

# Conflict

The word conflict covers such a wide variety of phenomena that it is difficult to conceptualise. It is derived from the Latin *confligere* (from *con-*, together, and *fligere* to strike) or *conflictus* (contest). In its most all-embracing meaning, conflict is opposition between two or more agents. It arises when one agent, individual or collective exhibits behaviours that affect the interests of other agents. This therefore supposes the existence of an antagonism, which can take on several forms: a relationship between opposing forces, rivalry or enmity, war etc. There are thus degrees of conflict, ranging from disagreement to tension and violence, via various intermediate stages.

The social and political status of conflict is ambiguous, and its function a subject of long-standing debate. It can be defined as a phenomenon that is inherent in the functioning of a human collective or community, which among other things recalls the well-known notion of the "state of nature", widely presented in the writings of the European philosophical tradition as preceding the social state (Hobbes, Rousseau). Expanding on the notion that humans are naturally driven to enter into conflict one with another, Hobbes defines conflict as a situation of war "of all against all". Only the establishment of a sufficiently strong sovereign State (or social contract for Rousseau) can put an end to it. There is another tradition which considers that conflict is not necessarily a negative phenomenon. It is possible to consider that a conflict is the symptom of poor social functioning, while conversely conflict can also be defined as a social construct. This generates several ideas: conflict can be avoided, there is no inevitability. It can be one mode of social regulation among others. It can have a creative function by instigating changes and stimulating the quest for compromises, for instance in the functioning of a democracy.

Nor is there any general theory of open international conflicts. For realists, they are inevitable because international relationships are anarchic, driving protagonists to resort to armed conflict. For Marxists, conflicts often oppose central States to peripheral States, and reveal a class struggle. War would in their view be a thing of the past if a communist society were to be set up. For liberals, it is the rarity of resources that motivates individuals wishing to advance their own interests to ask their governments to pursue policies that are incompatible, thus generating disagreement. However the potential for conflict could also encourage States to negotiate.

In the field of the social sciences, geography is well-provided with tools to study conflicts:

- conflicts and their protagonists can be localised. This localisation is the job of geographers
- conflict, whatever its geographical scale or its intensity, is often closely linked to territoriality. Space, whether appropriated or coveted, is often an important issue
- geographical space can be the framework, the stakes or simply the setting for a conflict, and sometimes all three at once
- conflicts generally unfold on the Earth's surface: their spatiality can be described and apprehended
- geography provides original insight into conflict as a factor in spatial organisation, generating varying degrees of change of variable duration.

The notion of conflict is useful in that it is applicable to wide range of situations involving different protagonists and objects on all scales of geographical space. There are for instance conflicts related to urbanism and territorial development. These activities are the business of specialists, but they are also political issues that involve power balances, power struggles, rivalry between political agents and forces, confrontations between projects in which divergent interests are played out (lobbies, citizens, institutions, etc). The refusal of certain developments by citizens who consider themselves to be wronged is often referred to as NIMBY (not in my back yard). The increasing numbers of agents involved in development issues on all levels is in itself a source of conflict.

Conflicts relating to usage are linked to the economic and social terms of occupation of space. They involve a wide range of agents (individuals, groups, enterprises, States, collectives, etc). They concern the usage, rather than the exclusive control over, a particular portion of space or a «resource» of which different agents wish to make use in ways that are incompatible. They can, although rarely, lead to confrontation. Conflicts for usage are generally settled by legal or administrative decisions, and this encourages the identification of decisional procedures based on discussion and mediation. There is also a probable correlation between conflict and different dimensions of «territories»: socio-demographic (population density and social structure), economic (dominant economic activity, specialised production) and political (conservation, regionalism).

Conflicts relating to environmental issues are on the increase. It is for example now agreed that global warming has undesirable

effects &#8211; the reduction of agricultural surface areas, more frequent droughts, reduced water reserves, submersion of certain areas (islands, low-lying areas, «deltas») and a reduction in habitable surface areas. Environmental damage, combined with certain social dynamics (for instance demographic pressures) can favour the breakout or aggravation of conflict. More widely, the environment has dialectic links with conflict: it can generate conflict, it can contribute to determining how the conflict is played out, and it can undergo the effects of conflict.

War and violent conflict are the first forms of conflict that come to mind. The causes are numerous, and can be studied by geography and geopolitics: ambitions of power, antagonism, territorial appetite, economic competition, access to energy sources, security threats on territories or their inhabitants, ideological, national, religious, or identity conflicts, etc. It is not easy to categorise violent conflict. The typologies are numerous, and there is no agreement among research bodies seeking to define them. Uppsala University refers to active armed conflict on the basis of at least 25 victims per calendar year. It concludes to major armed conflict when the number of dead exceeds 1000 in one year, in the setting of a conflict where at least one of the protagonists is a government. In contrast, the research institute on conflict in Heidelberg defines conflicts from three attributes: protagonists, actions and objects, with no mention of numbers.

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## **Bibliographie**