Cultural Contestation in Ethnic Conflict

Ethnic conflict often focuses on culturally charged symbols and rituals that evoke strong emotions from all sides. Marc Howard Ross examines battles over diverse cultural expressions and enactments, including Islamic headscarves in France, parades in Northern Ireland, holy sites in Jerusalem and Confederate flags in the American South, to propose a psychocultural framework for understanding ethnic conflict, as well as barriers to, and opportunities for, its mitigation. His analysis explores how culture frames interests, structures demand-making and shapes how opponents can find common ground to produce constructive outcomes to long-term disputes. He focuses on participants’ accounts of conflict to identify emotionally significant issues, and the power of cultural expressions to link individuals to larger identities and shape action. Ross shows that, contrary to popular belief, culture does not necessarily exacerbate conflict; rather, the constructed nature of psychocultural narratives can facilitate successful conflict mitigation through the development of more inclusive narratives and identities.

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To Katherine with love
for all the joys we share including
Katherine, Thomas
and the future members of their generation
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A decade ago I began puzzling about why, and how, what to some people are innocent cultural expressions are to others provocative, aggressive, politically significant acts. At one level, I had known this was the case for a long time from personal observations and experiences as well as the analyses of scholars such as Murray Edelman and Abner Cohen, both of whom, in different ways, focused my attention on the political uses of culture. My own investigation of culture and politics started thirty years ago when I began a cross-cultural study of conflict that examined differences between high- and low-conflict societies. This project led me to articulate ideas concerning the complementary roles of structural and psychocultural mechanisms that create societal dispositions toward particular forms and levels of conflict and violence. Next I utilized the same framework to explore how any given theory of conflict has crucial implications for the theory and practice of conflict management. For example, if a conflict is viewed as one over resource competition, people trying to end it will seek to negotiate an agreement to divide the resources in a manner that all sides can accept, while those who attribute the same conflict to incompatible identities will make bridging these differences central to their conflict management efforts.

As part of my work on conflict management, I asked why some conflicts are managed more successfully than others, and a case I investigated in depth was the 1989 conflict in France that arose when three Muslim junior high students were expelled for wearing headscarves in school (Ross 1993b). I was living in France with my family at the time and was astounded at how quickly the conflict expanded, at the intensity of emotion it generated, and at how inadequate the outcome was as it failed
to address the deep identity needs of those involved. Several years later I began studying Protestant Loyal Order parades in Northern Ireland where sometimes thousands of police and army troops are mobilized to separate Protestant marchers and Catholic protesters.

Once I began looking at, and talking about, intense conflict involving expressive culture, more and more examples that seemed especially relevant in long-term ethnic conflicts became apparent, or were recounted to me. In these conflicts, while there are always substantive, tangible issues dividing the parties, it is also the case that cultural assertion of exclusive identities invariably contributes significantly to heightened tensions, intransigent positions and, sometimes, to violence. As a result, conflict often persisted over what seems to outsiders, but not to the parties themselves, to be the most trivial of differences.

At some point, I realized how much I didn’t understand about the psychocultural dynamics of conflict expansion in enduring conflicts, and why and how small incidents engage so many people so passionately, why these conflicts are so resistant to resolution, and decided that there was a need for concepts to better analyze them, as well as for hypotheses about why some cultural conflicts take a more constructive turn than others.

The result is this book, a long answer to a short question that political scientists have struggled to explain: why are many ethnic conflicts so intense and so hard to settle? The most common answer to this question is that clashing interests over tangible resources such as land, jobs, or control of the state, create zero-sum conflicts that endure when the parties believe losing them can have disastrous consequences. As a result, institutions are unable to provide adequate security guarantees and the parties are unable to overcome commitment problems to find ways to share power and deescalate conflict. While such answers are useful, I also find them incomplete. What they lack is thoughtful consideration of where interests come from in the first place, how interests get defined in specific cultural contests, and the ways that culture structures appropriate ways to pursue them. The theories and language of interest and institutional analyses that are the bases for most political analyses make too little space for identity and culture and pay too little attention to how they directly affect conflict.

My starting point is different – namely that rich analyses of the politics of identity and culture provide an explanatory power that cannot simply be incorporated into a rationalist framework. The analysis of identity politics requires other tools. We need to investigate the power of culture
to order priorities, define enemies and allies, and offer meaning to large numbers of people under stress, threat, and uncertainty. In this book I emphasize the importance of psychocultural narratives and dramas and the power of cultural expressions and enactments to shape how people understand their group and its interests, to promote particular actions, and to create a society’s symbolic landscape. Widely shared narratives matter because they offer emotionally meaningful accounts of the world, defining groups and explaining their motives and actions. Because they frame the world and shape action, powerful narratives must be central to the analysis of ethnic conflict and steps taken to mitigate it. Finally, politically relevant psychocultural analysis not only examines group narratives, but also considers the many ways in which they are enacted in daily life and in a community’s sacred rituals. Enactment matters because participation affirms core elements of a narrative and strengthens attachment to it and to the group while linking present conflicts and people across time and space.

I emphasize identities and psychocultural dynamics because political scientists have paid too little attention to them; I believe they are central to analyzing core political questions about conflict, authority, and community. Our theories of conflict, and in particular its management, would be richer if we expanded our understanding of conflict and articulated more effectively how interests and identities interact and shape each other rather than the position that one is necessarily determinant of the other. Many conflict resolution practitioners understand this complementary relationship intuitively, and have integrated this into their practice. For them this book may be less relevant in terms of making explicit the role of culture in ethnic conflict than in spelling out the theoretical basis for what they already do, and providing some comparative examples.

This project involved field research in six countries and inspiration during visits to at least five more. As the project evolved, I sharpened and limited the cases I would examine and what I needed to know about each. Having engaged primarily in quantitative comparative research in the past, the methodological issues of what constituted not only evidence but comparable data in the qualitative case studies was not always easy to conceptualize let alone collect.

Two of the cases I included pressed me to separate my preconceptions from my analysis, and to be particularly rigorous in applying the tools the book offers. The first was the case of the Confederate flag controversies in the United States. When I began the research I didn’t plan to include race
in the United States as one of my cases but I changed my mind for three reasons. One was a comment from political psychologist Dan Bar-On who pushed me to focus attention on US racial conflict and not just think about ethnic conflict in other societies. Bringing the tools of my analysis back home would, he argued, perhaps provide important insights and would engage me differently than the study of other societies had. Second, my wife Katherine not only agreed with Bar-On’s points but added that including my own society (and eventually my own city) along with others in my project would be the best way to communicate to readers that the problems of ethnic and racial conflicts are not just found in far-away lands. Third, for some time I had followed the Confederate flag conflicts in the South and realized that these were quite comparable to the cultural contestation I had been examining elsewhere.

The second case that challenged my objectivity and my capacity to separate my own preconceptions and emotions from the analysis was the work I did in France, where I have lived a great deal in the past thirty-five years. To me, the argument that French culture is at risk from head-scarves in schools did not seem plausible. I saw no threat in ten, twenty, or even a thousand young girls wearing a scarf on their head in school, and I was impatient with the lack of respect that many in power have demonstrated, and the refusal of many French officials to think through their positions in constructive ways. However, as with the other cases, the point is not which side is “right” and which one is “wrong.” My reaction to the French narratives was no better than telling someone their feelings are wrong or than an analyst telling a patient they had a stupid dream. Dismissal of passionately held positions does not help us understand why people feel as they do and what the significance of these strong feelings is for political and social action; neither does it suggest useful steps to address the conflict constructively.

What I found especially difficult in studying conflicts in the societies I know best was listening actively to all the parties – a crucial first step in my methodological approach, which is based on my belief that you don’t have to accept someone’s position, but you do need to be clear what it is and then ask why they hold it so passionately. This is clear to me in theory, but, for example, given my own upbringing and experiences, when the object was the Confederate battle flag, it was not easy for me to see it as anything but a symbol of racial oppression. Explanations that it represented heritage and alternative constitutional principles (at least for some people) first struck me as false consciousness, if not deception. To
do the research and analysis effectively, I had to set aside these prior, and deeply held, personal positions to take seriously the question of why attachment to the flag is so strong, and to consider ways in which heritage primarily concerns the present rather than the past. Because this conflict was close to home and so connected to my life experience and values I had to be rigorous in applying the method that had been so much easier to use in more unfamiliar cultures in order to understand that for blacks as well as whites the heritage issues related to the Confederate battle flag are about recognition and loss as well as race, and that I owed them the same acknowledgment, not just rejection, that I urge on theorists and practitioners working on conflict in other cultures. My experience with the French case was similar, if less intense.

Let me close by saying that finishing this book has been very difficult because none of the cases I have examined sit still. Since the completion of early drafts, one of the cases has heated up considerably, while some that had been volatile have become more contained. I note this to make the point that I am not in the business of making predictions but rather of trying to understand both escalating conflict and the potential for conflict mitigation, and of identifying tools that help theorists to analyze ethnic conflict and practitioners to move toward “good enough” solutions. What I hope readers will take away from this book is a sense that even when ethnic conflict is intense, or when groups that appeared to have found a way to coexist return to violence, we should not simply wring our hands and believe that ancient hatreds make ongoing violent conflict inevitable.

Undertaking this research and writing required help from more than a few people and several grants that paid my research expenses, providing time to read, think and write as I explored new theoretical problems and literatures. A grant from the United States Institute for Peace got me started and I hope that the people who awarded it to me will recognize the core questions I promised to examine in this book despite the many changes in cases and concepts. A generous grant from the Mellon Foundation’s New Directions Program and regular sabbatical and research support from Bryn Mawr College provided the time and resources needed to do field work in six different countries and the time needed for writing. Students in my Culture and Ethnic Conflict Management class that I have taught since 1999 continually obliged me to sharpen my ideas and to make explicit the connection between the case studies and my larger argument.
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