The Contagiousness of Conflict

On a hot afternoon in August, 1943, in the Harlem section of New York City, a Negro soldier and a white policeman got into a fight in the lobby of a hotel. News of the fight spread rapidly throughout the area. In a few minutes angry crowds gathered in front of the hotel, at the police station, and at the hospital to which the injured policeman was taken. Before order could be restored, about four hundred people were injured and millions of dollars’ worth of property was destroyed.

This was not a race riot. Most of the shops looted and the property destroyed by the Negro mob belonged to Negroes. As a matter of fact neither the white policeman nor the Negro soldier had anything to do with the riot they had set off; they did not participate in it, did not control it, and knew nothing about it.

Fortunately for the survival of American civilization conflict rarely erupts as violently as it did in the 1943 Harlem riot, but all conflict has about it some elements that go into the making of a riot. Nothing attracts a crowd so quickly as a fight. Nothing is so contagious. Parliamentary debates, jury trials, town meetings, political campaigns, strikes, hearings, all have about them some of the exciting qualities of a fight; all produce dramatic spectacles that are almost irresistibly
fascinating to people. At the root of all politics is the universal language of conflict.

The central political fact in a free society is the tremendous contagiousness of conflict.

Every fight consists of two parts: (1) the few individuals who are actively engaged at the center and (2) the audience that is irresistibly attracted to the scene. The spectators are as much a part of the over-all situation as are the overt combatants. The spectators are an integral part of the situation, for, as likely as not, the audience determines the outcome of the fight. The crowd is loaded with portentousness because it is apt to be a hundred times as large as the fighting minority, and the relations of the audience and the combatants are highly unstable. Like all other chain reactions, a fight is difficult to contain. To understand any conflict it is necessary therefore to keep constantly in mind the relations between the combatants and the audience because the audience is likely to do the kinds of things that determine the outcome of the fight. This is true because the audience is overwhelming; it is never really neutral; the excitement of the conflict communicates itself to the crowd. This is the basic pattern of all politics.

The first proposition is that the outcome of every conflict is determined by the extent to which the audience becomes involved in it. That is, the outcome of all conflict is determined by the scope of its contagion. The number of people involved in any conflict determines what happens; every change in the number of participants, every increase or reduction in the number of participants, affects the result. Simply stated, the first proposition is that the intervention of Cole into a conflict between Able and Bart inevitably changes the nature of the conflict. Cole may join Able and tip the balance of forces in his favor, or he may support Bart and turn the balance the other way, or he may disrupt the conflict or attempt to impose his own resolution on both Able and Bart. No matter what he does, however, Cole will alter the conflict by transforming a one-to-one contest into a two-to-one conflict or a triangular conflict. Thereafter every new intervention, by Donald, Ellen, Frank, James, Emily, will alter the equation merely by enlarging the scope of conflict because each addition changes the balance of the forces involved. Conversely, every abandonment of the conflict by any of the participants changes the ratio.

The moral of this is: If a fight starts, watch the crowd, because the crowd plays the decisive role.

At the nub of politics are, first, the way in which the public participates in the spread of the conflict and, second, the processes by which the unstable relation of the public to the conflict is controlled.

The second proposition is a consequence of the first. The most important strategy of politics is concerned with the scope of conflict.

So great is the change in the nature of any conflict likely to be as a consequence of the widening involvement of people in it that the original participants are apt to lose control of the conflict altogether. Thus, Able and Bart may find, as the Harlem policeman and soldier found, that the fight they started has got out of hand and has been taken over by the audience. Therefore the contagiousness of conflict, the elasticity of its scope and the fluidity of the involvement of people are the X factors in politics.

Implicit in the foregoing propositions is another: It is extremely unlikely that both sides will be reinforced equally as the scope of the conflict is doubled or quadrupled or multiplied by a hundred or a thousand. That is, the balance of the forces recruited will almost certainly not remain constant. This is true because it is improbable that the participants in the original conflict constitute a representative sample of
the larger community; nor is it likely that the successive increments are representative. Imagine what might happen if there were a hundred times as many spectators on the fringes of the conflict who sympathized with Able rather than Bart. Able would have a strong motive for trying to spread the conflict while Bart would have an overwhelming interest in keeping it private. It follows that conflicts are frequently won or lost by the success that the contestants have in getting the audience involved in the fight or in excluding it, as the case may be.

Other propositions follow. It is one of the qualities of extremely small conflicts that the relative strengths of the contestants are likely to be known in advance. In this case the stronger side may impose its will on the weaker without an overt test of strength because people are apt not to fight if they are sure to lose. This is extremely important because the scope of conflict can be most easily restricted at the very beginning. On the other hand, the weaker side may have a great potential strength provided only that it can be aroused. The stronger contestant may hesitate to use his strength because he does not know whether or not he is going to be able to isolate his antagonist. Thus, the bystanders are a part of the calculus of all conflicts. And any attempt to forecast the outcome of a fight by estimating the strength of the original contestants is likely to be fatuous.

Every change in the scope of conflict has a bias; it is partisan in its nature. That is, it must be assumed that every change in the number of participants is about something, that the newcomers have sympathies or antipathies that make it possible to involve them. By definition, the intervening bystanders are not neutral. Thus, in political conflict every change in scope changes the equation.

The logical consequence of the foregoing analysis of conflict is that the balance of forces in any conflict is not a fixed equation until everyone is involved. If one tenth of 1 percent of the public is involved in conflict, the latent force of the audience is 999 times as great as the active force, and the outcome of the conflict depends overwhelmingly on what the 99.9 percent do. Characteristically, the potentially involved are more numerous than those actually involved. This analysis has a bearing on the relations between the “interested” and the “uninterested” segments of the community and sheds light on interest theories of politics. It is hazardous to assume that the spectators are uninterested because a free society maximizes the contagion of conflict; it invites intervention and gives a high priority to the participation of the public in conflict.

The foregoing statement is wholly theoretical and analytical. Is there any connection between the theory outlined here and what actually happens in politics? Since theoretically control of the scope of conflict is absolutely crucial, is there any evidence that politicians, publicists, and men of affairs are actually aware of this factor? Do politicians in the real world try to reallocate power by managing the scope of conflict? These questions are important because they may shed light on the dynamics of politics, on what actually happens in the political process, and on what can or cannot be accomplished in the political system. In other words, the role of the scope of conflict in politics is so great that it makes necessary a new interpretation of the political system.

If it is true that the result of political contests is determined by the scope of public involvement in conflicts, much that has been written about politics becomes nonsense, and we are in for a revolution in our thinking about politics. The scope factor overthrows the familiar simplistic calculus based on the model of a tug of war of measurable forces. One is reminded of the ancient observation that the battle is
not necessarily won by the strong nor the race by the swift. The scope factor opens up vistas of a new kind of political universe.

In view of the highly strategic character of politics we ought not to be surprised that the instruments of strategy are likely to be important in inverse proportion to the amount of public attention given to them.¹

Madison understood something about the relation of scope to the outcome of conflict. His famous essay No. 10 in the Federalist Papers should be reread in the context of this discussion.

The smaller the society, the fewer probably will be the distinct parties and interests composing it, the more frequently will a majority be found of the same party; and the smaller number of individuals composing a majority, and the smaller the compass within which they are placed, the more easily they will concert and execute their plans of oppression. Extend the sphere and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens.

While Madison saw some of the elements of the situation, no one has followed up his lead to develop a general theory. The question of the scope of conflict is approached obliquely in the literature of political warfare. The debate is apt to deal with procedural questions which have an unavowed bearing on the question. The very fact that the subject is handled so gingerly is evidence of its explosive potential.

While there is no explicit formulation in the literature of American politics of the principle that the scope of a conflict determines its outcome, there is a vast amount of controversy that can be understood only in the light of this proposition. That is, throughout American history tremendous efforts have been made to control the scope of conflict, but the rationalizations of the efforts are interesting chiefly because they have been remarkably confusing. Is it possible to reinterpret American politics by exposing the unavowed factor in these discussions?

A look at political literature shows that there has indeed been a long-standing struggle between the conflicting tendencies toward the privatization and socialization of conflict. On the one hand, it is easy to identify a whole battery of ideas calculated to restrict the scope of conflict or even to keep it entirely out of the public domain. A long list of ideas concerning individualism, free private enterprise, localism, privacy, and economy in government seems to be designed to privatize conflict or to restrict its scope or to limit the use of public authority to enlarge the scope of conflict. A tremendous amount of conflict is controlled by keeping it so private that it is almost completely invisible. Reference to this strategy abounds in the literature of politics, but the rationalizations of the strategy make no allusion to the relation of these ideas to the scope of conflict. The justifications are nearly always on other grounds.

On the other hand, it is equally easy to identify another battery of ideas contributing to the socialization of conflict. Universal ideas in the culture, ideas concerning equality, consistency, equal protection of the laws, justice, liberty, freedom of movement, freedom of speech and association, and civil rights tend to socialize conflict. These concepts tend to make conflict contagious; they invite outside intervention in conflict and form the basis of appeals to public authority for redress of private grievances. Here again the rationalizations are made on grounds which do not avow any specific interest in an expansion of the scope of conflict though the relation becomes evident as soon as we begin to think about it. Scope is the unlisted guest of honor at all of these occasions.
It may be said, therefore, that men of affairs do in fact make an effort to control the scope of conflict though they usually explain what they do on some other grounds. The way the question is handled suggests that the real issue may be too hot to handle otherwise. We are bound to suppose therefore that control of the scale of conflict has always been a prime instrument of political strategy, whatever the language of politics may have been.

A better understanding of circuitous references to the strategic role of the scope factor may be gained if we examine some of the procedural issues which have been most widely debated in American politics. Do these issues have a bearing on the practical meaning of the scope conflict?

The role of conflict in the political system depends, first, on the morale, self-confidence, and security of the individuals and groups who must challenge the dominant groups in the community in order to raise an opposition.

People are not likely to start a fight if they are certain that they are going to be severely penalized for their efforts. In this situation, repression may assume the guise of a false unanimity. A classic historical instance is the isolation of the Negro in some southern communities. Dollard says of the southern caste system that “it is a way of limiting conflict between the races . . . . Middle class Negroes are especially sensitive to their isolation and feel the lack of a forum in Southern towns where problems of the two races could be discussed.” The controversy about civil rights in connection with race relations refers not merely to the rights of southern Negroes to protest but also to the rights of “outsiders” to intervene.

The civil rights of severely repressed minorities and all measures for public or private intervention in disputes about the status of these minorities become meaningful when we relate them to the attempt to make conflict visible. Scope is the stake in these discussions.

Attempts to impose unanimity are made in one-party areas in the North as well as in the South. Vidich and Bensman describe the process by which the school board in a small town in upstate New York undertakes to control a political situation by limiting conflict. Commenting on the procedures of the board, the authors say that it attempts to deal with critics by making “greater efforts at concealment.” These efforts “result in more strict adherence to the principle of unanimity of decision.”

In a similar situation, in a Michigan village, “the practice of holding secret meetings was defended Monday night by Chester McGonigal, president of the Board of Education at James Couzen’s Agricultural School. Mr. McGonigal said that the Bath school board would continue to hold discussion meetings closed to the public and that only decisions reached would be announced.”

Perhaps the whole political strategy of American local government should be re-examined in the light of this discussion. The emphasis in municipal reform movements on nonpartisanship in local government may be producing an unforeseen loss of public interest in local government. There is a profound internal inconsistency in the idea of nonpartisan local self-government.

In modern times a major struggle over the socialization of conflict has taken place in the field of labor relations. When President Theodore Roosevelt intervened in the coal strike in 1902, his action was regarded by many conservative newspaper editors as an “outrageous interference” in a private dispute. On the other hand, the very words “union,” “collective bargaining,” “union recognition,” “strike,” “industrial unionism,” and “industrywide bargaining” imply a tremendous socialization of a conflict which was once re-
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garded as a purely private matter concerning only the em-
ployer and the individual workman.

The scope of the labor conflict is close to the essence of
the controversy about collective bargaining: industrial and
craft unionism, industrywide bargaining, sympathy strikes,
union recognition and security, the closed shop, picketing,
disclosure of information, political activity of unions, labor
legislation, etc. All affect the scale of labor conflict. At every
point the intervention of “outsiders,” union organizers, fed-
eral and state agencies, courts, and police, has been disput-
ed. The controversy has been to a very large degree about
who can get into the fight and who is excluded.

Each side has had an adverse interest in the efforts of the
other to extend the scale of its organization. Says Max For-
ester, “Lately, American employers have been showing a
renewed interest in industrywide negotiations as a means of
restoring a modicum of industry’s ‘lost power’ at the bar-
gaining table.”

The attempt to control the scope of conflict has a bearing
on federal-state-local relations, for one way to restrict the
scope of conflict is to localize it, while one way to expand it
is to nationalize it. One of the most remarkable develop-
ments in recent American politics is the extent to which the
federal, state, and local governments have become involved
in doing the same kinds of things in large areas of public
policy, so that it is possible for contestants to move freely
from one level of government to another in an attempt to
find the level at which they might try most advantageously
to get what they want. This development has opened up
vast new areas for the politics of scope. It follows that de-
bates about federalism, local self-government, centrality,
and decentralization are actually controversies about
the scale of conflict.

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In the case of a village of 1,000 within a state having a
population of 3,500,000, a controversy lifted from the local
to the state or the national level multiplies its scope by 3,500
or 180,000 times. Inevitably the outcome of a contest is con-
trolled by the level at which the decision is made. What
happens when the scope of conflict is multiplied by
180,000? (1) There is a great probability that the original
contestants will lose control of the matter. (2) A host of new
considerations and complications are introduced, and a mu-
titude of new resources for a resolution of conflict becomes
available; solutions inconceivable at a lower level may be
worked out at a higher level.

The nationalization of politics inevitably breaks up old lo-
cal power monopolies and old sectional power complexes; as
a matter of fact, the new dimension produces so great a
change in the scale of organization and the locus of power
that it may take on a semirevolutionary character. The
change of direction of party cleavages produced by the shift
from sectional to national alignments has opened up a new
political universe, a new order of possibilities and impossible-
ities.

Since 1920 the Negro population of the United States has
increased by nearly five million, but nearly all of the in-
crease has been in the northern states. There are now six
northern states with a Negro population larger than the Ne-
gro population of Arkansas. These migrations have national-
ized race relations and produced a new ratio of forces in the
conflict over segregation and discrimination. The appeal for
help in the conflict is from the 13 percent in the South to
the 87 percent outside the South.

Everywhere the trends toward the privatization and so-
cialization of conflict have been disguised as tendencies
toward the centralization or decentralization, localization or
nationalization of politics.
The question of scope is intrinsic in all concepts of political organization. The controversy about the nature and role of political parties and pressure groups, the relative merits of sectional and national party alignments, national party discipline, the locus of power in party organizations, the competitiveness of the party system, the way in which parties develop issues, and all attempts to democratize the internal processes of the parties are related to the scope of the political system.

The attack on politics, politicians, and political parties and the praise of nonpartisanship are significant in terms of the control of the scale of conflict. One-party systems, as an aspect of sharply sectional party alignments, have been notoriously useful instruments for the limitation of conflict and depression of political participation. This tends to be equally true of measures designed to set up nonpartisan government or measures designed to take important public business out of politics altogether.

The system of free private business enterprise is not merely a system of private ownership of property; it depends even more for its survival on the privacy of information about business transactions. It is probably true that the business system could not survive a full public disclosure of its internal transactions, because publicity would lead to the discovery and development of so many conflicts that large-scale public intervention would be inescapable.

To a great extent, the whole discussion of the role of government in modern society is at root a question of the scale conflict. Democratic government is the greatest single instrument for the socialization of conflict in the American community. The controversy about democracy might be interpreted in these terms also. Government in a democracy is a great engine for expanding the scale of conflict. Government is never far away when conflict breaks out. On the other hand, if the government lacks power or resources, vast numbers of potential conflicts cannot be developed because the community is unable to do anything about them. Therefore, government thrives on conflict. The work of the government has been aided and abetted by a host of public and private agencies and organizations designed to exploit every rift in the private world. Competitiveness is intensified by the legitimation of outside interference in private conflicts. It is necessary only to mention political parties, pressure groups, the courts, congressional investigations, governmental regulatory agencies, freedom of speech and press, among others, to show the range and variety of instruments available to the government for breaking open private conflicts. How does it happen that the government is the largest publisher in the country? Why is everything about public affairs vastly more newsworthy than business affairs are?

The scope of political conflict in the United States has been affected by the world crisis, which has fostered the development of a powerful national government operating on a global scale. Industrialization, urbanization, and nationalization have all but destroyed the meaning of the word "local" and have opened up great new areas of public interest and produced a new order of conflicts and alignments on an unprecedented scale. The visibility of conflict has been affected by the annihilation of space which has brought into view a new world. Universal suffrage, the most ambitious attempt to socialize conflict in American history, takes on a new meaning with the nationalization of politics and the development of a national electorate.

The development of American political institutions reflects the scale of their participation in conflict. The history of the United States Senate illustrates the way in which a public institution is affected by its widening involvement in
national politics. In a series of decisions, the Senate first established the principle that individual senators are not bound by the instructions of state legislatures. Next, the direct popular election of senators has assimilated the Senate into the democratic system. It is noteworthy that the direct election of senators was followed shortly by the abolition of "executive" sessions. Today the Senate is a national institution; its survival as a major political institution has depended on its capacity to keep pace with the expanding political universe.

The history of the Presidency illustrates the same tendency. The rise of political parties and the extension of the suffrage produced the plebiscitary Presidency. The growth of presidential party leadership and the development of the Presidency as the political instrument of a national constituency have magnified the office tremendously. The Presidency has in turn become the principal instrument for the nationalization of politics.

The universalization of the franchise, the creation of a national electorate, and the development of the plebiscitary Presidency elected by a national constituency have facilitated the socialization of conflict. Thus, modern government has become the principal molder of the conflict system.

On the other hand, even in the public domain, extraordinary measures are taken occasionally to protect the internal processes of public agencies from publicity. Note the way in which the internal processes of the Supreme Court are handled, or the way diplomatic correspondence is shielded against public scrutiny, or the manner in which meetings of the President's cabinet are sealed off from the press, or the way in which the appearance of unanimity is used to check public intervention in the internal processes of the government at many critical points. Or note how Congress suppresses public information about its own internal expendi-

tures. Everywhere privacy and publicity are potent implements of government.

The best point at which to manage conflict is before it starts. Once a conflict starts it is not easy to control because it is difficult to be exclusive about a fight. If one side is too hard-pressed, the impulse to redress the balance by inviting in outsiders is almost irresistible. Thus, the exclusion of the Negro from southern politics could be brought about only at the price of establishing a one-party system.

The expansion of the conflict may have consequences that are extremely distasteful to the original participants. The tremendous growth of the Democratic Party after 1932 gave rise to a conflict between the old regular organizations and the newcomers. Why, for example, do the regular organizations prefer to take care of the new party workers in ad hoc organizations such as the Volunteers for Stevenson?

Other tensions within the Democratic party resulted from the increased political activity of labor unions, tensions between the old regular Democratic party organizations and the new political arm of the labor movement. On the other side, a factor in the lack of success of the Republican party in recent years seems to have been the reluctance of the old regular Republican party organizations to assimilate new party workers. At a time when tens of millions of Americans have developed a new interest in politics, the assimilation of newcomers into the old organizations has become a major problem, made difficult by the fact that every expansion of an association tends to reallocate power. Thus the very success of movements creates difficulties.

Is this not true of the labor movement also? Is it not likely that undemocratic procedures in labor unions are related to the attempt of old cadres to maintain control in the face of a great expansion of the membership? The growth of organizations is never an unmixed blessing to the individuals who
first occupied the field. This seems to be true of all growing communities, rapidly expanding suburban communities for another example.

The dynamics of the expansion of the scope of conflict are something like this:

1. Competitiveness is the mechanism for the expansion of the scope of conflict. It is the loser who calls in outside help. (Jefferson, defeated within the Washington administration, went to the country for support.) The expansion of the electorate resulted from party competition for votes. As soon as it becomes likely that a new social group will get the vote, both parties favor the extension. This is the expanding universe of politics. On the other hand, any attempt to monopolize politics is almost by definition an attempt to limit the scope of conflict.

2. Visibility is a factor in the expanding of the scope of conflict. A democratic government lives by publicity. This proposition can be tested by examining the control of publicity in undemocratic regimes. Says Michael Lindsay about Communist China:

It is probably hard for the ordinary citizen of a democratic country to envisage the problem of obtaining reliable information about a totalitarian country. In democratic countries, especially in the United States, policy formation takes place with a good deal of publicity. When one turns to a totalitarian country, such as the People’s Republic, the situation is completely different. All publications are controlled by the government and are avowedly propagandist. Criticism and discussion only appear when the government has decided to allow them. The process of policy formation is almost completely secret.®

3. The effectiveness of democratic government as an instrument for the socialization of conflict depends on the amplitude of its powers and resources. A powerful and re-

sourceful government is able to respond to conflict situations by providing an arena for them, publicizing them, protecting the contestants against retaliation, and taking steps to rectify the situations complained of; it may create new agencies to hear new categories of complaints and take special action about them.

Every social institution is affected by the way in which its internal processes are publicized. For example, the survival of the family as a social institution depends to a great extent on its privacy. It is almost impossible to imagine what forces in society might be released if all conflict in the private domain were thrown open for public exploitation. Procedures for the control of the expansive power of conflict determine the shape of the political system.

There is nothing intrinsically good or bad about any given scope of conflict. Whether a large conflict is better than a small conflict depends on what the conflict is about and what people want to accomplish. A change of scope makes possible a new pattern of competition, a new balance of forces, and a new result, but it also makes impossible a lot of other things.

While the language of politics is often oblique and sometimes devious, it is not difficult to show that the opposing tendencies toward the privatization and socialization of conflict underlie all strategy.

The study of politics calls for a sense of proportion; in the present case it requires a sense of the relative proportions of the belligerents and the spectators. At the outset of every political conflict the relations of the belligerents and the audience are so unstable that it is impossible to calculate the strength of the antagonists because all quantities in the equation are indeterminate until all of the bystanders have been committed.
Political conflict is not like a football game, played on a measured field by a fixed number of players in the presence of an audience scrupulously excluded from the playing field. Politics is much more like the original primitive game of football in which everybody was free to join, a game in which the whole population of one town might play the entire population of another town, moving freely back and forth across the countryside.

Many conflicts are narrowly confined by a variety of devices, but the distinctive quality of political conflicts is that the relations between the players and the audience have not been well defined and there is usually nothing to keep the audience from getting into the game.

Notes

1. “The indirect approach is as fundamental to the realm of politics as to that of sex.” Liddell Hart, quoted by Al Newman in The Reporter, October 15, 1958, p. 45.
2. John Dollard, Caste and Class in a Southern Town, 3d ed., Doubleday and Company, Garden City, 1957, p. 72. See also pp. 208–211 for a discussion of bipartisan arrangements in the South to depress conflict. Dollard discusses the impact of the one-party system on voting participation. Often the argument is made that the Negro would be contented if left alone by outsiders.
3. Vidich and Bensman, Small Town in Mass Society, Princeton, 1958. Members of the board resort to “inchoately arrived-at unanimous decisions in which no vote, or only a perfunctory one, is taken.” They “attempt to minimize or avoid crises, and this leads to further demands for unanimity and concealment.” pp. 172–173.

There is always the danger that, should an issue come into the open, conflicting parties will appeal to outside individuals or groups or to more important figures in the machine. Public sentiment could easily be mobilized around the issues.” p. 127.

“In the ordinary conduct of business in this manner, issues and conflict never become visible at the public level. Undisciplined appeals to outside groups which would threaten the monopoly of power of the controlling group do not occur.” p. 128. See also p. 133.

4. Lansing (Michigan) State Journal, July 15, 1958. The statement was made in response to a challenge following an election contest.

   See also statements by George Romney, president of American Motors Corporation, Wall Street Journal, January 21 and February 2, 1959.
7. A classical case is described by John F. Fairbank (“Formosa through China’s Eyes,” New Republic, October 13, 1958), in terms of Chinese military and diplomatic history. “Contenders for power in traditional China commonly found it essential to utilize the barbarians, for the latter were powerful fighters, though often naïve in politics and easily swayed by their feelings of pride and fear. There is a great body of lore and precedent on this subject in Chinese historical annals. Sometimes the Chinese were outmanipulated by the barbarians. The Sung Emperors, for example, made a mistake in getting Mongol help against the Jurchen invaders from Manchuria; the Mongols eventually conquered China. Similarly the Manchus stayed to conquer and rule the country.”