

# Cultural Conflict

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## Abstract

This essay traces the emergence of the concept of cultural conflict as it is commonly used today in the social sciences. I describe the history of social scientific approaches to cultural conflict as they developed from the post-World War II period through the 1980s; emphasizing how changes in the ways scholars conceptualize culture correspond to changes in how conflict is investigated. I argue that a pendulum-like swing has occurred between, what I refer to as, inequality-based approaches and value-based approaches to the study of conflict. Researchers deploying inequality-based approaches tend to focus on how inherent antagonisms within political, economic, and religious institutions, to name a few, lead people into contentious relations with others. In these accounts, culture is viewed as a by-product of a group's position within a particular institution, and as such, is considered to reflect members' collective interests (or institutionally produced needs). Value-based approaches, on the other hand, are characterized by the researcher's attention to fundamental differences in what people *believe*, and how these beliefs lead to contentious relations between various groups, nations, or even civilizations. In these approaches, culture is seen as enduring sets of schemas, or value systems, that direct action. This essay then turns to the debate over particular value-based approaches to cultural conflict that emerged in the 1990s and presents emerging alternatives to these approaches. I conclude by presenting work that represent the current state of scholarship on cultural conflict and discuss how increased cross-disciplinary collaborations contribute to our ability to advance social science research and develop new understandings of how culture relates to conflict.

## INTRODUCTION

This essay traces the emergence of the concept of cultural conflict as it is commonly used today in the social sciences. It would be impossible to cover the entire history of cultural conflict, or every perspective on the issue; such a project would take entire volumes. So here I focus on the history of social scientific approaches to cultural conflict as they developed from the post-World War II period through the 1980s, and then turn my attention to a particular understanding of how culture contributes to conflict that emerged in the 1990s. I describe this as a shift between inequality-based approaches

and value-based approaches. I cover a range of criticisms and debates over these approaches that have allowed several powerful perspectives to emerge, which represent the current state of scholarship on cultural conflict. The essay concludes by discussing how increased cross-disciplinary collaborations contribute to our ability to advance social science research and develop new understandings of how culture relates to conflict.

## FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

The history of cultural conflict begins with the transition from a focus on *social* conflict to *cultural* conflict. It corresponds to a shift from what I refer to as inequality-based approaches to the study of conflict to those that are value-based. Researchers deploying inequality-based approaches tend to focus on how inherent antagonisms (or competing *interests*) within political, economic, and religious institutions, to name a few, lead people into contentious relations with others. In these accounts, culture is viewed as a by-product of a group's position within a particular institution, and as such, is considered to reflect members' collective interests (or institutionally produced needs). Value-based approaches, on the other hand, are characterized by the researcher's attention to fundamental differences in what people *believe*, and how these beliefs lead to contentious relations between various groups, nations, or even civilizations. In these approaches, culture is seen as enduring sets of schemas, or value-systems, that direct action.

A focus on social conflict, associated with inequality-based approaches, implies that researchers attempt to explain conflict by investigating material interests as the source of antagonism. Culture, here, is seen to have little to no causal influence on the occurrence of conflict. On the other hand, value-based approaches focus on cultural conflict in the sense that they view culture as the primary cause or determinant of conflict rather than as an effect of conflict. Scholars conceptualize culture as systems of values that have become independent from the material or socioeconomic conditions in which they originated. To better understand how the relationship between particular conceptions of culture correspond to particular ways of understanding conflict, the next section discusses the pendulum-like swing from studying social conflict to cultural conflict in more detail.

### SOCIAL CONFLICT TO CULTURAL CONFLICT

Many of the past scholarly references to conflict relate to the "conflict theorists" of the 1950s and 1960s, like C. Wright Mills, Lewis Coser, and Ralf Dahrendorf. These thinkers, despite their differences, are best known for their criticisms of structural functionalism, the dominant approach to sociology from the 1940s to the early 1960s. Structural functionalists, best

represented by Talcott Parsons, viewed society as composed of interdependent subsystems that develop to meet peoples' needs and to ensure the survival of the overall system. People, from this perspective, are believed to possess a volatile human nature that must be constrained by the system in order to maintain stability. In this view, conflict represents a disruption in the system, wherein the natural tendencies of people are not being adequately constrained by social structures. The occurrence of conflict requires the system to adjust, whether this means developing new cultural norms or new institutions of social control, to prevent future disruptions. It is in this sense that conflict is viewed as a normal attribute of all social systems. It is fundamentally caused by human nature and results in improvements being made to the system that are assumed to maintain long-term stability (for more information, see Parsons, 1951; Parsons & Shils, 1951).

Conflict theorists criticized structural functionalists for assuming that conflict is a normal, common attribute to all social orders (Joas & Knöbl, 2009). Instead, conflict theorists claimed that people who would otherwise behave in an orderly manner are pressured into contentious relationships by social institutions, and that social institutions relating to politics, economy, family, and religion have developed in ways that manufacture antagonisms between people that would not have existed otherwise (Abbott, 2004; Joas & Knöbl, 2009). For example, in *White Collar*, C. Wright Mills (1951) examines how the position of middle-class Americans in the labor force alienates them from work, their own personalities, and also estranges them from their local communities. In other words, their position in the labor force generates negative tensions with people in other social classes, in addition to producing ill will toward others in the same social class, as their interests cannot be satisfied without infringing on others. Thus, from the perspective of the conflict theorists, conflict does not occur naturally but has *social* origins that must be investigated and explained; this is where the connotation of *social conflict* comes from.

Culture in these accounts is often considered to be epiphenomenal, a mere by-product of the material or socioeconomic conditions in which people live, and therefore does not have causal attributes. Culture, in this sense, can be thought of as a shadow; it mimics or even distorts how an object appears but it does not substantively change the object. As a result, the accounts provided by the conflict theorists of the 1950s and 1960s are often limited to discussions of how antagonisms are manifested in instances of social conflict. They cannot adequately account for the ways in which so-called epiphenomenal aspects of social life also contribute to conflict (see Collins, 1985 for more information on the conflict theorists).

New perspectives emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, which further developed sociological understandings of how culture relates to institutions, and

therefore how culture contributes to conflict. Contributions from theorists associated with the “practical turn” in sociology, like Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens, began to present culture as symbolic resources that mediate an individual’s relationship to institutions. Symbolic resources, according to these theorists, refer to the understandings and social statuses that people gain from participating in institutions such as education, the arts, or the labor force. These symbolic resources link individuals to institutions; they provide people with the ability to make sense of and act within the world. In addition to enabling action, these authors contend, symbolic resources also constrain action because they limit the ways that people can make sense of situations. Because a person can only draw upon symbols (or meanings) that are available to them, and because they develop habituated ways of interpreting those symbols, in any given situation some courses of action will appear to be possible, while others will not even occur to them. Bourdieu and Giddens can each be characterized as deploying inequality-based approaches because they conceptualize culture as inseparably linked to the material and socioeconomic conditions. The habituated ways in which people interpret symbols primarily corresponds to their objective position within a broader set of relations, such as an economic class.

The emphasis that Bourdieu and Giddens each place on culture as symbolic resources yields a focus on symbolic conflict, or, as Bourdieu (1998) calls it, “symbolic violence.” Conflict here does not refer to physical violence (although clashes can turn physically aggressive) so much as it does to people’s struggles over symbolic resources that enable them to interpret and act within the world. For example, in *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984) investigates how competition between French social elites helps shape class-based antagonisms in French society as a whole. He argues that the upper strata of French society develop particular likes and dislikes—leisure activities, membership to clubs, the food they like—which distinguishes them from the “vulgarity” of lower strata. The more exclusive these upper class tastes appear, the more valuable they become, because tastes are not harmless preferences but are symbolic resources that enable people to act, and thus act as powerful processes of inclusion and exclusion. In other words, the distinguishable taste and lifestyles that emerge out of economic stratification are not only by-products of inequality, but they are also sites of contestation and struggle in their own right.

In sum, as with the earlier inequality-based approaches, Bourdieu and Giddens did not attribute causality to culture in and of itself, although their emphasis on how symbolic resources mediate between a person’s place in the world and how he or she acts in the world provided an important link for other scholars to do so. By the 1990s, some sociologists and political scientists altered the view of how culture is related to conflict. Rejecting the premise

of inequality-based approaches and associated claims that culture corresponds directly to material or socioeconomic conditions, these researchers considered culture to be systems of belief that exist independently from the social conditions in which they originate. It is this separation of culture from underlying conditions that marks a shift away from studying conflict using inequality-based approaches and toward using value-based approaches. In other words, once culture was viewed as independent of other factors, researchers began imbuing it with independent causal attributes.

#### VALUE-BASED APPROACHES TO CULTURAL CONFLICT

*Cultural conflict*, as we commonly understand it today, refers to accounts of contentious relationships between people, groups, or nations, in which culture, not underlying material or socioeconomic inequalities, causes conflict to occur. Researchers deploying these approaches make several assumptions that shape their investigations. First, they assume that culture, as systems of beliefs, has become detached from material conditions (e.g., Hunter, 1991; Hunter, 2006; Huntington, 1996). In this sense, culture has become a reality unto itself. Second, researchers base their work on the premise that recent societal changes have led to culture eclipsing material conditions as the primary cause of conflict. In this sense, antagonisms exist between people because they adhere to different cultural systems, not because they possess competing class interests. Aligned with these assumptions, the primary goal of researchers is to understand how differences in belief contribute to conflict.

Value-based approaches to the study of cultural conflict often are accounts of societal battles, whether domestic or global, between culturally polarized groups. For example, in *Culture Wars*, James Davison Hunter (1991) investigates political discourse in the United States and argues that two competing cultural views of morality have emerged in the United States since the end of the Cold War. Hunter contends that these two views of morality, religious conservatism and a secular progressivism, are so entrenched in party politics that each has decoupled from the material or socioeconomic conditions in which they originated. As a result, the United States has become permanently polarized between two general groups. At a global level, authors like Samuel Huntington (1996) use a value-based approach to discuss irresolvable differences between entire civilizations—in this case, Western and Islamic civilizations.

#### CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

Value-based approaches to cultural conflict are currently the subject of intense debate across various disciplines, such as sociology, political science,

history, and cultural studies. While policy experts and the public seem to savor accounts of cultural conflict for their simplicity, it is this very simplicity that is at the heart of academic critiques of such work. Many scholars challenge value-based accounts of cultural conflict as tautological and empirically unsupported. Some take their criticism further by doing empirical work in order to test the propositions presented in value-based accounts. This section explores these critiques in more detail, highlighting several of the most significant arguments and responses related to the debate over the culture wars thesis. I then present new research that represents a move away from value-based approaches.

#### DEBATING VALUE-BASED APPROACHES

*Criticisms.* The advantage of value-based approaches is that they provide simple and provocative accounts of cultural conflict that allow authors to make strong causal claims. The downside is that while the explanations are appealing for their clarity, they can easily become tautological when a researcher presents the presence of difference between categorically distinct groups or populations as the cause of continued division. This is because, conflict, as an eruption between people who adhere to irreconcilably different sets of values, then serves as an indicator of that difference. It produces a situation in which it is nearly impossible for researchers to distinguish between the aspects of culture that are presumed to contribute to occurrences of conflict and the aspects of culture that are asserted to be consequences of such conflict.

Besides pointing to the tautological reasoning used to make these arguments, many scholars challenge the empirical claims used to support accounts of cultural conflict. The most popular (i.e., most frequently cited) challenges to the culture wars thesis tend to analyze large-scale opinion surveys such as the General Social Survey (GSS) to test whether Americans are actually polarized along moral issues. For example, Paul DiMaggio, John Evans, and Bethany Bryson (1996) argue that researchers often mistake the appearance of polarization as expressed in political and media rhetoric as representing differences in what the general public actually believes. Analyzing GSS data, they test whether Americans are polarized along a number of social and moral issues such as the role of women in the public sphere, acceptance of racial integration, and abortion. They find that on all accounts except abortion, Americans are not nearly as polarized as the culture wars thesis suggest.

Alan Wolfe (1998) also analyzes GSS data in combination with his own qualitative interviews with middle-class Americans about their views on social issues such as religion, patriotism, family, racial discrimination, and

sexuality. With the exception of homosexuality, he also finds that accounts of culture wars have been greatly exaggerated. Instead, he argues that most middle-class Americans are pragmatically minded and willing to support traditional values in some manner while also supporting the expansion of rights and increased social acceptance of discriminated groups. Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2010) conducted a similar investigation using opinion poll data to examine whether most Americans are more likely to be politically moderate or extreme ideologues. These authors find that there is a strong trend toward Americans being politically moderate.

In response to his critics, Hunter (2006) argues that his conception of culture as public discourse operates at the collective level and not that of personal belief. Therefore, he suggests, anyone using individual-level data not only misses the point of his argument but is also incapable of testing the accuracy of his thesis. Yet Hunter's response draws attention to another limitation of his approach. He may not only be mistaking political and media rhetoric as representing differences in what the general public believes, he also assumes that people act upon the discourses that are conveyed in that rhetoric. Whether people draw upon a particular discourse during the course of action is an empirical question, not one that can simply be implied. For example, political ads often present candidates as polar opposites. An ad might attempt to scare viewers by saying that a Democratic candidate is going to raise their taxes, socialize their healthcare, and grant amnesty to undocumented immigrants who have come into their country. The same ad might present the Republican candidate as fiscally responsible, committed to competition in the marketplace, and willing to do what it takes to preserve border security. The question for researchers is: What does the meaning conveyed in this ad represent? Hunter's error is that his approach encourages researchers to interpret the difference between the Democratic and Republican candidates made in this ad as representative of what the broader US public believes. He further compounds this error by claiming that the polarization demonstrated in this type of ad has become permanent; that based on their adherence to particular moral systems, people will continue to act in ways that perpetuate this cultural conflict. Had Hunter revised his claims, to state that the discursive patterns he identifies are just that, discursive patterns, and not proof that cultural systems have become, in his own words, *sui generis*, then we would be having a different discussion altogether.

*Emerging Alternatives.* Had Hunter limited his claims and matched them to the type of data he collected, more likely than not, his work would resemble George Lakoff's *Moral Politics*. Lakoff (2002), who uses a value-based approach, presents the cultural divide between Democrats and Republicans

as relating to competing moral systems. He identifies both “liberal” and “conservative” ideological positionings as radial categories (or umbrella concepts) and then searches for a coherent organization that runs throughout each. He concludes that the moral differences between liberals and conservatives can be reduced to people adhering to different understandings of the family. Liberals apply a “nurturing parent” model of the family to their broader political beliefs (implicating a role for programs providing a social safety net), while conservatives do the same with a “strict father” model (emphasizing self-reliance over social provision to those in need). The main difference between this argument and the culture war thesis is that Lakoff limits his discussion to the discursive systems. He also makes it clear that people can use either model in various ways. In this sense, Lakoff acknowledges the diversity of opinion within each radial category and also remains open to the possibility that people could move between the different models. So, rather than making claims about a new form of permanent polarization in US politics, Lakoff provides us with the analytical tools to examine how miscommunication and breakdown in dialogue occurs between liberals and conservatives.

Moving past the dichotomy between value-based approaches and inequality-based approaches, scholars today are investigating the relationship between cultural conflict and other historically significant social divisions that occur along economic, racial, religious, linguistic, or educational lines. Notably, these scholars are doing away with the assumption that polarization occurs along one central cleavage. Instead, by investigating how different moral views or contrasting cultural beliefs map onto existing social differences, these scholars are able to develop understandings of how conflict develops along multiple, smaller cleavages. For example, Claude Fischer and Greggor Mattson (2009) review claims made between 1970 and 2005 to understand whether America is becoming more polarized, or using their terminology, more fragmented. While they find little support for claims that fragmentation is increasing along racial or ethnic lines, they argue that there is a widening gap in social class—whether measured by educational attainment or income. Furthermore, they contend that Americans are becoming more concentrated in “little worlds” defined by contrasting ways of life.

Scholars researching institutions are also actively challenging the assumptions made in value-based approaches, namely, that belief alone determines action. For example, Amy Binder and Kate Wood (2013) set out to understand how two groups of people with similar political ideologies can engage in very different styles of political action. Comparing conservative political clubs at two US universities, they find that the universities themselves have



distinct institutional cultures that help shape the political action of conservative students on each campus. This speaks to the situated nature in which political action takes place. People do not act only in response to a single cultural system, but are nested within various institutions, organizations, and social relationships that shape action to varying degrees.

Political scientists are developing new accounts of how polarization occurs amongst political parties. For example, Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson (2005) question whether we should view Democrats and Republicans as mirror images of each other. Treating each party as a distinct community, or what they refer to as separate social configurations, they find that political polarization is increasing, but that it is due largely to changes in the Republican Party, not the Democratic Party. More specifically, they argue that during George W. Bush's presidency, a slim majority of the Republican Party gained control and pushed the party's agenda further to the political right, while Democrats maintained their previous political positions. Research in this mode demonstrates quite clearly that researchers should not view cultural conflict as equally created by "both sides," but rather that we must view political and organizational interests, and sources of power, as central to the discussion.

Lastly, in what is perhaps the most promising of recent approaches, sociologist Rogers Brubaker (2013) compares how language and religion, as significant domains of cultural activity, each lead to political conflict. To do so, he first compares each domain of cultural activity to see how they are similar and different. Second, he compares the ways in which particular activities that regulate private behavior within each domain become manifested within political claims addressing such matters as gender, sexuality, family, education, social policy, and economy. Investigating liberal societies, he argues that linguistic pluralism has become a less significant source of political conflict in recent times, whereas, religious pluralism has become more deeply institutionalized and increasingly politicized, which has begun to lead to more robust forms of diversity and political conflict. Brubaker's work further demonstrates the usefulness of comparing various domains of cultural activity in order to understand the relation of culture to conflict.

#### KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As I have argued here, scholars developed the value-based approaches to cultural conflict in the 1990s in order to understand how cultural beliefs contribute to contentious relationships between people, large-scale groups, organizations, and civilizations. Ironically, the major contribution and limitation of these value-based approaches is that they analytically severed the link

between culture and structural conditions. By viewing culture as an independent system, value-based conflict theorists presented themselves as able to assess the independent causal attributes of culture leading to the occurrence of conflict. However, as indicated by the large body of criticism being waged against value-based accounts of cultural conflict, they go too far toward one logical extreme. Researchers cannot isolate culture as an independent causal factor that is detached from all material or socioeconomic conditions without making questionable epistemologically claims that decreases the usefulness of their investigations. In other words, the simplified accounts provided by scholars deploying value-based approaches have the potential of obscuring our understandings of how conflict occurs in today's world. Specifically value-based approaches to cultural conflict limit our understandings of how culture relates to conflict because:

Culture is always seen as causing conflict. Scholars can only observe causation as unidirectional. They cannot reverse the causal order or investigate the possibility of a dialectic relationship between culture and conflict.

Existing cultural differences are always seen as causing conflict and then the occurrence of that conflict is seen as reinforcing those preexisting cultural differences. This not only leads to tautological explanations, it also discourages scholars from investigating how instances of conflict between cultural groups can lead to the emergence of new cultural forms.

Conflict is always seen as occurring along one central cleavage. This assumption prevents scholars from considering the possibility that more than two cultural groups are involved in a conflict. This assumption also obscures smaller, more fragmentary, cleavages that may occur.

Cultural groups are viewed as homogeneous communities. This encourages scholars to negate the possibility of internal divisions leading to internal conflicts that are either resolved, persist, or lead to the formation of new cultural groups or subgroups.

Cultural differences, and therefore cultural groups, are always presumed to exist before the occurrence of conflict. This can lead to misidentifying cultural groups that have emerged during a conflict as having existed before the conflict.

These limitations must be taken seriously if scholars are to develop new insights and understandings of cultural conflict. This does not mean eliminating concepts such as cultural conflict; it simply suggests that scholars need to reevaluate how they consider culture within their investigations of conflict.

## EMERGING TRENDS IN THE STUDY OF CULTURAL CONFLICT

The studies presented in this entry speak to the challenges of studying conflict. Scholars emphasizing material or socioeconomic conditions often neglect how culture, in the forms of peoples' understandings of the world, leads to disagreements and contentious relationships between groups. At the same time, researchers granting primacy to culture as an independent causal force, independent from material or socioeconomic conditions, go too far in the other direction by assuming culture to be the most significant factor driving conflict. Scholarship in this area could benefit from taking the middle ground between inequality-based and value-based approaches and attempt to develop comprehensive approaches that account for both structural and cultural factors.

The challenge to developing a comprehensive approach (or approaches) is that it requires researchers to do away with particular assumptions about how culture relates to material or socioeconomic conditions. Researchers should not assume that culture is epiphenomenal, nor should they consider it to be completely independent. In other words, whether material and socioeconomic conditions or culture lead to conflict is not a zero-sum proposition. Instead, whether underpinning social conditions, culture, or some linkage between the two leads to conflict should always be an empirical question. It is plausible that structural factors will seem more significant in some instances but not others, and the same for culture.

Researchers must also do away with the belief that identifiable cultural groups actually represent homogeneous communities. The degree of homogeneity, solidarity, sense of commonality, or even degree of connectivity between members, must also be an empirical question. One way to do this is to initially conceptualize cultural groups as broad categories such as "Democrat" or "Republican." Then, whether researchers read accounts of a particular categorical group or conduct their own field research, they can begin to characterize the degree to which the people associated with a category are actually a group (Brubaker 2004). Doing so will lead to empirically grounded understandings of the relationships and dynamics in and between "groups" of people, as well as the salience that particular categories have in their lives. This should not only prevent researchers from jumping to conclusions about whether a broader political discourse represents a cultural group or not but it also challenges researchers to consider people as more multidimensional. Individuals do not belong to a single cultural group; they are nested within numerous cultural groups. With this complexity in mind, researchers need to understand how individuals become involved in some cultural conflicts but not others.

After doing away with these old assumptions about the relation between material or socioeconomic conditions and culture, in addition to the assumption that cultural groups are homogeneous, there are four areas of research that promise to provide new insights and understandings of how culture is related to conflict.

Constructing longer chains of succession between culture and conflict.

If culture can contribute to the occurrence of conflict, and conflict can produce new cultural understandings and practices, then we need long-term empirical cases that follow development of various cultures and conflicts as they relate to each other.

Investigating the ways that people participate in particular conflicts and how those experiences affect their participation in others.

Studying the relationship between smaller conflicts (or cleavages) in order to understand if there are broader, more central conflicts. How do temporary alliances in smaller conflicts either tell us about those smaller conflicts or speak to the presence of a broader, more pervasive conflict?

Examining internal conflicts within a cultural group. How do contentious relationships within a cultural group lead to the emergence of new groups or subgroups?

Pursuing these research agendas will be much easier if scholars engage in cross-disciplinary dialogue. This not only means engaging in discussions across the humanities and social sciences, it also means reaching out to others in the technological sciences in order to develop new data collection methods. The more types of information scholars can bring in, the better they will be at understanding how culture contributes to conflict. For example, sociologists are beginning to partner with computer scientists to develop new techniques that can collect vast amounts of information from the Internet in an instant. While few sociologists know how to write a program for doing this, few computer scientists would know how to interpret that information sociologically. Together they can produce new modes of data collection that will open new areas of investigation. Through these joint efforts, scholars are sure to develop new understandings and insights into the relation between culture and conflict.

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