individuals, groups, crowds or masses; be violent or not; seem reasonable or completely irrational; concern material resources and interests or collective identities and abstract ideas; follow ethnic, religious, political or class lines. –Yet, it is recognised as a single phenomenon across cultures and eras. What makes that diverse and timeless process a specific social phenomenon? How do we safely categorise it as “conflict”?

My purpose here is to bring together some elements that determine conflict as a distinct process, separate from other forms of antagonism, such as competition, emulation or mere rivalry². We often take conflict to be a “breakdown” of existing social order, an anomaly in an otherwise peaceful world. This is of course a misconception, for any persistent social form should not be explained away as a disruption of other social forms³. Conflict is a regular social process and should be seen as such.

² My interest here differs from that of authors who define conflict as a continuous line expressing antagonism and divergence, e.g. Simmel or Coser. Of course this is not to argue that this continuity is untrue but to determine points and mechanisms of qualitative transformation of collective behaviour which lead to “open conflict” and, following that, to violence or threat of violence. At the same time, I should also clarify that *I look at these mechanisms here from a point of view of developments in sociality*. The empirical consequences that these mechanisms may have for conflict resolution are to be dealt with separately.

³ Simmel’s observations in this matter seem to be as interesting as they were a century ago (1904: 492): “That which was negative and dualistic may, after deduction of its destructive action in particular relationships, on the whole, play an entirely positive role. This visibly appears especially in those instances where the social structure is characterized by exactness and carefully conserved purity of social divisions and gradations, For instance, the social system of India rests not only upon the hierarchy of the castes, but also directly upon their reciprocal repulsion. Enmities not merely prevent gradual disappearance of the boundaries within the society-and for this reason these enmities may be consciously promoted, as guarantee of the existing social constitution-but more than this the enmities are directly productive sociologically. They give classes and personalities their position toward each other, which they would not have found if these objective *causes* of hostility had been present and effective in precisely the same way, but had not been accompanied by the feeling of enmity. It is by no means certain that a secure and complete community life would always result if these energies should disappear which, looked at in detail, seem repulsive and destructive, just as a qualitatively unchanged and richer property results when unproductive elements disappear; but there would ensue rather a condition as changed and often as unrealizable, as after the elimination of the forces of co-operation-sympathy, assistance, harmony of interests.” See also Simmel 1971: 70ff.

Becoming “we”

There are many ways to form collective social entities. Nations could not have been built in the same way as nomadic groups nor sects in the same way as sports clubs. Sociality is limitless in its variations but accurate in its outcome. It leads to belonging, a universal characteristic projected upon the members of a collectivity (Pólos et al. 2002). There is nothing like conflict to determine, delineate and accentuate the sense of belonging. That is why conflict must be a matter of parties supporting different outcomes, otherwise it is mere disagreement. In fact, conflict could be defined as a line of division that cannot be crossed without betraying one’s belonging. This is precisely a crucial point in conflict dynamics⁴. The capacity to polarise reality into two, or more, incompatible universes is not a given condition. Only some disagreements generate conflict and few conflicts lead to collective violence. Little is known of the processes via which it is impossible to proceed with one’s life because others are such an obstacle that one needs to combat them, so as to neutralise or eliminate them.

Firstly, this is a collective social process rather than an individual condition. Even when it happens between two neighbours disputing a piece of land, it involves cultural norms and collective opinion. Before construing a neighbour’s act as usurpation, a collective representation of what is just must exist. *Conflict is not mere predatory behaviour*, it is hostile action that appears justified to those who undertake it. That justification can underlie both offensive and defensive behaviour (“we” attack “them” because “they” committed X offence against “us”; “we” defend ourselves because “they” attacked “us” first). The justification of hostility is always based on values, even when material interests (e.g. looting) are flagrant parts of the motivation behind aggression. This is true to the point where Black proposes to look at almost all criminal violence as ‘moralistic’ behaviour (Black 1998). It is certainly

⁴ As a field report puts it; “[...] Political extremism and the Manichean nature of many of its ideological currents stand in direct opposition to the bargaining and accommodation inherent to democratic processes. Countries undergoing democratization and liberalization are especially vulnerable here. Bringing extremist protagonists into the fold of a comprehensive reform effort may prove complex, exhausting and, at the end of the day, futile or counter-productive. Excluding extremists, however, might hand them exactly the legitimacy they need to gather popular support for the use of violence. Political violence, on the other hand, being a threat to the life and well-being of every citizen, raises the stakes for political decision-makers and engaged citizens. By intimidating and polarizing the public, political violence saps the will to reform and undermines civil society’s engagement. As violent attacks bring greater risks to both lives and resources, consensus-building grows increasingly difficult for advocates of reform” (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2006:7).

impossible to conduct conflict as a process pursuing objectives that are not related to any collectively observed values; negotiation via likely costs and benefits would otherwise suffice. This is why conflicts are neither rational nor irrational, but they combine these aspects at each level of interaction between the parties, as it happens with any other social process.

Value-based polarisation is an indispensable part of the dynamics of conflict. This is not, however, a self-evident postulate. It raises a set of questions. For example, why is the organisation of hostile actions not enough to generate aggression, particularly in conditions where a part of a society keeps a permanent arm of aggression, i.e. an army, ready to fight? Why do the parties turn towards an absolute observation of their own values, what we often call “radicalisation”, while in time of peace that does not appear to be necessary? Why do people tend to demand from each other a specific positioning regarding the conflict, i.e. “for” or “against” “us”? Why do people and groups endanger their lives and livelihoods towards an objective that is often abstract and, at any rate, much less significant than what they are willing to risk? To answer these questions we need to look at the effects produced by the dynamics of polarisation. We often discuss the condition that precedes a conflict in terms of “tension” (Justino, Microcon Working Paper 1: 18). Albeit necessary, tension is not sufficient to generate that binary polarisation that allows for conflict. It is a rather diffuse condition with opinions and actions concentrating on a spectrum of disagreement that leaves enough space for doubt, uncertainty and inertia. From an operational point of view, this means that individuals and groups still hold independent opinions that may converge, often to a high degree. Yet, at this stage converging individuals and groups are not determined by their opinion on that matter, and their belonging to a greater social entity (society, nation, ethnicity, religion, political party or sports club) does not depend on that opinion. On the contrary, it is perfectly possible to belong without holding extreme views and even while expressing opinions that promote negotiation and compromise. At this stage, the social bond operates ‘as usual’, that is, via the continuous negotiation of norms and values within a more or less supple framework bequeathed by history. In these conditions, conflict is often a projection that most actors participating in that tension wish to avoid while at the same time, they keep their diverging representations of what is just. That condition may last for generations without leading to a conflict. Views of various intensities are expressed, even actions of open hostility may take place, but contact between the parties is maintained, negotiation remains possible and peace is preserved, albeit with some sense of unease and fragility.

At that stage the social bond remains determined by the multiplicity of parameters that give it a high complexity. The margin of negotiation with dominant values and norms continues to exist and a certain degree of deviance with regard to one or another norm is in practice tolerated. This may include social rule-breaking by young people, testing the limits of established practices, or even a certain amount of non-cooperation with dominant social patterns, e.g. what we understand as ‘incivility’ in postindustrial societies. Then, in some cases, a precipitated change happens. That is what conflict experts refer to as a “trigger”. Discourses change to become particularly radical, people feel that a new condition is developing, their options become suddenly more limited and abstract questions start turning into demands for concrete decisions. Instead of thinking about what could be a just negotiated solution people now need to think if they are willing to fight or flee. How does that change come about? As a Ukrainian proverb puts it “When the flag is unfurled, all reason is in the trumpet”. But what makes the flag unfurl?

Conflict experts know that conditions favouring conflict may exist for long without ending in conflict and, inversely, in some cases things move very fast from peace to tension and to violent conflict (Roy, Microcon Working Paper: 15). Instead of trying to predict where this will happen, we may usefully ask ourselves *what* in fact happens. In a nutshell, what happens is a “closure” of the spectrum across which the social bond organises itself. Whilst many criteria and several degrees of conformity determine social belonging on one instant, a single criterion and a given degree of conformity determine on the next instant. Who “we” are changes rapidly according to a binary division which polarises the world into “us” and “them”. Suppose that two collectivities, the As and the Bs reach that stage. Here is a hypothetical map of prescribed beliefs as part of a dynamics of conflict.

What As must conform to	<p>As, according to themselves, are: Members of X (tribe, ethnicity, religion, race) Europeans Civilised Honest Rich Generous to Bs Exploited by Bs</p>	<p>Bs, according to As, are: Members of Y (tribe, ethnicity, religion, race) Asians Uncivilised Treacherous Corrupt Poor Interested and malevolent Greedy Duped by their leaders</p>	<p>Bs think that As are: Infidels Pigs Thiefs Cruel Homosexuals Cowards Uncivilised Contemptuous Worthy of elimination</p>
	<p>As, according to themselves, are not: Atheists Homosexuals Anarchists Black Soft Cowards</p>	<p>Bs, according to As, are not: Capable of understanding- -civilisation -human rights -proper organisation -economic growth Peaceful Willing to negotiate within reason</p>	<p>Bs think that As are not: Beings whose life is worth as much as the life of Bs Capable of considering Bs as fully human</p>
What Bs must conform to	<p>Bs, according to themselves, are: Members of X (tribe, ethnicity, religion, race) Proud Warriors Civilised Generous to As Exploited by As</p>	<p>As, according to Bs, are: Members of Y (tribe, ethnicity, religion, race) Uncivilised Immoral Cowards Homosexuals Disrespectful Arrogant</p>	<p>As think that Bs are: Inferior Expendable Uncivilised Black Handy to exploit</p>
	<p>Bs, according to themselves, are not: Disbelievers Homosexuals Anarchists Black Cowards</p>	<p>As, according to Bs, are not: Honest Direct Generous Trustworthy Warriors</p>	<p>As think that Bs are not: Capable of civilisation Intelligent Capable of respect towards women Organised Strong</p>
What both As and Bs must conform to	<p>As and Bs are mutually exclusive</p>		

What is significant here are not the beliefs as such but the organisation of these beliefs. As and Bs become incompatible in their existence to the point where they believe that their existence is mutually threatened. The fact that they have coexisted without conflict so far is irrationally eliminated in order to allow for adequate polarisation. However, this is not enough as such to generate conflict, even less so violent conflict. The most important part of the table is the left-hand side column, which we can call the criterion of conformity or social control. What this tells us is that the negotiable spectrum of the social bond has become very narrow. Instead of the multiplicity of parameters that could be considered in terms of belonging to the collectivity, now a single parameter is sufficient to eliminate belonging. Those previously As that do not conform to what is asked of them with regard to Bs, will soon not be considered 'real' As. And if they put their deviant beliefs into practice, then they will be considered traitors and treated as such. In fact, this scheme of conformity tells us that belonging to As depends on holding or accepting a set of beliefs on Bs, and vice versa. In other words, *enmity becomes the main criterion of belonging*. This is invariably the outcome of a process leading to conflict. The social bond loses its elasticity and its polysemy and demands from each individual a specific type of conformity in order to keep belonging to his or her collectivity. From a structural point of view, the phenomenon can be described as a 'closure' of the sociocultural system. Men, women and even children find themselves bound by a dominant set of two ultimate mental outcomes (for or against) and very limited practical possibilities (fight or flee). The fulcrum of conflict dynamics is that closure of otherwise open or relatively flexible systems towards a tunnel vision at the end of which is the enemy.

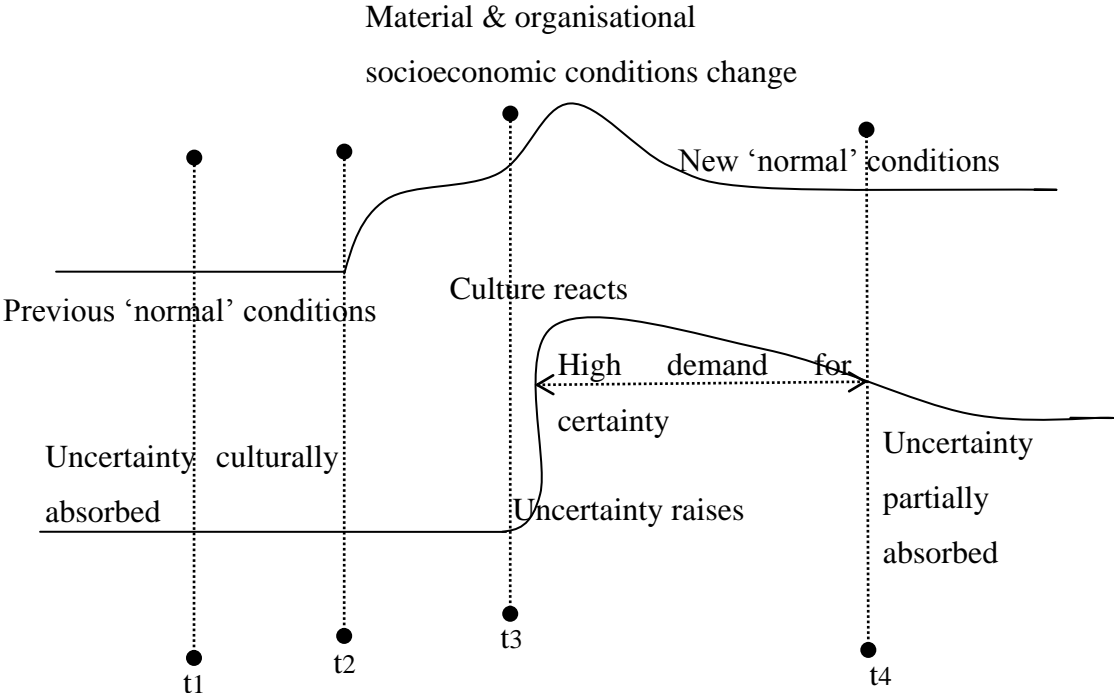
Openness and Closure

Societies both generate and absorb uncertainty. Depending on the condition of the social bond, i.e. the type of sociality that each society has, uncertainties can be of apparently different nature. From weather conditions and their effects on harvest to the labour market and its effects on a person's livelihood, uncertainties continuously open up possibilities that affect social relations. In less planned and programmed settings, what we often call 'traditional' societies, uncertainties are absorbed through belief systems and community interdependence. People take, so to speak, uncertainties for granted and count on their social structure so that they react collectively and come out of a predicament or that they accept a loss and continue (Haram & Bawa Yamba 2009; Ainslie 2005; Herzfeld 2001: 133; van den Boss et al. 2005). In modern societies, uncertainties have been increasingly processed as targets of specific

systems that are supposed to make the world certain and reliable. Particularly in late modernity, intolerance to uncertainty has drastically increased at the same pace as people cannot depend on each other to overcome or accept a loss. Planning, preparation and insurance are supposed to be at the disposal of the isolated late modern individual who now bears full responsibility for her trajectory of life. While the difference of these two socialities produces concrete effects as we will see, they both possess a degree of openness with regard to possible outcomes for social participants, taken either individually or collectively. In traditional settings, one does not know what the developments will be for the whole community but trusts that his place will remain stable within that community. In late modern settings, one trusts that the society will continue in the same way but does not know what his place will be within society.

Uncertainty is an excellent neutraliser of conflict because it does not allow for polarisation. When there are many possible outcomes of different nature, it is less likely or altogether impossible that a binary possibility for the future will be accepted. But this is so when uncertainty can be socially absorbed, i.e. when the demand for certainty does not become as intense as to affect culture in a way that compensates for an intolerable degree of uncertainty.

Fig.1: Dynamics of Onset of Conflict



Let us take the hypothetical example of a society that finds itself in a condition of great uncertainty, because it is going through an important change. Up to a point, the 'normal' mode of sociality will absorb the uncertainties that the change produces. But if the change surpasses a certain degree, then the culture of that society will prove inadequate to reassure social participants. A typical example is rapidly increasing wealth and individualisation, which leads to a spectacular reorganisation of 'traditional' values and norms around new modes of coexistence. For example, when bank loans to young couples replace dowries, cohabiting extended families become inevitably rarer and values of dynamic individual competitiveness replace respect for older generations. But when the change is quite destabilising, the demand for certainty might also radically increase. This is precisely the point where culture may turn towards 'closure', i.e. towards a representation of the future that limits possible outcomes and invites everyone to bear upon these outcomes. Instead of the famous Marxian "melting into air of all that is solid", a reverse cultural motion is possible whereby the solid is so needed so as to be produced via representations of the future. Through these representations a society tightens its ranks again into a coherent "we". These are the representations that we often describe as radical, authoritarian, ethnicist, nationalist, orthodox, etc., i.e. the representations that polarise the world and allow for conflict. When material openness becomes particularly high, cultural closure is likely to balance that and polarise representations, sometimes with devastating consequences.

Before turning to these consequences, let us look at another factor that seems to be particularly important for openness and closure of both material/organisational and cultural systems. It is well known that late modern societies are not as easy to radicalise along one single criterion of polarisation (Gat 2005; Azmanova 2010; Schneider & Esteban 2008; see also Collier and Hoeffler 2002: 34). This is not of course because late modernity is a superior humane culture that left conflict and violence behind it. Late modern societies keep strong armies and use them when their interests are at stake, even against much weaker adversaries. Having conducted the greatest genocides (against native Americans and against Jews, Roma and Sinti in Europe) and two World Wars, modern societies cannot look at themselves as inherently peaceful. Far from being able to claim moral superiority, the reason why contemporary Western societies are unlikely to produce closure is their accentuated individuality. Here is the link to low levels of conflict associated with postindustrial capitalism. In the simplest terms, capitalism produces options, real or imagined. At the same

time it distributes these options across a dense web of institutions and organisations and delivers them to each individual separately. As I have argued elsewhere (Lianos 2001: 173ff.), capitalism is the lowest common social denominator towards trumping community interdependence and moving human societies from the direct sociality of community settings to the institutional sociality of late modern conditions. That lack of social interdependence makes individual projections and aspirations possible, as individuals take for granted the efficient operation of the institutional web in late modern societies. Simply put, it is certain that, say, the transport or the multimedia sector of the market will keep on working in the future while it is not certain for each and every employee of those sectors that she will continue to be employed or even that she will continue to wish to be employed in the same sector. Seen from this angle, the closed system is the capitalist institutional web because it establishes the certainty of its continuation with specific outcomes. Paradoxically, however, that web generates openness in culture via individuality. Choices and options proliferate to the point where competition remains a standard internal characteristic of the system and can materialise among individual aims and objectives. There is no necessity, nor even likelihood, for the concentration of these objectives into foci of polarisation. People agree with regard to an issue, disagree on another and are indifferent to a third issue, so that they continuously represent their world as a large spectrum of possibilities that each individual chooses to pursue. The process of narrowing down these possibilities towards an incompatible coexistence of As and Bs is foreign to late capitalist culture. Other means need to be found in order to satisfy the high demand for certainty under these circumstances. Naturally, individuals seek to increase their certainty by reinforcing their personal socioeconomic position so long as the institutional web keeps delivering goods and services. Certainty has become a matter of investment, property, health and retirement plans rather than a matter of community and family links. Cultural closure is far away and violent conflict too. It would take a formidable, international breakdown of supply in goods and services to reverse that trend in late capitalist societies, which would mean material and organisational closure that would bring conditions close to the conditions of 'developing' societies.

This takes us to the possibility of looking at closure as a precondition of polarisation. The proposal that seems plausible is that only *combined material and cultural closure* brings about the necessary conditions for polarisation to emerge and prepare conflict. Otherwise, either material conditions or cultural parameters or both, will let tension off and defuse

attempts at polarisation. We can look at polarisation as the point in time where a closed culture meets closed material⁵ conditions and the demand for certainty is accentuated. These settings produce a very limited number of choices for groups and individuals and prepare them to make or accept clear collective decisions, rather than seek to develop isolated strategies. This is therefore the point where polarised representations of the future suit the socioeconomic conditions in order to associate limited practical choices with ideological positions proclaiming clear-cut rivalries.

The Role of Institutions

I use here a specific definition of institutions which includes all structures that mediate human sociality as third parties (Lianos op. cit.: 16; 32). In this sense a web research engine or an online socialising site is an institution, just like a ministry, a hospital, or even the local supermarket. Although their power varies, institutions determine, configure and often control how interactions take place within the field over which they exert their power. The main characteristic of institutions is that they influence sociality *as third parties*; that is, they have their own forms or agendas, interests and plans and mediate in human interaction accordingly. The local shop organises its space so that the flows of queuing move as fast as possible, just like the electricity company streamlines its procedures to avoid disruptions in the supply of current by monitoring our demand over the days of the week, and a search engine determines in its algorithms which associations of words are meaningful and in what sense. Less visibly, other, more ‘traditional’ meanings of institutions do exactly the same thing: they configure social reality into stable forms that bind their subjects as configurations of sociality that are external to the interacting parties. This is why marriage or friendship, for example, indicate given relationships whose configuration is recognised by all members of a society as such. Be they traditional or late modern, institutions fragment human sociality into forms that differentiate communities in various ways. Communities are divided, for instance, into kinships, families, workers, guardians of the established order, leaders, and, increasingly, clients and users of specific systems such as passengers, telephone callers, drivers, patients and so forth. As Haesler points out “[...] institutions should be understood as obstacles in the

⁵ I should remind that in this context “material” includes socioeconomic and organisational conditions.

first instance. They should be understood as third parties whose role is either to prevent fusion [in human relations] or to perpetuate incomplete relations.” (Haesler 2005) . Few forms of fusion are as strong as the togetherness that is generated within each party in a conflict. All institutional dimensions become rapidly and invariably subordinated to the overwhelming and all-encompassing dynamics of conflict, even when there is no ‘total war’ . For example, family subordinates itself to the conflict by supporting the young males in being courageous fighters for their party in the conflict. Sometimes this can be a value in itself as exemplified by the famous farewell of Spartan mothers when their sons left for war “Come back either with your shield or on your shield”⁶; either a fighter or dead. What is a job at time of peace, becomes a duty in time of conflict and that is why the general “morale” of the societies or communities engaged in conflict is so important. It diminishes differentiation and aligns everyone towards supporting his side.

Because they fragment sociality, institutions obstruct the dynamics of conflict. They open up possibilities in social forms that diminish polarisation. Let us take political civil war as an example. Before any dynamics of conflict seriously arises, right wing people can use the services of a communist cobbler and left wing people the services of a right wing grocer. In other words, “consumers” is a category that properly exists in its own right and follows the rules of its institutional configuration. It obeys criteria such as proximity, price, quality, speed of delivery etc., i.e. criteria that are internal to its own institutional configuration. Once the cultural system starts closing, the institutional aspect of the transaction contracts in favour of the community aspect of it. Togetherness trumps market efficiency and it suddenly is more important if one’s cobbler is a communist rather than a good cobbler. People look at the same choices that used to be banal with new eyes and it now becomes perfectly possible that buying a melon is a left or right wing act, an act of support or betrayal. The institutional lines disappear into their new role of vehicles of a superordinate binary culture made of “for” and “against” positions and acts.

The regression of institutions is the most telling sign of a conflict in the making. This is because the space claimed by community cultural proximity expresses itself via a demand for decisions. Where there was no question as to what buying a melon meant, now one is aware

⁶ Dropping one’s shield and abandoning fighting was the ultimate shame for a Spartan.

that it will be interpreted as a politically meaningful act. The question then arises forcefully: “where should I buy that melon?”, which now means “I must decide on whose side I am”. The distance supplied by institutional neutrality is now withdrawn. Everything has new meaning and all that was an exclusively market transaction now inexorably becomes a grave and conscious decision with very serious potential consequences. Although more visible in modern and late modern societies, this institutional regression is in the same way present in more ‘traditional’ societies. Family, for example, weakens in favour of overall cultural closure. A left wing cousin is either a positive marker of political identity or an embarrassment. “Disown or not disown?”, that is the question as the cultural environment contracts asking for decisions. Family is not any longer an institution strong enough to stem the questioning force of conflict dynamics. Like other institutional configurations, such as marriage, religion, neighbour relations, professional partnerships or merely doing business with someone, family links are not strong enough to justify neutrality, ambiguity or externality to conflict. On the contrary their importance is now inversely significant. “Coming from” a left or a right wing family may be incomparably more significant than having had a left or right wing grocer. Public and express forms of disowning may make a difference but suspicion will always persist. In a secret police classification system, for example, one may never be part of the trustworthy right-wingers unless all his family has been right wing for at least three generations (Samatas 2004: 30ff.).

Institutional regression can and often does include the institution of institutions, the state itself. The “weakness” of institutions is often considered as a favourable condition for conflict without adequate explanation. (For a series of critical angles see Tocci, Microcon Working Paper: 30; Cuestal & Murshed, Microcon Working Paper 8: 6; Murshed & Tadjoeeddin, Microcon Working Paper 2: 25; Justino, Microcon Working Paper 1: 10). A sense that ‘developing countries’ do not have powerful or efficient institutions casts a shade over their association with conflict. Like other aspects of a late modern gaze on developing countries, this is an association of differences with Western countries that comes to be seen as meaningful in itself. If these countries are poor, have weak institutions or little infrastructure, then that must also explain why they are conflict ridden. More careful examination of the facts, shows that conflict may be more likely as such societies get richer and, more generally

in transition periods⁷. Their institutions are in fact strong, for if those of the modern type are much weaker than in Western countries, the ‘traditional’ ones are much stronger. The reason must be found somewhere else why late modern institutions avert conflict more than ‘traditional’ institutions. In order to seriously look at the question, we must consider late modern societies to be as conflict prone as non-late modern societies.

‘Late modern’ versus ‘traditional’ settings

It is easy to observe that late modern societies produce much less material and cultural closure than other types of societies. For that reason, they are often portrayed as more tolerant, free, progressive, liberal or even humane. However, tensions are frequent and causes for dispute as easy to find as in other societies. Internationally, competition of geopolitical interests is permanent and nationally, political views are diversified and often organised around specific, clearly delineated foci of divergence. For example, it is often said among politicians and social scientists that we need an explanation why there is no violent conflict in Belgium these days. That sort of question can be asked for many, more or less late modern, countries where issues of competing identities and national minorities exist, e.g. the United Kingdom, France, Switzerland, Spain, Greece, Poland and even Romania and Hungary. Neither the ‘greed’ nor the ‘grievance’ hypothesis, nor any combination of both, seems to be relevant here and this is why the Collier et al. (2009) have moved towards the “feasibility” hypothesis, i.e. the opportunity for conflict and were obliged to represent differences in sociality via income. Less influential, aggrieved, minorities are financially strong enough to arm themselves and in some case oblige established states whose national identity they claim, to support and protect them after starting a conflict. In some cases, like in the Basque country or in Corsica, permanent, limited rebel violence has existed for decades but it does not generate the polarisation that we see in non-late modern societies. Even machine guns and bombs fail to bring cultural closure and can be portrayed as absurd expressions of marginal and dangerous extremist views. This is reliable historical evidence that social culture in late modern societies

⁷ For example, Justino found that “states with higher economic growth may expect to experience larger amounts of civil unrest” (Microcon Working Paper 3: 28); Cuestal & Murshed observe that transitions are important in terms of explaining conflict (Cuestal & Murshed, Microcon Working Paper 8: 8; see also Guichaoua, Microcon Working Paper 19: 10); a series of national cases is used to illustrate the link in Cawthra & Luckham 2003. For an argument on power transition see Geller 1992.

is particularly resistant to closure. That is not a matter of inherent peacefulness but a matter of social organisation since late modern societies do not easily turn into that superordinate communal “we” that conditions conflict. This is an apparent paradox since late modern societies are mass societies. A large amount of people lead similar lives in similar settings to the point where 70% among them have the feeling of belonging to an enormous “middle class” or “working class” in the sense that they are ‘normal people’ (Evans & Kelley 2004; 1995; Surridge 2007)⁸. However, the greatest part of this similarity has to do with the pursuit, expression and realisation of individual options. People resemble each other in that they consider themselves different. Like separate individuals who go to the supermarket and buy unique combinations of similar things, late modern subjects combine unique life trajectories using similar components provided by the institutional web. The building blocks of Educational qualifications, personal relations, working environments, leisure pursuits, career objectives and retirement plans are ever present concerns for all but individually and competitively pursued. It is precisely the efficient mediation of the institutional web which elevates individual differentiation to the ultimate competence and duty of the late modern subject. In this context, individuals use the resources provided by the institutional web to flee all sorts of community settings and obligations; for, communities are formidable generators of social control and demand strong conformity in order to allow belonging and to perpetuate their structure. This is why late modern societies are thought to lack values and coherent norms projected upon all their members. In fact, they share the values and norms of individuality, not in the historically liberal, modern sense of a legally sovereign individual, but in the sense of the practical multiple operator of the institutional web. There are two main ways in which this configuration hampers the probability of conflict. Firstly, it generates continuous uncertainty over life trajectories and individual social positions. Secondly, it breaks up all demands for certainty into projects of different direction and content. Let us see how these two dimensions operate.

Stratification is an important parameter in conflict. A great body of literature supports this intuitive position. From inequality within the same society (vertical inequality) to inequality across different groups and societies (horizontal inequality) it is thought that class division is

⁸ Albeit not a reliable indicator of class in sociological terms, self-reported class belonging is a strong indicator of the perception of one’s position in society, therefore a strong determinant of social culture.

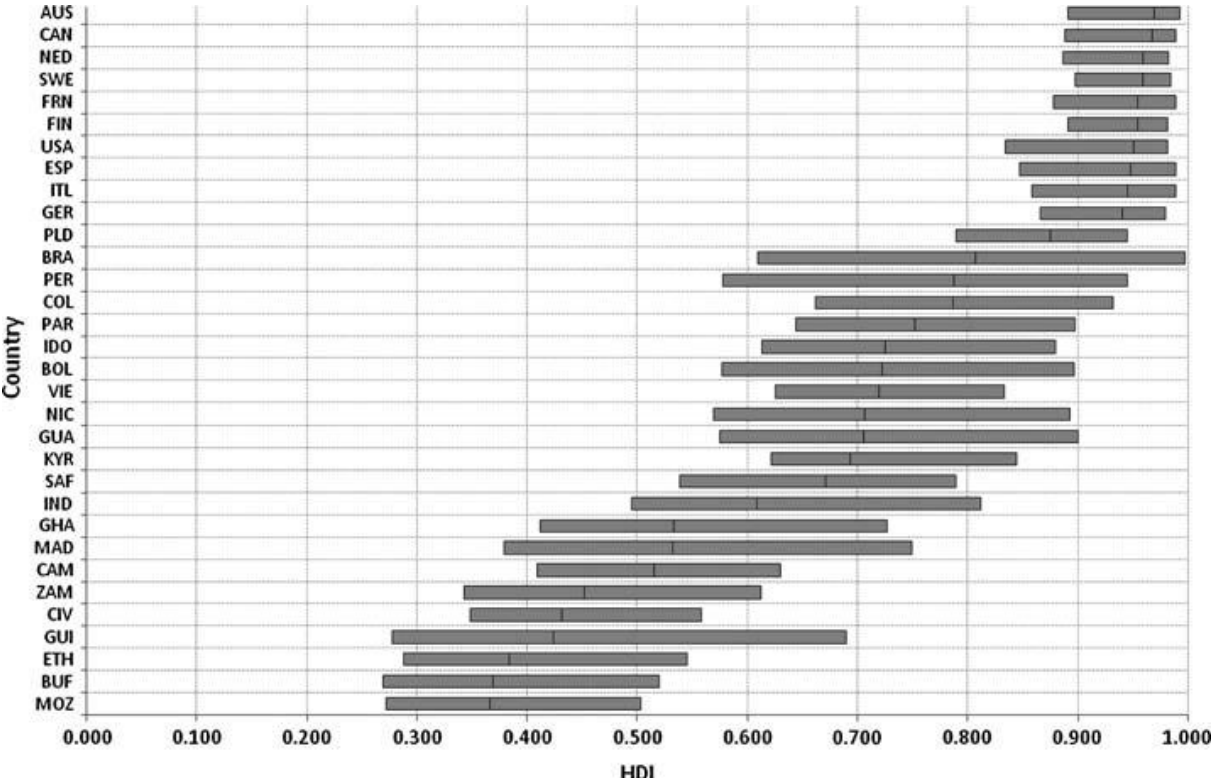
a significant aspect of conflict dynamics (Stewart, Microcon Working Paper 13). Although, how this happens is not established (Justino, Microcon Working Paper 1: 15-16) and there is controversy over the conditions that surround the link (Collier & Hoeffler 2002: 34; Stewart, Microcon Working Paper: 3; Grafton, Knowles, Owen 2004⁹), it is rather likely that a sense of injustice can be a powerful reinforcing or triggering factor in a pre-conflict condition. As Murshed & Tadjoeeddin put it: “Grievances and horizontal inequalities may, after all, be better at explaining why conflicts begin, but not necessarily why they persist. Neither the presence of greed or grievance is sufficient for the outbreak of violent conflict, something which requires institutional breakdown which we describe as the failure of the social contract” (Microcon Working Paper 2: 33).

There is no denying that late modern societies can contain immense concentrations of wealth in the hands of the few. However, “inequality in human development in high income countries is significantly lower than in middle and low income countries” (Grimm et al.: 204;

⁹ This is a particularly interesting analysis from a reverse point of view and brings longitudinal evidence that higher levels of social divergence are associated with both statistically and economically significantly lower levels of total factor productivity and per capita income.

see diagram below¹⁰). More importantly, the abundance of late modern societies is often systemic. Resources are increasingly accessed, not possessed. Wealth is largely a matter of participating in the function of a continuously working infrastructure that supplies a myriad of opportunities for all to see. Even social justice has its own powerful infrastructure with its transfers, benefits, tax credits, subsidies and compensations, its more or less inclusive access to basic healthcare and its thousands of social workers and other “social sector” jobs. This is why a new category of stratification, that of the excluded, has emerged in late modern societies. These people are usually, but not always, relatively poorer but they are most importantly for one reason or another unable to participate in the normally competitive access to resources. Surprisingly at first sight, these significant minorities have never formed the powerful social movement that one would expect from millions of educated people, possessing the precious postindustrial resources needed for organisation, i.e. information, communication (particularly at the time of the worldwide web) and available time (since they are often unemployed). What is more, these large aggrieved minorities are not repressed or even particularly policed; on the contrary, they are invited to “participate”. Any current understanding of conflict is inadequate before such a paradox. This is why closure is an

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interesting category to conceive of polarisation and conflict. Late modern societies have the greatest of difficulties to produce both material and cultural closure.

Uncertainty and the responsibility for building an adequate individual life course are two well identified characteristics of late modernity (Lianos et al. 2004; 2000; Beck 1992, Giddens 1991). Our view of conflict is incomplete until we understand how uncertainty operates in terms of openness and closure of social systems. Aspiration is a duty for late modern men and women (Lianos et al. 2004; Young 2007; Department of Work and Pensions 2006). Satisfaction with one's condition is tarnished as lack of ambition or complacency and the dynamics of social existence finds some stability only when hopeful effort is underway. That type of aspirational uncertainty, albeit tyrannical, is a wonderful machine of neutralising ideological, collective utopias (Mannheim 1956, Turner 2003, Levitas 2000: 204). As objectives are set, pursued and reached in terms of individual aspiration, collective utopias become redundant for the very reason that they are collective. For example, acquiring a university degree is rarely seen as an instance of a mass process that produces banal qualified workers and in some case unemployed people. It is rather the realisation of one's competitive potential, since the type and class of the degree are thought to prove determining for the competitive advantages that the new graduate may or may not possess against others. Aspirational uncertainty is a rationalised system of hope that presents the future to each individual as a completely open set of almost limitless possibilities. In order to simply exist and build a basic selfhood, late modern men and women *must believe in that openness*. This condition is highly effective in preventing any type of closure because believing in closure automatically means reducing one's idea of one's own potential and social worth. The demand for certainty remains cast in personal circumstances without ever merging into a shared, collective projection.

This is not to say that democratic capitalism is nothing but the sum of individual illusions. Contrary to appearances, late modern institutions are not at all weak; "in imposing order on the chaos of relations, institutions display that annoying tendency towards hegemony, which leads to a totalitarian order if pursued to its end" (Haesler 2005). They may seem weaker only because they cannot operate in a sovereign or assertive manner (Dubet 2002). But their role is not to impose a unified vision of a society under a state, as it was in modernity. It is to penetrate society in all its expressions and interactions and ensure that their mediation is

legitimate, continuously present and reasonably efficient. Seen from a structural point of view, they compete and win against direct sociality links by making them redundant and, eventually, leading them to wither away. Even the ultimate forms of intimacy are now perceived as regulated by institutional categories debating the limits of acceptable behaviour and the delineation of physical or emotional contact. Naturally, this is neither an institutional conspiracy nor a governmentality plan. It is simply the effect of fleeing the strong restrictions of community belonging as we replace them with an efficient, omnipresent institutional web capable of permanently supporting our individuality. When understood in their real role, late modern institutions are remarkably strong and remarkably flexible at the same time. In social terms, that means much stronger and enduring than the sovereign and rigid institutions of modernity. That strength and flexibility *does not avert conflict as such* but via the two large avenues that institutions lay through late modern society: competitive individuality and organisational efficiency.

The institutions of more direct forms of sociality that operate in non-late modern societies are also strong but impose strict, value-based social control. They lead to a centripetal dynamics, which reinforces closure and, in this way, conflict. This explains why not all developing societies are involved in conflict as well as why late modern societies are practically never involved in large-scale violent conflict, either amongst or between them. Institutional weakness means in fact institutional strength, but for a different type of institutions. Seeking to “strengthen institutions” in areas where conflict exists or may arise is therefore useful only to the extent that it leads to the decline of ‘traditional’ institutions, such as family, marriage, symbolic debts, reciprocal gift, tribe, community or religion. But this has only been possible, until today, through the competitive individualism of the capitalist market. When, typically, new institutions are grafted onto conditions that are not those of a capitalist market, these will be usurped or limited by the old institutions to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the stage of market development and the cultural strength of the old institutions. The result appears to us as ‘corruption’, i.e. the application of direct sociality ties on institutional settings, and institutional ‘weakness’, i.e. the filtering of institutional action through direct sociality structures before it reaches its individual targets. This is not to deny that such aspects survive in late modern settings, particularly among the ruling classes who maintain autonomous decision powers. However, not only need these practices remain secret but they also do not permeate daily mass interaction with the institutional web. In other words,

institutional efficiency may coexist with dysfunctional interstices as long as these are viewed as exceptional or abnormal.

Concluding remarks and further development

The close dependence of conflict on uncertainty and opportunity is caused by sociocultural conditions that limit choice and at the same time cannot absorb uncertainty via community belonging. As a regular form of social interaction, conflict is a combination of conditions and sociality better comprehended in terms of closure. This explains the role of socially weak and organisationally strong institutions in dissuading, averting or containing conflict, especially violent conflict. It also explains why some conflict cycles are longer than others, in an inverse relation with collective organisational capacity. Violence becomes endemic in settings where other options lead to destabilising uncertainty. Democratic capitalism opens up such options and generates aspiration, thus seriously diminishing the probability of violent conflict. It is a separate matter whether the development of liberal individualism is the only durable avenue for expressing conflict without having recourse to violence. In order to attempt any answer to this question, we must comprehend the role of conflict in social dynamics, the very *raison d'être* of having conflict ascribed to human sociocultures in practically ethological terms. To address this issue, a second paper will follow on conflict as social change.

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