Introduction

Emergent and Self-Propelling Conflicts

Virtually all violence is emergent, in the sense that it does not inevitably happen because of long-standing structural conditions. Why does violence happen at one particular time rather than another? Most of the time it does not happen. Structural conditions for social antagonism are much more widespread than overt conflict, and conflict is more widespread than physical violence. Threatened violence often aborts; when it does break out, how long it lasts and with what severity of damage vary considerably. There appears to be a great deal of indeterminacy in all aspects of violence, from beginning to end.

Although violence is not structurally inevitable, emergent conflicts and their temporal life-spans are not inexplicable. By “inevitable,” we mean following invariably from the particular causal conditions that we have in mind; for example, the theory that class conflict under capitalism is the cause of revolution has been widely rejected as a kind of historical inevitability that poorly fits the historical record. It does not follow that all theories of causal process fail; what we need are causal conditions that demonstrably operate at the level of time-dynamics we are concerned with. The crucial turning points in conflict and violence are matters of process and temporary situational configurations, rather than long-term structures. Processes have patterns, and discovering these patterns generates a predictive theory. This is not merely a hypothetical claim, since research in recent years on short-term patterns of violent situations has shown a number of situational configurations that promote violence and others that inhibit it.

Time-dynamics of social processes are concerned with when events begin and end and how long they go on. These time-patterns are a subject for empirical observation. Not all kinds of conflict and violence have the same time-patterns; why they differ is what we want to establish. The time-dynamics of conflict and violence are sensitive to scale: conflicts among small numbers of persons have different time-dimensions than
conflicts at larger degrees of organization, from crowds to movements to armies and states. This does not mean merely that small-scale fights take less time than struggles among bigger organizations. There are turning points in all sizes of conflict, and different time-patterns branch out from these turning points. In one-on-one face conflicts, repetitive gestures and insults (combined with an unsupportive audience) bring rapid boredom, and the threat of violence often aborts in less than 60 seconds. In a protest demonstration, there is a particular few hours when violence is most likely to break out, and if that period of vulnerability is passed, there is no violence that day. On a much larger scale, revolutions succeed rather quickly (in a matter of days) if a tipping point mechanism is present; without the necessary conditions for a tipping point, a would-be revolution turns into a civil war that can last years. These are the kind of time-dynamics we are seeking. As we shall see, differences in time-patterns are related to how much damage is done and the strength of people’s emotions for continuing or ending a fight.

Violence, Volume 2

This volume, Explosive Conflict: Time-Dynamics of Violence, is the sequel promised in my 2008 book, Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory. The original plan of that book was comprehensive, but there turned out to be far too many types of violence to handle in one volume. The Micro/Violence book analyzed 30 types, all focusing on here-and-now situational details. What was left out is the macro level, stretching out in time and space. This includes not only large-scale organized violence (war, revolution, genocide, guerrilla and terrorist tactics), but also the meso or middle-sized spectrum where protest demos can last for weeks. There are also violent events like mass rampage shootings, carried out by isolated individuals or duos (and thus in a sense are micro), but which have a preliminary build-up of months of secretly collecting weapons and making plans; and these connect to previous rampages because would-be mass killers obsess over spectacular attacks they want to imitate. Some kinds of violence have a backward trail that requires us to step out of the here-and-now dynamics, while other kinds of violence have sudden emergence but a long forward trail because of their scale of organization. Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory bracketed the social background of individuals as well as their motives for getting into violence, in order to focus on situational dynamics. My aim was to start empirically at the point where a confrontation shapes up, and to watch it move forward—or not—to actual violence. This was a deliberate intellectual tactic. Obviously, I am aware of the large amount of research relating violence to social class, race, gang membership, gender, family, and childhood experience. It should go without saying that our explanations are multi-causal. My chief point is that having a background statistically
related to violence still leaves most such people, most of the time, not committing violence. As I have noted about gang members: even if they committed half of all murders (and we know that a large proportion of homicides are domestic and other kinds), the ratio works out to 1 murder per 88 gang members (Collins 2008: 373); and even for these killers, what do they do the other 364 days of the year? Similarly with the causal power of motivations: being angry or wanting to hurt someone is not a sufficient explanation of whether violence will be carried out or not.

My key finding is confrontational tension/fear (CT/F), which makes committing violence difficult—when it comes to the sticking point, in the words of Lady Macbeth—not easy. This is an emotional and physiological process that tends to make threatening confrontations abort, except where there are situational conditions that allow persons to break through the emotional barrier. And even when they do start violence, CT/F generally makes them incompetent, with bad aim, out-of-control firing or striking, and hitting the wrong targets. Without social pressure to keep the fight going, most fights wind down rather quickly. My aim, then, was to shift the explanatory focus from background propensities to actual mechanisms in play in a threatening situation. What background conditions and current motives cannot explain are turning points and outcomes: that is to say, what determines whether a fight will break out or not; and if it does, who wins, loses, stalemates, and how much damage is done.

**Explaining Outbreaks and Outcomes**

This book continues the emphasis on turning points and emergent processes; but let us now remove the brackets around the immediate situation. Looking backwards from the threat of violence, what causes conflict in the first place? Do we have a general theory of the causes of conflict? Sociologists since the 1950s have worked with the three-dimensional stratification of Max Weber: economic class, cultural status-group identity, and political power are all domains of conflict. More recently, we have added gender and sexual preference as bases of domination and contention. Anything which is a resource for organizing and for social superiority can be grounds for conflict, between the haves and the have-nots.

Donald Black has argued that this kind of theorizing is insufficient. A constant cannot move a variable; only a change in one condition can cause a change in another condition. Racism, or capitalist inequality, as constant features cannot generate conflict. Black argues that change is what causes conflict; and that change can occur in either direction, and in three dimensions: an increase or decrease in hierarchy; an increase or decrease in social distance or intimacy; an increase or decrease in cultural similarity or difference. This gives conflict its moral quality: people feel their habitual arrangements and standards are being violated, and that they have the
moral right to resist the change. Hence Black's title, *Moral Time* (2011): conflict is a movement in time, which people feel as a moral trajectory for the worse.

Black proposes that conflict is greater when changes on these dimensions are bigger and faster, and when changes occur on more dimensions simultaneously. His theory focuses less on large structural changes than on individual experience. Conflict occurs when a person or group rises or flaunts their success, thereby incurring hostility; but also when a person experiences downward mobility, lashing out in resentment at being fired. Thus, the prediction is about which persons set off conflict with whom. We should note two blank spots in the explanation. One is that there are a variety of ways persons can react to a shift in their relative position: losers can accept it; they can move away and avoid the situation; they can counterattack; they can displace their attack onto someone else; they can turn against themselves in suicide. Black's *The Social Structure of Right and Wrong* (1998) spells out conditions under which people in particular network configurations choose one or another of these paths. For example, avoiding a conflict by moving away is typical both in hunting-and-gathering bands and in modern suburbs, where hierarchy and mutual dependence are low and it is easy to change networks. There still remains a gap on the micro-level of everyday life, because a person who wants to attack someone they feel has insulted them nevertheless will not carry out the attack, unless they have favorable situational conditions, such as emotional domination in a particular encounter.

Another kind of theoretical gap is the time-dynamics. An underlying mechanism in Black's theory is that people are habituated to being in a particular pattern of hierarchy and social distance, and feel that a sudden or large change is shameful or wrong. By the same token, once they get used to a change in their social location, it again becomes taken for granted and no longer causes conflict. This means there must be a time-law about how long it takes for bland normalcy to be re-established. Putting the two kinds of theoretical gaps together, we can see that micro-interactional contingencies may keep an aggrieved person from engaging in overt violence, and if a favorable situation to attack never arises, enough time may elapse so that the new relationship becomes normalized. In other words, there is a danger-time zone between the initial change in “moral time” and habituation to the change. Once that time zone is passed, the chances of conflict fall away.

We need a three-step model: (1) changes in underlying conditions generate potential conflict; (2) potential conflict turns into overt conflict; and (3) overt conflict goes through a turning point to violence.

Step (1) is reasonably well theorized. Almost anything can become a source of potential conflict, especially changes in relative social position. Rapidity and extensiveness of these changes magnify the potential for conflict.
Step (2) needs further analysis. Potential for conflict is stored in people’s emotions, but individuals can keep their emotions to themselves; or engage in backstage griping without confronting their target; or spend their time on private fantasies for revenge, even planning scenarios and collecting weapons for an attack. Posting such plans or rants on the Internet is another step along this path. But all these remain potential rather than overt conflict, until the two sides actually make contact expressing an “I-vs.-you” relationship. There are a number of ways this can happen. They could use official and organizational channels, such as making a complaint, calling the police, filing a lawsuit, organizing a political campaign. They could confront the opponent face-to-face, either as individuals or as a mass gathering, such as a protest demonstration. There are also some in-between steps, such as engaging in covert attacks. Robert Emerson’s *Everyday Troubles* (2015) found that conflicts between roommates—over messiness, noise, or using each other’s possessions—usually did not lead to overt complaints but to unvoiced tit-for-tat or other tactics expressing one’s displeasure; and these moves were often misinterpreted by the other side because they were not overtly expressed. As yet we lack a good theoretical explanation of which kinds of moves are made, and whether they are made at all.

Step (3) has been theorized on the micro-level (Collins 2008) in the pathways circumventing confrontational tension/fear. A larger-scale theory of turning-points to violence is the subject of this book. And once violence breaks out, we need to theorize whether the result will be winning, losing, or stalemate, and how long it takes.

Steps (2) and (3) are the subject of this book.

**Overview of the Book**

Part I, “Time-Dynamics,” is a series of steps toward establishing time-patterns and their mechanisms.

Chapter 1 uses a trendy title “C-Escalation and D-Escalation: A Theory of the Time-Dynamics of Conflict,” to bring out some further points about the spiral of conflict: it is counter-escalation but also the less-studied but all-important de-escalation process. This is a micro-macro effort focusing on micro-mechanisms (from interaction ritual) plus meso-level structures that activists assemble by mobilizing networks and material resources. Together these drive the upward spiral, but also provide alternative ways for the downward process to happen.

Conflict escalates through a series of feedback loops. On the micro level, conflict generates conditions for intense interaction rituals, whose internal solidarity fuels external conflict. Perceived atrocities increase ideological polarization reciprocally between opponents, while real atrocities also happen because confrontational tension/fear makes violence incompetent at hitting its intended targets, and adrenaline surges plus emotional
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Conflict groups build up meso-structure by seeking allies, driving out neutrals, and mobilizing material resources. Both sides counter-escalate through the same set of feedbacks. Who wins or loses depends on differences between opponents’ rates of escalation, and by destroying the other side’s organizational and material capacity.

Conflict de-escalates when both sides fail in conditions for solidarity, for overcoming confrontational tension/fear, and through exhaustion of material resources. Emotional burnout sets in through a time-dynamic of explosion (a few days), plateau (three months), and dissipation of enthusiasm (out to six months, somewhat analogous to the half-life of decaying radiation). Defection of allies opens the way for third-party settlement. When both sides remain stalemated, initial enthusiasm and external polarization give way to emergent internal factions—a victory faction (hard-liners) versus a peace faction (negotiators)—thereby creating a new dimension of conflict. Ideals promoted at the outset of conflict become obstacles to resolution at the end. Peace is not everybody’s goal; a moral gulf develops between those who want to end a conflict through victory, and the combination of realists and idealists who want to end the costs of debilitating stalemate.

Chapter 2, “Time-Bubbles of Nationalism,” introduces the concept of a “time-bubble,” an emotional mood produced by a sudden event focusing public attention into a massive interaction ritual. But interaction rituals, like everything else, are subject to time-dynamics. How long does the bubble last before the air leaks out of it? We start by looking at the macro-historical causes of nationalism.

Modern nationalism is a by-product of the bureaucratic state penetrating society, creating cultural uniformity and national identity. But structurally based nationalism is not necessarily very intense. Even when institutionalized in periodic formal rituals like the Fourth of July, it can be routine, low in emotion—even boring. We need to explain sudden upsurges in popular nationalism, but also their persistence and fading in medium-length periods of time. Nationalist surges are connected with geopolitical rises and falls in the power-prestige of states: strong and expanding states absorb smaller particularistic identities into a prestigious whole; weaker and defeated states suffer delegitimization of the dominant nationality and fragment in sudden upsurges of localizing nationalities. Moving from macro-patterns to micro-sociological mechanisms, conflict producing solidarity is a key mechanism: dramatic events focus widespread attention and assemble crowds into spontaneous mass-participation interaction rituals. Evidence from public assemblies and the display of national symbols following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 shows an intense period of national solidarity for three months, then a gradual return to normal internal divisions by around six months. Spontaneous rituals of national
solidarity are produced not only by external conflict but by internal uprisings, where an emotional upsurge of national identity is used to legitimate revolutionary crowds and discredit regimes. But conflict-mobilized national solidarity lives in a three-to-six-month time-bubble, and needs to institutionalize its successes rapidly to have long-term effects.

Chapter 3, “Tipping Point Revolutions and State Breakdown Revolutions” examines why revolutions succeed or fail. After the fall of the Soviet satellites and then of the Soviet Union itself during 1989–1991, and a series of “color revolutions” in its successor states, the belief grew among activists in a formula for carrying out revolution. Assemble a huge crowd of demonstrators; stay civil and non-violent while letting the other side take the moral onus of committing atrocities against unarmed people; build up sympathy from the crowd-control forces so that they start intervening on your side; within a few weeks the authoritarian ruler becomes isolated and is removed by state elites going over to the revolution. This tipping point theory was widely emulated in the Arab Spring revolts in 2011, but with mostly poor results. It also runs contrary to the state breakdown theory of revolution formulated by Theda Skocpol, Jack Goldstone, and others on the famous historic revolutions in England, France, Russia, China, and Japan. This theory posits a sequence of three processes: first in time, a pervasive state crisis in finances and/or military defeat; second, a split within the ruling elite over how to solve the crisis; third, a popular revolt, after elite reformers have prepared the way for the downfall of the whole regime. The state crisis is inescapable because it undercuts the elite’s means of coercion and control. The third component, a mass uprising, is similar to the tipping point theory. But the third component without the first two results in shallow or failed revolutions, which soon reverts to another version of the old regime, and produces no deep structural changes. The anti-Soviet revolution fits the state breakdown theory. The Arab Spring revolts, like other waves of attempted revolution (as in 1848), were set off by emulation of revolutions elsewhere, without the prior internal components of state breakdown that made change inevitable. Not that the tipping point theory is useless as an analytical device; it adds to our theoretical repertoire—the causes of shallow revolutions and of deep structural revolutions.

Chapter 4, “Time-Dynamics of Violence from Micro to Macro,” summarizes time-dynamics of conflict, on a scale from thresholds of small-scale violence within a few minutes or less; for crowds, violent danger-time zones of a few hours; for riots and revolutionary tipping points, a span of three days up to several weeks; the mass crisis solidarity and hysteria zone of three months, falling off by six months; and macro time-forks where wars or revolts get resolved quickly with relatively few casualties, or turn into prolonged civil wars and wars of attrition that go on for years.
Part II, “The Eye of the Needle: Emotional Processes,” is about the collective moods that swing conflicts one way or another, from the threshold of outbreak, to the time they call it quits. This set of chapters makes two points. (Chapter 5, “Material Interests Are Ambiguous, So Interaction Rituals Steer Political Movements.”) First, framing conflicts in terms of their conflicting interests is a poor predictor of what will actually happen. Not that material interests don’t exist, but in practice they are ambiguous as to what people do to advance them. People still have to decide who gets included as having “the same interests,” from narrowly self-centered personal advancement, to local protection, to grand coalition. And interests don’t determine tactics; the history of the labor movement, or any reforming social movement, tends to revolve around splits over whether to be peaceful or violent; whether to seek incremental gains and pragmatic deals with opponents, or to strive militantly for rapid and total change: in short, compromisers vs. ultras. The same movement can switch among these paths (the Nazis and the early Chinese Communists are examples), and timely switching is often what makes them successful. This kind of split over tactics is similar to what we see in Chapter 1, in the downphase of a stalemate conflict between bitter-enders and the peace faction. If interests don’t explain these emergent processes of conflict, what does? To readers of my previous books, it will come as no surprise: the success or failure of interaction rituals that bring people together as action groups.

Second point: How long do these collective moods last before they change? I examine mood swings in two historic revolutions. (Chapter 6, “Mood-Swings in the Downfall of the English Revolution.”) The end of the English Revolution happened between the time Oliver Cromwell died in 1658 and the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. For most of this time, all the important actors wanted to continue the republic, the Commonwealth. Only in the last two months was there a switch, when the same people who vowed, “Monarchy never!” were cheering for the return of the King.

(Chapter 7, “When History Holds Its Breath: The Take-Off of the French Revolution.”) The other case is the turning point of the French Revolution, the night of August 4, 1789, when the assembled notables of France decided to abolish the aristocratic regime, and with it the power of the chief hereditary aristocrat, the King. This is a theoretically important case because Ivan Ermakoff (2015) presents it as key evidence for a critique of Durkheimian interaction ritual theory. Yes, the assembly broke into collective effervescence, a wave of enthusiasm, emotional energy, a new basis of solidarity—but these happened after a period when the assembly was deeply divided, hesitant, and unenthusiastic about anything. The interaction ritual (IR), in other words, was just a victory celebration, once they finally hit on something they could agree upon. Ermakoff stresses this was an instance of genuine historical contingency, a cognitive and emotional
standstill—they genuinely didn’t know what to do. In Ermakoff’s analysis, they suddenly shifted when the Duc de Châtelet made a speech declaring that aristocrats should voluntarily give up their privileges and become citizens like everyone else. (An extreme case of going against one’s material interests!) Other speakers chimed in, and soon there was a cascade of aristocrats disavowing their privileges; and this created the conditions for Durkheimian solidarity. But the IR is an outcome, not a cause, in the time sequence.

My response is: look at the earlier events of the crisis through the experiences of the Duc de Châtelet. He was a strong monarchist, the commander of the royal guard, tasked with leading his soldiers to police the radicals of the assembly, and holding off the crowd at the Bastille. In all these events he failed. His emotional energy (EE) was dashed by his failed IRs with his own mutinous soldiers. Suddenly he had an emotional revelation: go where the EE is, on the side of the opponents he had tried to put down. This fits the motivational principle of IR chains: individuals avoid IRs that drain their EE, and seek those where they gain EE. How long does it take to make a total switch in trajectory? Trace the EE of the Duc de Châtelet from June 23 to August 4: six weeks.

Chapter 8, “Assault on the Capitol: 2021, 1917, 1792,” compares the January 6, 2021 assault on the US Capitol with two similar scenes: the Bolshevik assault on the Czar’s palace in November 1917 and the attack on the Tuileries palace in Paris in August 1792 that began the overthrow of the French monarchy. My focus is not on the background conflicts or the downstream consequences (the Capitol attack failed rather quickly while the others made historic revolutions), but on the process of crowds attacking the center of government. It is the similar details that first caught my attention: protestors sitting in the Senate presiding chair, and trashing the office of House Speaker Pelosi, scenes that echoed the French and Russian Revolutions. Similar, too, were the Capitol police retreating before the protestors, and officials wavering and disagreeing over what forces to send to repel the assault. The larger lesson is that at a revolutionary moment, it is a contest of which side can stay organized while the other side becomes disorganized—two spinning gyroscopes waiting to see which one will fall first.

This is one of two instances in this book where I was able to gather first-hand evidence on historic events while they were unfolding. The first (described in Chapter 1) was the day after the 9/11, 2001 attack on the Twin Towers in New York, when I realized it was an opportunity to investigate Simmel’s classic theory that external conflict creates internal solidarity—in this case, by walking around and counting how many flags people put up and how long they were displayed. This became my first research measuring the time-dynamics of violent conflict. The second was in the days after January 6, 2021, when the news media and the Internet were full
of photos and videos of militant demonstrators and the police at the Capitol. It was an opportunity to watch the details of revolution first-hand, instead of relying on documents collected by historians. Historic events are big and macro, but nevertheless they are human social processes, full of emotions and the collective actions of individuals. Today’s era of visual data gives us unprecedented access to the dynamics of history—if we seize the opportunity to examine it with sociological eyes.

Part III, “War and Sport: Dynamics of Winning, Losing, and Stalemate,” begins with the point that sports and violence model each other (Chapter 9, “The Micro-Sociology of Sport”). Sport is play-fighting, or in William James’s term “a moral equivalent of war,” and involves similar mechanisms for winning and losing. There is also a convergence in research methods. Close micro-observation was pioneered by using film and video recordings to plan game strategy and athletic training; and more recently taken a further step by body instruments measuring breathing and heart rate. We probably know more about what happens on an athletic field than anywhere else. This development was paralleled by micro-sociology of everyday interaction and violence. The upshot is we can spell out pretty clearly how play-conflict is won or lost; and this provides a useful addition to what we have observed about real violence. Both are contests of EE (emotional energy), solidarity, and EDOM (emotional domination).

There are of course some differences. Games are scheduled in advance and organized in leagues or tournaments, so that teams of about the same ability play each other. In war, especially in particular battles, leaders try to arrange it so that they fight when and where they have advantages of numbers and terrain; they seek an unequal playing field. Games are much shorter than battles, with time-dynamics in the 1-to-3-hour time zone rather than the all-day-to-several-days in battles of maneuver. Sieges and trench warfare stretch out into years, producing a level of attrition, and logistics problems, far beyond sports. Nevertheless, sport reveals the core of battle.

Chapter 10, “Battle Dynamics: Victory and Defeat”: What happens in battle combines a number of different processes, but we can see fairly clearly how they flow toward victory, defeat, or stalemate by diagramming them in a flow chart with feedback loops. I try to avoid losing the path in a diagram with too many spaghetti loops, by walking our way through on two main paths. (1) How much material resources an army has, delivered by logistics of high or low quality, into firepower on the battlefield, which I call the intensity of assault. Simultaneously, (2) how high is the army’s organizational morale (made up of the familiar sources of EE, coordination, and military discipline), which determine how good the army is at maneuver. (Think Napoleon, or Grant vs. Lee.) The main argument is that morale/maneuver is more powerful than material/logistics/firepower (Napoleon said 3-to-1), because the key to victory is breaking down the
enemy’s organization, making them unable to use the material resources that they have. But maneuver does not always win battles; if conditions for successful maneuver are weak, or if differences in material resources are just too strong (beyond 3-to-1, the precise ratio being more complicated than this), victory will go the other way.

Inventions of new military technology do not require a new theory, since technological innovations operate by changing the strength of the pathways in the basic model, but not eliminating these pathways. Chapter 11, “High-Tech War in Theory and Reality,” takes up high-tech war, the “revolution in military affairs” since the computerization of battle in the 1990s. War has changed from commanders on the battlefield (Napoleon, Stonewall Jackson, Rommel, Patton) into remote control from the other side of the world. Sensors in space satellites and drones trace enemy movements by comparing high-resolution photos; infra-red sensors locate the heat of vehicles or human bodies; radar detectors pin-point the source of enemy firing and fire back immediately to destroy it. Does turning over fighting to computer-controlled technology penetrate the fog of war and eliminate Clausewitzian friction? Friction affects all parts of Chapter 10 battle diagrams. Friction in logistics—mechanical breakdowns, traffic accidents, running out of fuel—screws up scheduling all along the line, and reduces advantages in forces and firepower. Besides this physical drag, friction also takes the form of informational fog—not knowing where the enemy is, or even where all one’s own forces are—and human emotions, which amplify enthusiasm or spread confusion and the passivity of defeat. Thus, friction also produces wild or inaccurate firing, and can stymie the morale-maneuver sequence. High-tech is designed to remedy this by turning to non-human sources of scheduling, targeting, and information, and by taking human emotions out of the loop.

Drawing on experiences of US and UK troops in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, I spell out some reasons why friction remains. The enemy may also have high-tech and can use it to negate our own (an increasing concern in possible future conflict with China); and even in asymmetrical war against lower-tech enemies, cyberwar is often the technology most within their means. On the material/logistical side, high-tech equipment is expensive and difficult to maintain; expensive aircraft can carry only a limited number of smart bombs and missiles, and armored helicopters can be grounded by sandstorms or maintenance and not available when and where they are needed. On the morale/maneuver side, bored troops running battlefield computers can commit security breaches; nominally allied local forces can destroy trust and sow paranoia by green-on-blue attacks. Until the future invention of robot soldiers who can move around complicated spaces like buildings as well as humans can, boots-on-the-ground soldiers are going to be engaging other human beings in situations full of confrontational tension/fear.
Because of the expense of high-tech war, its vulnerability to countermeasures, and the morale-sapping effects of highly politicized communications media, contemporary wars tend to degrade back toward traditional war, the longer a war goes on. Adding together the sources of friction in a high-tech version of the battle flow-chart, there is an increasing tendency toward stalemate. This is the biggest morale deflator of all.

Chapter 12, “Terrorist Tactics: Symbiosis with High-Tech,” applies the analysis to terrorism, which is an extension of guerrilla war. Both are a reaction by the low-tech side to fighting a more advanced army. Firepower was already becoming devastating by the end of the Napoleonic wars and during the American Civil War of 1861–1865, making frontal assault near-suicidal. There has been an increasing shift to long-distance bombardment—whether by artillery or by aircraft and missiles—throughout the last 200 years. In response to devastating firepower, battlefields have spread out; instead of big divisions marching into combat, infantry learned to infiltrate in small groups, whether through the trenches of WWI or the helicopter-delivered teams from Vietnam onwards. Increased mobility has made the battlefield into a checkerboard of outposts.

Guerrilla warfare (dating from the Spanish resistance to Napoleon) avoids major confrontations, instead hitting logistics lines that supply far-flung posts, whether by ambush or by improvised explosive devices (IEDs, a cheap, improvised version of minefields). Traditional guerrillas hid in inaccessible mountains and jungles; terrorists hide in the civilian population. Both follow the trend of spreading out the battlefield, to avoid massed frontal assaults against devastating firepower. As high-tech sensors have gotten better at detecting military formations, the preferred terrain for low-tech resistance has become concentrations of human population. This is a tit-for-tat response of low-tech warriors to superior high-tech enemies. A pre-modern conqueror would just annihilate the entire population, but the morality of modern democracies forbids it; and anything of the sort is publicized by ubiquitous high-tech news media. High-tech enhances the political side of war, as a contest of competing moralities (the “hearts-and-minds” cliché). Here the emotional side of war becomes even stronger.

Symbiosis between terrorism and high-tech war extends also to firepower. After the Vietnam War, the trend in artillery and bombing shifted from increasing the sheer destructiveness of explosives and incendiaries, to making their targeting more precise. But the world-wide communications and computerization that make this possible also mean that terrorists operate inside the same high-tech network as ourselves. Commands to detonate road-side IEDs against approaching Western military vehicles in the Middle East can be routed through Internet cafés thousands of miles away, using the same communication satellites as everyone else. The same world-wide network facilitates both the material side of war and its moral/
emotional side. Atrocities have become easy to publicize, whether they are
committed by high-tech soldiers frustrated by terrorists who attack them
under the guise of civilians; or the deliberate shock tactics of ISIS videos
showing children cutting off the heads of captured enemies—a means of
dramatizing their will to resist and of recruiting new volunteers to their
side. Thus, the political side of war becomes even more a war of competing
atrocities, as seen by opposing points of view. Ironically, the quest for clean
“surgical strikes” in high-tech war has had consequences bringing back the
emotional dynamics of wars in previous phases of history.

Part IV, “Violence in Everyday Life,” updates the micro-level research
on small-scale violence that is the topic of my 2008 book. One of the
topics omitted there was sexual aggression and violence. Chapter 13,
“Emotional Domination and Resistance to Sexual Aggression,” asks if the
patterns found in all face-to-face violence also apply to attempted rape:
confrontational tension/fear that makes attacks difficult, not easy; micro-
situational conditions that allow the barrier of CT/F to be circumvented,
including attacking the emotionally weak, social support and audience
effects. Data publicized during the take-off of the #MeToo movement
makes it possible to test these points. These accounts are extensive enough
to avoid the fallacy of sampling on the dependent variable (looking only
at rapes that succeed); the movement’s wider definition of sexual aggres-
sion makes it possible to see when potential sexual coercion succeeds or
fails. Here we find that most potential rapes fail; and that the key process
deterring them is not being emotionally dominated.

Chapter 14, “Clues to Mass Rampage Killers,” looks at the sequence
of action over time that culminates in mass rampage killings, especially
school shootings. Most of the motivational conditions usually cited—
being bullied, being an alienated isolate—are statistically far too com-
mon to explain the small proportion of students who make these attacks.
One feature that stands out as a clue is that would-be perpetrators spend
months collecting information about previous attacks, and assembling a
clandestine arsenal of weapons, ammunition and costumes. The crucial
point is that this is a clandestine activity; it needs to be distinguished
from other patterns of gun ownership, even gun cults, which are out in
the open, with no attempt at hiding.

Chapter 15, “Cool-headed Cops Needed (and Cool Heads on the
Street): Heart Rate Monitors Can Help,” examines the micro-dynamics
of police shooting suspects when no real threat to the officers exists.
Confrontational tension/fear is again at work, especially when exacer-
bated by a vehicle chase or high-speed arrival at the scene, by mislead-
ing rumors on police communications networks, or the confusion of
large numbers of police present. We can zero in on a mechanism that
makes violence incompetent—in the sense of hitting the wrong target,
or applying more force than necessary. The physiological basis of CT/F
is heart rate elevated to the level where perception blurs and officers lose fine motor control of their weapons. Recognizing the problem suggests a solution: heart-rate monitors and training to avoid going into action when one’s own body-signs are out of control.

Finally, the “Conclusion: Optimistic Discoveries in the Sociology of Violence” argues that at least some kinds of violence can be prevented, by putting into practice what we have learned about turning points toward or away from violence. This can be done by participants right there on the ground. Large-scale violence is harder to control, but becoming aware of its time-dynamics can make policy-makers more sophisticated about where the danger-zones and turning points are.

Notes

1. These alternatives apply both to individuals and to groups that lose status. An example is lower-middle and working-class whites who see themselves squeezed out of the high-tech economy of the upper-middle class, and ignored in favor of efforts to raise previously discriminated minorities from below. This type of explanation has been prominent in political commentaries about Trump supporters. The latter three outcomes are evident here (especially if one counts the opiate crisis as a form of suicide).

References