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[Heterogeneous Conflicts: One Role for Critical Conflict Theory](#)

By: [Derek Sweetman](#) January 15, 2011

One of the goals of Unrest is to investigate the theoretical spaces not commonly addressed in our analysis of contemporary conflict and our attempts to address it. We hope to contribute to the development of Critical Conflict Theory (CCT), which has the opportunity to provide insights traditional conflict theory cannot. This essay argues that heterogeneous conflicts should be a fertile ground for critical work and, in so doing, hopes to point at least some of the CCT work toward this underrepresented area.

In *Conflict and Defense* [i], Kenneth Boulding dedicated a chapter to what he called “heterogeneous conflicts.” These are conflicts in which the parties are not of the same type. Boulding saw the most interesting of these as involving conflicts where one party is an individual and the other a group or organization [ii]. His focus in that particular chapter is primarily on the various processes of socialization through which individual-group conflicts are mediated, in the sociological sense. For Boulding, heterogeneous conflicts are usually instances of conflict between an organization and a member of that organization, but the value of the insight extends much further.

Boulding’s concept, however, did not get carried on in conflict theory beyond *Conflict and Defense*. Traditional conflict theory and conflict resolution seems reluctant to engage the idea of heterogeneous conflict directly. To the extent that “heterogeneous conflict” appears in the conflict literature, it is generally in a different context altogether, such as in Putnam’s use of “homogeneous conflict” and “heterogeneous conflict” to differentiate between boundary and factional disputes in negotiation [iii]. To an extent this should not be surprising, as I have earlier described the tendency of conflict resolution to use the category of “party” to constitute that which it works [iv]. By definition, conflicts occur between “parties” and we see parties as conceptual units that share certain characteristics. The two parties to a conflict may differ significantly in detail, yet they are fundamentally of the same character.

The fallacy of this approach is clear within Boulding’s original conception of heterogeneous conflict, but becomes more drastic if we take Boulding’s idea to its logical conclusion. Boulding posits conflict between an individual and an organization as the prototypical heterogeneous conflict. He may have been imagining group members and the group itself, but there is no reason to

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avoid extending this definition to conflicts between individuals and much larger groups or institutions, such as multinational corporations or governments. A student struggling against a university, a citizen fighting her government, or a customer in a dispute with a global media company all would easily fit within our most basic expectations of conflict, but are very clear examples of conflict between two parties of disparate type. Additionally, these types of interactions challenge some of the assumptions we make about conflict itself.

Take, for example, Roger Fisher's commonly accepted (although admittedly broad) definition of conflict as "a social situation in which there are perceived incompatibilities in goals or values between two (or more) parties, attempts by the parties to control one another, and antagonistic feelings toward each other" [v]. Heterogeneous conflicts involve incompatibilities in goals or values, attempts to control, and antagonism, but attributing these as "perceptions" or "feelings" seems to overly anthropomorphize institutions and groups. When we say that a company perceives a threat or that a government feels something about its citizens, we are speaking metaphorically, not literally. Similarly, Fisher's definition should be read literally in the interpersonal sense, but more figuratively as parties move farther from the interpersonal, single-actor ideal. This, however, uncovers one of the weaknesses of traditional conflict theory. Ultimately, it treats every actor (relabelled as either an in-process "party" or out-of-process "spoiler," of course) as a human actor, subject to human limitations and predilections.

Traditional conflict theory attempts to define heterogeneous conflicts in ways that make them more manageable within the established framework through two definitional acts, which may be used alone or in tandem. The first of these is to focus on differences of power instead of differences of type and the second is to approach institutions, governments, and organizations as if they are simply individuals writ large.

The focus on power difference instead of type difference recasts heterogeneous conflicts as "asymmetrical conflicts," defined as any conflict in which there is a power imbalance between the parties related to the resources that they could bring to bear on the conflict [vi]. In practice, scholars focus on cases where the imbalance is pronounced, since every conflict will have some level of difference between the parties.

The literature of conflict analysis and resolution is robust, but not unified, on the subject of asymmetric conflict. The term was first mentioned in 1974, but has recently become much more common [vii]. There is even a new journal, *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*, focused specifically on the issue. In general, asymmetry is recognized through the methods used by the less-powerful party, including guerrilla tactics or terrorism [viii], the recognition that one party is more powerful than the other [ix] or simply seen in conflicts where relative levels of power are unclear [x]. Some go so far as to say that asymmetric conflicts are causally different than others, in that the "root of the conflict lies not in particular issues or interests that may divide the parties, but in the very structure of who they are and the relationship between them" [xi]. Asymmetric conflicts are said to require simple awareness on the part of practitioners, or in some cases efforts to remove the asymmetry [xii].

These explanations that focus on less unbalanced asymmetries may provide an understanding of heterogeneous conflicts, but I am not confident in this. First, all are built from cases of violent conflict. The majority of heterogeneous conflicts, however, do not include direct (physical) violence. Second, all of these still presume that the imbalance is occurring between groups, which ignores the difficulties of dealing with participants of different essential types.

The alternative within traditional conflict theory is to look at conflicts involving large organizations or institutions and individuals as if the difference is negligible and that it can be treated as an agent problem. This could mean treating parties as if they were people, such as the "anthropomorphic conception of the state," which posits that states can be seen as people [xiii]. It could also mean focusing on the agents of the institution or organization as if they actually are the institution or organization. This does a double disservice, first because it treats the groups and systems as something they are not and second, because it ignores the strong extent to which the actions of the agent are not his own. Any conflict resolution practitioner who has tried to rely on a presumption of basic human needs to resolve a dispute with their cable company should readily recognize that assuming the person on the other end of the phone has the agency to act as a full person is a mistake. However, it is important to note that treating corporations as people is not a fiction in legal practice. The push toward "corporate personhood" has continued in the American legal system [xiv]. The point of this, though, is not to make these conflicts more amenable to conflict resolution, but to make them more amenable to adjudication within the legal system. Additionally, we need to realize that whatever use this may have within the legal system, corporate personhood leaks into other venues in ways that undermine the lives of real people [xv].

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These are level-of-analysis solutions to the problem that conflict occurs on multiple levels between parties on multiple levels. We may use the lens of the individual to explain group conflict, we may use the lens of the unified party, or we may break down the parties into their subgroups. While this seems reasonable, it reinforces the notion that conflicts occur primarily between parties of a similar fundamental type. While heterogeneous conflicts have crept into international relations and security studies through the analysis of asymmetrical warfare and the relations of states (the US) and transnational networks (Al-Qaeda), there appears to have been little work done on heterogeneous conflicts in other venues, even though those are actually much more plentiful. On the mundane end of the spectrum, this would include individuals (acting as consumers) in conflict with multinational corporations. A more interesting manifestation would be the conflict between an individual and the economic system in which they live. In the end, we are left to imagine what it even means to label both sides in a heterogeneous conflict as “parties,” when they share so little.

One reasonable alternative is to avoid calling the phenomena we are labeling “heterogeneous conflict” conflicts at all. This sets aside conflict theory entirely and focus on the behavior of the much smaller party in heterogeneous conflicts as either resistance or grievance, such as James C. Scott’s work on individual peasant resistance [xvi] or in business managerial studies that examine complaints over time to map the “grievant’s career,” [xvii] where “conflicts” are reframed into “complaints.” I would like to believe, however, that there is utility in retaining the lens of conflict in examining these disputes.

Once we jettison the presumption that conflict is exclusively a human-human phenomenon, whether those humans are acting alone or in groups, it is easy to recognize that much of what is discussed as tension between the individual and larger systems or, more directly, “oppression,” should also be recognized as conflict. While this may seem an overly-intellectualized model, consider the conflicts described by Lisa Dodson in *The Moral Underground: How Ordinary Americans Subvert an Unfair Economy* [xviii]. Dodson’s stories of workers and managers recognizing the extent to which they live within a system that seeks to undermine their goals and taking action to undermine the functioning of that system appear on one hand to be obviously conflict behavior and on the other as something traditional conflict theory could only process by reframing into a dispute between employees and bosses.

These are the conflicts that we all experience as we attempt to assert agency in the world, but they are not well-served by traditional conflict theory. What we need, then, are new tools derived from non-conflict work on systems, oppression, hegemony, and the like and applied to the resolution of conflict.

What do we gain by approaching these issues as conflicts? Conflict resolution is agency-oriented. It is premised on the idea that we can do something about systems of violence; we can change the world. It is not just critical reflection, but a course of action. In its most ambitious forms, it aims at nonviolent transformation of our social reality, not the violent, adversarial overthrow of groups or classes. A clear understanding of the conflicts in which we are embedded is vital for this enterprise, as are new tools for addressing them. Critical Conflict Theory holds the promise of aiming us in the right direction. It is possible that the issue of how to address heterogeneous conflicts is the fundamental question of Critical Conflict Theory. At least, it is an important place to start.

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