



# Resolving International Conflict

Dynamics of Escalation,  
Continuation and Transformation

Edited by Isabel Bramsen, Poul Poder and Ole Wæver

Routledge Studies in Peace and Conflict Resolution



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# RESOLVING INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT

*Resolving International Conflict* rethinks the dynamics of conflict escalation and continuation by engaging with research from the wide range of subfields in this area.

The book suggests a new framework for understanding conflict as a particular form of situation, interaction and tension. It shows how conflicts are shaped by varied dynamics relating to emotion, securitization, incentives, digital technology and violence; even attempts at monitoring, resolving or remembering conflicts may end up contributing to their escalation or continuation. Split into two sections, the first part focuses on the question of why and how conflicts escalate, while the second part analyses the continuation of conflict. The book features several case studies of conflict escalation and continuation – in Bahrain, Israel–Palestine, South Sudan, Northern Ireland and, most prominently, the case of the Syrian uprising and subsequent civil war. Throughout the book, and, in particular, in the conclusion, the consequences for conflict transformation are discussed.

This work will be of much interest to students of conflict resolution, peace studies, war and conflict studies, security studies and international relations, in general.

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*Edited by Isabel Bramsen, Poul Poder  
and Ole Wæver*



First published 2019  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge  
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

Names: Bramsen, Isabel, editor. | Poder, Poul, editor. | Wæver, Ole, 1960– editor.

Title: Resolving international conflict: dynamics of escalation, continuation and transformation / edited by Isabel Bramsen, Poul Poder and Ole Wæver.

Description: Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2019. |

Series: Routledge studies in peace and conflict resolution | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018061184 (print) | LCCN 2019015927 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781351590761 (Web PDF) | ISBN 9781351590754 (ePub) |

ISBN 9781351590747 (Mobi) | ISBN 9781138104853 (hardback) |

ISBN 9781138104860 (pbk.) | ISBN 9781315102009 (e-book)

Subjects: LCSH: Conflict management—International cooperation—Case studies. |

Crisis management—International cooperation—Case studies. | Peace-building—

International cooperation—Case studies. | World politics—1989—Case studies.

Classification: LCC JZ5601 (ebook) | LCC JZ5601 .R47 2019 (print) |

DDC 327.1/72—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018061184>

ISBN: 978-1-138-10485-3 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-138-10486-0 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-10200-9 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo

by codeMantra

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# 1

## INTRODUCTION

### Revitalizing conflict studies

*Ole Wæver and Isabel Bramsen*

Conflict is endemic to social life, sometimes inescapable, often productive and occasionally disastrous. Violent conflicts are a major source of suffering in the world. Much relevant knowledge has been gained through conflict research, and the management of conflict has progressed in many respects. Yet, conflicts continue to surprise, erupting with unexpected force and resisting attempts at resolution, often recurring again and again. An overview of the insights and challenges regarding international conflict can therefore be structured usefully around two topics: *escalation* and *continuation*. The former concerns the question of why large-scale, violent conflicts occur in the first instance: Why do many minor, seemingly manageable conflicts turn into self-reinforcing, often lethal processes that drastically limit the potential for human achievement of other aims? The second question is why conflicts continue – often long after they have been generally seen as counterproductive, destructive or fruitless: Why do they not lose momentum, but continue to reproduce, often against determined efforts to end the conflict?

This book aims to make a novel contribution by focusing on the dynamics of conflict as such. During escalation, something *happens* when actors, relations and the general situation increasingly become shaped according to the logic of conflict. While this ‘becoming conflict’ is central, it is often seen as self-evident in contemporary scholarship that the most powerful approach – not least in order to ensure sustainable conflict transformation – is to look ‘before’ the conflict for its ‘causes’. This common approach entails a risk of making an error that is simultaneously logical, methodological and practical, where causality is attributed to pre-existing features that only became causes of the conflict because the conflict became a conflict, which was not a determined outcome. It was only as the conflict escalated that these pre-existing conditions gained their clear direction. Further exploration of the transformative powers of self-reinforcing conflict

escalation is therefore required. Similarly, concerning conflict continuation, it is crucial to focus on the dynamics of the conflict itself: dynamics rendering it not only resistant to resolution but actually enabling the generation of new energy, which reinvigorates the conflicting parties. Escalation and continuation are the key observation points of our dynamic approach to analysing conflict; they enable novel insights into conflict prevention and conflict resolution/transformation, respectively.<sup>1</sup>

If conceptualized as distinct from its causes and effects, conflict can only be captured analytically. We do so by viewing conflict as a mode of being, as a form of social relations. In this volume, we define conflict as a social form comprising a *situation of contradiction, interaction and tension* (SIT).<sup>2</sup> The heart of conflict is the ongoing communication of a 'no' in relation to a 'no' (Luhmann 1984, 1997; Messmer 2003a, 2003b, 2007; Stetter 2008, 2014), that is, a conflict exists only when a communication offer is refused and the first party also refuses the refusal (more on this later). Unshackling the concept of the conflict itself as distinct from its causes and effects is a precondition for locating social mechanisms in the conflict itself, thereby seeing the effects of a situation becoming *conflictualized* (taking that distinct social form) and the processes and effects of change within the conflict along the main dimensions that constitute it, that is, changes of *situation of contradiction, interaction and tension*.

Does the preceding approach and our further reflection regarding conflict apply to conflicts of all types and scale? Or specifically to 'international conflicts'? The theory of conflict is general; the focus here is narrower. A central idea of the volume is that conflict is a generic social phenomenon; it has characteristic features across scale and can therefore be theorized and studied in settings ranging from local to global. The purpose of the present volume is to show the value of conflict as concept and to approach cases of 'large-scale social conflict' that touch upon violence in the sense of having been (or being) violent conflicts or threatening to turn violent or return to violence. To keep the volume focused, we use our distinct approach to speak to the range of cases that are typically held to be the domain of both International Relations and mainstream Peace and Conflict Research: 'International Conflicts'. However, we do so by drawing on theories and ideas that in some cases have evolved out of research on smaller groups. The book thus repeats the move of the founders of modern peace and conflict research in the 1950s and 1960s (e.g. Boulding, Galtung and Rapoport), who theorized about conflict in general, with the international arena as their main motivation (Boulding 1963; Galtung 1958, 1969; Rapoport 1960).

The central assertion is that conflict is a particular social form that rebuilds social identities, subjectivities, energies and emotions as part of a conflictualization of situations. While numerous factors condition this process in significant ways, it is important to avoid linear causality and instead carefully study the process whereby a given conflict gains increasing hold of a development (escalation) and how it continues to reproduce as social formation (continuation). Many elements normally seen as 'causes' of conflict are better understood by our perspective,

which still ascribes importance to the pre-existing elements but avoids the widespread tendency to impute causality to relationships that are much more contingent and only appear clear by unjustified selection on the basis of outcomes. Closer attention to what makes a case a conflict, how it took that shape and why it continues sheds new light on familiar cases.

The book is driven by this attempt to refocus conflict studies on the dynamics of conflict itself. It is therefore primarily organized around the issue of conflict dynamics rather than a particular selection of cases or variables. Coherence of analysis is achieved around dynamics rather than variables. This chapter introduces a series of key concepts and mechanisms associated with these dynamics. Different chapters place their emphasis differently, but all draw on this perspective on endogenous dynamics. In accordance with the shift in explanatory focus from underlying causes to endogenous dynamics of conflict, the methodological approach shifts from variables to mechanisms.

Our approach recognizes the importance of identifying the underlying factors that create higher or lower general probability for conflicts to escalate, especially important when devising structural policies that can influence these factors and thereby, at the aggregate level, the number of violent conflicts in the world. If the likelihood of violent conflict increases with economic inequality (Cederman, Gleditsch and Buhaug 2013) or climate change (Hsiang, Burke and Miguel 2013), this certainly should enter into political decisions that impact inequality and climate change. However, the effects of such factors on conflicts are basically ‘statistical’ – that is, they influence the frequency of the outbreak of violent conflict – but specific conflicts cannot be traced back to such statistical factors. Such large-scale understanding of causes is important for systemic policies preventing conflicts; and in relation to specific conflicts, part of peacebuilding can be the address of such factors to reduce the risk of a return of violence. However, this hunt for underlying causes has often hindered a sufficiently close look *into* the dynamics of the conflicts, as such, and exploring the dynamics of escalation and continuation in conflicts therefore holds great promise for conflict transformation.

The book addresses *two times two* questions:

1. Why and how do conflicts escalate? And what does that suggest in terms of how to achieve conflict transformation<sup>3</sup>/violence prevention?
2. Why and how do conflicts continue? And what does that suggest in terms of how to achieve conflict transformation/violence prevention?

Not all chapters give equal weight to these questions of how conflicts escalate and/or continue on the one hand and how this could be addressed on the other. Some chapters focus mainly on the first part of the question, touching only on the consequences for transformation/prevention at the end, while other chapters focus entirely on efforts at resolving or de-escalating conflicts. Given that the subtitle of the book lists escalation, continuation and transformation, some might

have found it more logical to divide the book into three sections: one on escalation, one on continuation and one on transformation. Nevertheless, we argue that conflict transformation is too interconnected with the dynamics of escalation and continuation for them to be treated separately, both because causes of conflict escalation and continuation have implications for conflict transformation and because attempts at transforming conflicts in and of themselves often end up being parts of the dynamics escalating or continuing the conflict, as several of the chapters will show.

While ‘escalation’ is rather self-evident as focus and terminology, the second part is not: why ‘continuation’? The two terminologies most often used to describe continuing conflicts are ‘protracted’ and ‘intractable’ conflicts. While there are advantages to connecting to established, specialized terminology, there are also reasons for deviating from this practice. Firstly, our idea of ‘continuation’ is more general (the other two terms are only used for conflicts that have already continued for a long time and proven hard to resolve, whereas the issue of continuation already appears rather early in a conflict as in Syria); and secondly, the conceptions of protracted and intractable are too closely tied to the notion that these conflicts have been exposed to attempts at resolution and proven resistant to such efforts, which again is a secondary feature to the characteristic that they are able to regenerate energy to continue as conflicts. ‘Protracted conflict’ is usually a label that points towards particularly strong, underlying sources of conflict (in terms of human needs or incompatible identities), thus rendering a conflict ‘intractable’ in the sense of being ‘resistant’ to efforts at resolution that would work in other cases. Edward Azar’s concept of ‘protracted social conflict’ has become part of ordinary parlance. He developed a theory of protracted conflict focusing on deep-seated cleavages, hatred and fear among social groups that cause hostile interactions often turning into violence. The main route to the solution of such conflicts goes through meeting underlying human needs (Azar 1990; Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall 2011). ‘Intractable’ conflict is a concept that has been used rather systematically by several scholars, including Coleman et al. (2012) and Crocker, Hampson and Aall (2005). While the focus is on the difficulty of resolving these conflicts, thereby emphasizing the importance of prevention, labelling some conflicts as inherently difficult to solve is problematic, as this will always depend on specific dynamics of both conflict and conflict transformation rather than a particular feature of the conflict in the first place. Finally, our intention is that the use of ‘continuation’ will trigger productive puzzlement and guide people towards considering the perspective on conflict – the mode of asking – presented in this book.

The book does not follow a conventional approach to causal explanation, where it posits ‘variables’ that are then tested for their explanatory power. Beyond general meta-theoretical reasons for not doing so, it would in the present case risk putting excessive emphasis on causes ‘prior’ to conflict, where this book shifts the focus towards the dynamics of conflicts themselves, but also on dynamics of

conflict transformation, as analysed in Chapters 9 and 10 on Northern Ireland and South Sudan, respectively. In principle, it is therefore open to any kinds of factors that are demonstrated to be relevant in the empirical chapters. However, we intend to pay special attention to some particular elements: emotions, external actors, new social media, religious actors, modern subjectivity formation and collective memory. Some of these are inherently linked to the concept of conflict (especially emotions and memory), while others are brought in because we find that they have not been given as much attention as deserved (new social media, religious actors, modern subjectivity formation) or not properly linked to the analysis due to the dominant approaches to conflict studies that place factors as external to the conflict that really should be conceptualized as part of the conflict itself (external actors, conflict expertise). Most attention is paid to the three factors: emotions, memory and media.

The approach in this book can be characterized in three steps that are connected but do not fully determine each other (and *are* therefore three moves, not one):

1. We focus on the dynamics of conflict as such – how conflict organizes social relations. In contrast to an emphasis on causes outside the conflict, it is the conflictualization and de-conflictualization itself that we study through the phases of escalation, continuation and transformation.
2. The SIT triangle is a more operational, specified articulation of one possible way of studying conflict that satisfies the principled demand from the first point. This model is presented in detail below.
3. We privilege three particular factors that are usually given insufficient attention: emotions, memory and media. This does not exhaust the possibilities opened by the first two moves, but these processes become particularly important in light of our interest in conflict dynamics and their unfolding in situations, interactions and tensions.

## Positioning the book in contemporary conflict research

Peace and Conflict Research is generally eclectic and inclusive, which is often productive and pleasant. In contrast to a discipline like International Relations, which routinely cultivates ‘great debates’ and a strong sense of internal contrast (Wæver 1996), the general intellectual style in peace and conflict research is broadly inclusive, which probably relates to its solution-oriented self-understanding and that ‘whatever works’ is therefore welcome (Bramsen 2017). Among the costs of this is a tendency to pile models and insights on top of each other, with little attention to the basic assumptions and principled status of different elements. This complicates our effort to position ourselves. Especially any claim of novelty is likely to be met with the objection, ‘No, we include that too’. However, it is one thing to mention, say, dynamics of conflict, and to possibly depict them as part of some diagram, it is another to put the emphasis there. Most studies have a plot, an underlying narrative that links elements in a manner that

makes particular flows, dynamics and points of action particularly important. Along these lines, it is possible to identify some broad traditions or main approaches, each of which places their main emphasis in a particular place. At the risk of oversimplifying, we will briefly use the typology presented by, amongst others, Peter Wallensteen (2015:37–62), and relate it to our project. Wallensteen presents three basic approaches to conflict resolution focused on, respectively, human needs, rational calculations and conflict dynamics. Each includes both a conception of what conflict *is* and what conflict *resolution* should focus on. These are not active research traditions or ‘schools’ that most scholars consciously identify with; rather, they are ideal types that remain relevant as characterization of most work in peace and conflict research (we will discuss some recent contributions that have important similarities or contrasts to our approach but do not fit well into these three approaches).

The first approach is about basic human needs, fundamentally arguing that conflict is the expression of unmet needs that find expression in violent behaviour towards other social groups (Burton 1990). This approach has generated much useful research and practice. Like the founder of the approach, John Burton, a leading second-generation scholar like John Paul Lederach (1995), is also a scholar-practitioner, and much insight has been gained from this approach as a result of its application in actual conflict resolution attempts and problem-solving workshops. Moreover, scholars interested in rethinking foundational theoretical questions have found it useful to revisit this approach, address the criticisms and develop the theory (Avruch and Mitchell 2013). However, the two main limits of the approach remain. First, theoretically, that it is problematic to give any context-free, general measure of human needs (also exemplified by the fact that different scholars identify different basic needs, e.g. Galtung 1996:197; Burton 1990); the analysis therefore tends to become trapped between a subjectivist hostage to what people see as their needs and an objectivist ‘view from nowhere’ of true human needs that is ultimately imprinted by power through dominant conceptions of subjectivity and sociality. The second problem is that which we have already hinted at: ‘deep causes’ is mostly relevant for understanding what comes before conflict, not necessarily the self-propelling dynamics of conflictualization. In many cases, deprived human needs might not be an issue at all, whereas everything in hindsight can be interpreted in this framework. Still, this approach is complementary to ours, not incompatible. It is important to conflict resolution, not least in a peacebuilding perspective where peace agreements and the processes that back them up are well advised to consider the more continuous concerns in society that can favour a remobilization of violence; only it will always remain one step removed in the understanding of any given conflict.

The second approach is defined by rational calculations. Wallensteen illustrates this with reference to the work of I. William Zartman (1991), whose concepts of ripeness and mutually hurting stalemate are among the most immediately useful

and operative ideas in contemporary conflict resolution. Zartman argues that violent conflict typically continues as long as the parties believe it is possible to win the conflict; the moment first becomes ripe for mediation when they reach the realization that the situation has evolved into a 'mutually hurting stalemate'. While this in itself does not ensure that they find a way out, at this point they become open to help to finding an exit from a trajectory that has become unattractive. Another rationalist scholar who several of the contributors to the present volume draw upon is James D. Fearon. Some of his most influential analyses (1994, 1995) showed how, in principle, a peaceful solution always existed for both parties that would be preferable to war. His rational choice-based analysis helped identify some of the main mechanisms preventing such peaceful solutions, pointing specifically to the difficulty of communicating private information and commitment problems in the face of future power shifts. While the Zartman and Fearon analyses might initially appear very different from ours, as they approach conflict basically as a rational choice and not a complete social process, they are actually relevant in our perspective: the moment agreement is reached is important in a conflict process – not necessarily the final word, but an important one, nevertheless. This means that one should regard an agreement as an element in the history of the conflict, as a step that often reconfigures the dynamics and energies of the conflict – but in what direction and how successfully can only be understood by embedding the 'rational' analysis of agreements in a more dynamic and more complete picture of the conflict as a whole. It is also hard to deny that self-consciously rational calculations play a role in conflicts, even if we will argue from our perspective that they are always emotionally charged (as argued below). Thus, 'rational' decisions make up a particular form of conflict behaviour, not because they reflect some form of abstract, pure rationality, but by being constituted as a specific modality of reasoning that is energized emotionally in distinct ways.

The third approach in Wallensteen's typology is the dynamic one, associated with Johan Galtung, and maybe especially 'the middle Galtung' (i.e. the work that followed his first more conventional phase and predated the later often absolutist and culturalist work (1990), especially the seminal pieces in *Journal of Peace Research* like Galtung 1969) who developed the conflict triangle (more on this later). In this approach, there is no single 'source' of a conflict; once a conflict has evolved, it becomes a combination of perceptions, conflict behaviour and contradictory demands; we become our conflict, and it defines our identities and agendas. The conflict becomes a way of life. In this perspective, the main challenge is to somehow interrupt the self-reinforcing dynamic of the conflict, and then it will often become evident that what seemed like an absolute contradiction was actually amenable to 'win-win solutions'. Our work mostly belongs in the tradition of dynamic conflict theory, however, trying to make it even more dynamic than in the original version (more on this later).

A possible fourth approach to conflict could be called structural analysis or transformation. This is related to versions of the human-needs approach taking



more of an interest in the deep socio-economic-political roots of conflict and to other sides of Galtung's work than those stressed in the ideal-typical dynamic approach, with more attention to how some cultures and societies generate more violence than others (Galtung 1996). Structural analysis points towards the middle- and long-term causes of violent conflict, such as the ethno-demographic composition, unequal distribution of resources or the political system (Mucha 2012:3, Rubenstein 2017) and identifies societal conditions such as transnational relations (Gleditsch 2007; Svensson and Nilsson 2018), ethnicity (Wucherpfennig et al. 2012), horizontal inequality (Steward 2010), unemployment (Gallo 2013) or poverty (Justino 2012), primarily in the explanation of the onset and duration of civil wars. Interestingly, the research frontier in the overall quantitative analysis of the causes of civil wars seems to move in this direction – forming a somewhat surprising alliance with some of the more radical, structural approaches: after a period where 'grievances' as explanation seemed to lose out to 'greed' (Collier 2007; Fearon 2008), a strong case is currently being made that with refined data and methods, the political exclusion of ethnic groups and economic inequality would appear to explain ethnic conflict better than it had been assumed for more than a decade (Bartusevičius 2014; Cederman, Gleditsch and Buhaug 2013). While it certainly can be argued that some spiritual value systems, economic orders and political regimes generate more violence than others, addressing such elements in order to transform a conflict is usually an excessively indirect strategy – both too slow and too prone to become politicized and thus a part of the conflict itself ('your religion is the problem', 'neo-liberal economic policies are to be blamed', etc.). Thus, the possibility of structural transformation removing some of the fuel for future conflict is better seen as part of processes growing out of conflict transformation from within the conflict.

Our emphasis on the dynamic approach does not mean that the others become irrelevant; basically, they just have to be reconceptualized as part of conflict dynamics. This means that while some of the following chapters will include elements that might initially seem more fitting for one of the other approaches, these moments are reinterpreted in the context of the present volume in terms of the dynamics of the conflict, including the networks of emotional energy.

Some bodies of work in contemporary peace and conflict research are difficult to fit into the three or four approaches discussed, and some of them have interesting points of contact to our approach that make future collaboration promising. Resource mobilization theory, one of the main approaches in the study of social movements, has become a major contender for explaining especially non-violent uprisings, but potentially also other conflicts (Chenoweth and Ulfelder 2017). This approach places much emphasis on the social dynamics involved in the process of people becoming mobilized by 'movement entrepreneurs' and creating self-sustaining processes. Even if it is currently often used to identify variables that can subsequently be tested quantitatively, the understanding of conflict and conflict resolution has some links to the dynamic and especially our neo-dynamic

approach. Many of the criticisms raised against resource mobilization theory might be remedied by closer collaboration. Stathis N. Kalyvas has spearheaded a growing body of work on violence that demonstrates how the main cause of violence is very often not the underlying grievances in a given situation but rather the previous violence and confrontations between the groups. It is a dynamic approach, especially in how it sees the formation of the parties to a conflict as a complex process whereby local feuds and patterns of grudges channel choices into the formation of the larger groups that then emerge with major fault lines, that were not really the cause of the conflict (Kalyvas 2006; Kalyvas, Shapiro and Masoud 2008). Despite some clear methodological contrasts, there are points of contact from which we have benefited and see future potential in exploring. Similarly, there is a literature on wars (especially in Africa) which argues that especially the *continuation* of war is explained less by the importance of what the parties allegedly fight over than by the advantages for important actors on both sides in continuing them (Keen 2012; cf. Kaldor 2012). While this is similar to standard Marxist critique, these newer works are more dynamic in not anchoring their analysis in a deep social structure with pregiven interests, placing instead greater emphasis on constellations that emerge and distribute the interest in conflict continuation in complex ways. They tell us less about the emotional mechanisms that enable these conflicts to mobilize and therefore to continue on a large scale. A final ‘like-minded’ approach to be mentioned is the work by Oliver Ramsbotham on radical disagreement, which we return to later in this chapter. It is interesting to mention here, in the section on general approaches, because it has evolved in the direction of attention to intra-conflict dynamics, the possible mutations at the difficult end of very conflictual relations. It is also relevant to our approach because it pays attention to situations in which the intensity of the conflict is very high in terms of the kind of relationship without this necessarily correlating with the level of violence. Thus, it points to the independent importance of how a conflict is constituted linguistically, emotionally and socially distinct from its causes and effects.

In many quarters, peace and conflict research has become increasingly mono-disciplinary in recent decades due to the dominance of political scientists, including the two most influential journals in the field: *Journal of Peace Research* and *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (Desrosiers 2016). In this situation, the book shows the relevance of a range of approaches from the humanities, sociology, anthropology and area studies. The methods used and the processes of enquiry employed vary among the chapters (video analysis, interviews, action research, quantitative data, reflection on own experiences as practitioners). While they are all specialists in different fields, the authors have adopted a not-too-technical style of presentation, and the chapters are not written in the typical research article format with detailed reporting on one specific research finding fitted narrowly into some specialist agenda. In this way, the book is designed for further scholarship and teaching and stimulate general debate in the field of peace and conflict research on the identity, direction and core assumptions of the field.

Moreover, the concluding chapter collates some general lessons concerning conflict dynamics and implications for research and conflict resolution practice.

## The concept of conflict

A central part of the Peace Research tradition, and this book in particular, is to look through the conflict-prism, to understand something *as conflict*. The notion of conflict is central in Peace and Conflict Research and has different connotations than in other traditions (*cf.* Wæver 2014). In sociological conflict theories, for example, conflict refers to the ongoing, ever-present struggle over resources and power in society (Collins 2015), whereas in Peace and Conflict Research, conflict often refers to a specific conflict with a beginning and end in time and space, including two or more parties striving to obtain incompatible goals (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall 2011; Wallensteen 2015). In the sociological context, one would typically have conflict as defining for one's general approach ('conflict theories', in contrast to consensus-defined approaches), paradoxically making it difficult to generate a distinct conception of a discrete object called conflict. Peace and Conflict Research wants to understand 'conflicts'. It matters whether something is considered a conflict rather than, for example, a revolution, an uprising, a war or analysing other aspects of international relations. There is an element of reciprocity inherent in the concept of conflict (Roy, Burdick and Kriesberg 2010). Tempting as it may be to perceive only one party as an aggressor – which is often the perspective, especially if you are involved in the conflict – perceiving the situation as a conflict implies recognizing the reciprocity, such as how Western policies stimulated the Russian annexation of Crimea or Al-Qaeda's attack on the World Trade Centre in 2001.

In the (predominantly) English-language scholarly world, most work has based itself on ideas of conflict from the 1950s and 1960s (Burton, Galtung, Boulding, Curle), from there pushing forward to add new empirical insights, leading to a sprawling network of specializations on the role of religion, media and various other important factors, on lessons from different strategies for resolution and so forth. However, the 'core' in the sense of understanding conflict has thinned out. Those specializing in 'religious conflict' emphasized 'religion' but took 'conflict' to be a trivial concept; the study of 'gender and conflict' or 'media and conflict' similarly; the specification and new link-up became defining, whereas a cross-cutting continuous development of the understanding of 'conflict' disappeared. One of the problematic effects of this has been a weakened sense of *the difference conflict makes*. It was part of the original intervention by conflict research to try to create awareness of the fact that conflict shaped relations, and the parties to a conflict therefore tended to be locked into focus on the 'substance' of the conflict, unable to see how the problem had become a constellation of which they had become a party themselves. Similarly, external parties trying to address a conflict need to understand the conflictness of the issue in order to avoid naïve assumptions about how it can be 'solved'. A conflict

perspective can bring this out in ways that a security or development perspective on the same situation cannot. It is therefore important to keep cultivating a sense in conflict studies of what conflict is and what conflict does.

The status of conflict theory is paradoxical. Peace researchers often point out how policy debates on international conflicts ignore basic insights from textbook conflict theory. However, while it is true that even quite rudimentary conflict theory could improve practice, conflict theory has not evolved that productively; after a creative ‘founding phase’, conflict research did little to deepen its core theories. Parts of research floated ‘upwards’ to global structures, whereas work on conflict management and mediation drifted ‘downwards’ towards operational accumulations of (‘how to’) experiences and advice. Whilst parallel bodies of theory in fields such as Sociology and IR went through dynamic periods of theory development, less happened at the heart of conflict theory. An unambitious eclecticism has become fashionable within conflict research.

An important exception to the general decline in theorizing has especially unfolded in the German-speaking part of the world. Inspired by the systems theory of Niklas Luhmann, scholars like Heinz Messmer, Stefan Stetter and Mathias Albert have paid renewed attention to the question of what characterizes conflict as a particular social form (Luhmann 1984, 1997; Messmer 2003a, 2003b, 2007; Stetter 2008, 2014), thereby continuing the classical sociological insight from Simmel (1904) that conflict is not a lack of sociality but a particular form hereof. From Luhmann’s communication-centred approach to social systems, the defining feature of conflict is the lack of agreement involved in jointly developing a differentiated social world. In contrast to the wide variety of social communication that can take place through media like money, love, power, law or faith, the form of social relationship that is characteristic of conflict is a communication offer that is not accepted.

## How emotions matter

One of the ways we wish to advance the conceptualization and deepen the theoretical understanding of conflict is to include the importance of emotional dynamics that explain how parties to a conflict are energized or de-energized. Like Pearlman (2013), for example, we stress the role of emotions in relationship to agency, as various kinds of emotions either energize or de-energize actors (see also Barbalet 1998 for the basic sociological argument) (see Bramsen and Poder in Chapter 2). We treat emotions as an integrated part of normal social processes rather than as irrational aberrations (Lake and Rothchild 1996; Weingast and Figueiredo 1997). In so doing, we take a different approach than Eran Halperin (2016), for example, who discusses in *Emotions in Conflict: Inhibitors and Facilitators of Peace Making* why and how protracted conflicts become protracted, even though people actually want peace and are well aware of the manifold costs of protracted conflicts. Halperin’s answer for understanding this puzzle lies in appreciating how emotions work as distinct psychological barriers to peacemaking.

The present book also addresses protracted or continuing conflicts but understands emotions basically as forms of energy rather than psychological barriers that hinder peacebuilding.

The sociology of emotions – especially the theory of interaction rituals by Randall Collins (2004, 2012) – suggests placing collective patterns at the centre of analysis. When studied sociologically, emotional dynamics can be linked to and integrated with other factors. It becomes possible to study specific groups and actors (neither individuals nor the abstract unit as such) in particular sequences of interaction that generate the emotional dynamics of a given conflict. Emotions float in networks between individuals, groups and things and should be understood as being located and transferred in such socio-material relations rather than arising from within ‘the individual’ (inside-out) or ‘the society’ (outside-in). Social networks can be understood as conduits for affect but also the reverse, as circulations of affect may also be constitutive of social networks alongside other factors (Ross 2013). Assuming that emotion configures conflict and vice versa, we can speak of an emotion-conflict assemblage that acknowledges the contingent, constantly changing and inextricable aspects of the emotion-conflict relationship. This conceptualization of conflict and emotion is applied in our analyses of how conflicts escalate and continue, respectively.

While emotion-centred research has a very marginal status in peace and conflict research, it has grown gradually within International Relations to the point where it has become common to talk of an ‘emotional turn’. A substantial body of literature was spearheaded by scholars like Neta Crawford (2001) and Jonathan Mercer (2010) and well synthesized by Emma Hutchison and Roland Bleiker (2014). This literature usually tries to straddle psychological and political categories, encountering – and acknowledging – severe theoretical and methodological problems, especially in relation to problematic concepts of individual and collective emotions.<sup>4</sup> In the present book, we have placed the main emphasis elsewhere (although there are some overlaps, including inspiration from Barbalet 1998): our main reference point is Randall Collins’s micro-sociological theory, which invests comparatively little in delineating particular emotions and ascribing political content to these, instead placing its main focus on the question of emotional *energy*, that is, the more aggregate effect of various emotions energizing or de-energizing actors to be more or less determined and forceful in their political acts. This focus on emotional energy and the production of agency is developed mostly in Chapters 2 and 3. One advantage of this approach is that it runs less risk of conflating psychological and political categories. Emotional *dynamics* are important to understand political processes, but political categories (like responsibility, protection, legitimacy, threats and justice) should not be replaced by psychological categories just because they seem to correlate (empathy, trust and fear). A conflict is basically a form of sociality, not an emotion, but the *dynamics* of conflict are understood best if emotions are included in the analysis, especially to understand which actors are energized or de-energized

when and how. The possibility to delve into one specific emotion, humiliation, is explored in Chapter 4, and here it is shown how this can be done carefully to avoid reductionism.<sup>5</sup>

### Conflict as a social form: introducing the SIT triangle

At their peril, analysts and practitioners alike often underestimate the value of understanding conflicts *as conflicts*. When a situation gets tense and laden with violence, the reaction from observers and parties considering intervention is to look at its ‘content’ right away, not its form, that is, the situation has become conflictualized. Therefore, they start discussing who is right or wrong on what, and in what direction the situation should develop in order to reach a just and stable outcome. This very often leads to political discussions on the values and interests at stake – what should be furthered or hindered – but ignoring that the situation has emergent collective qualities understood best as conflict (Galtung 1969; Simmel 1904). Similarly, the expertise drawn upon will often be specialized knowledge about the ‘object’ at stake (water scarcity, security experts or at best area specialists), but the distinct dynamics of conflict regularly upset expectations about the results to be obtained. When the situation has become conflictualized, the parties behave differently than expected based on their previous being and doing and their stated interests in relation to the object of the conflict, now overlaid by the dynamic of the conflict itself. In conflict studies, the question of what a conflict *is* is often confused with what *causes* conflict. The ubiquity of conflict has made us blind to it (Messmer 2003a, 2007). Most theories describe the larger field *around* conflict (causes and effects), but pay surprisingly little attention to what happens between input and output (i.e. the conflict as an independent entity). A useful definition of conflict must describe not what is *in* a conflict or what is affected *by* conflict (e.g. identities, interests and attitudes) but what *is* a conflict. Conflict is a specific type of social form, as already argued by Georg Simmel (1904). For the *intensity* of conflict to become a meaningful concept, it is necessary that *conflict*, in turn, is conceptualized with sufficient clarity that there can be more or less of it, that is, conflicts can be more or less conflictual or intense. Failing to achieve this, scholars fall back on violence as the sole measure of intensity, which, in turn, precludes meaningful research on the relationship between conflict and violence (Bramsen and Wæver 2016).

While many scholars declare that they see conflict as unavoidable or even constructive and that they only strive to keep it non-violent (Kriesberg and Dayton 2013; Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall 2011), the majority end up making violence the primary gauge of conflict, thereby undercutting the logical space for intense, positive conflict (Sørensen and Johansen 2016). In Uppsala’s data set, conflict intensity is literally measured as the number of battle deaths.<sup>6</sup> However, there is no evidence that higher levels of intensity lead to higher levels of violence (Chenoweth and Lawrence 2010). A non-violent conflict can nevertheless