

Conceptualising conflict in human society: a critique of some theoretical perspectives

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Abstract

This paper is a critique of selected theoretical perspectives on conflict in human societies. The paper argues that whilst there are active armed conflicts in different parts of the world, there are no universally agreed causes of these conflicts. The paper identifies multi-conclusions from the handled theories. Thus, knowledge of the inherent aggressiveness in humankind, the presence of human needs, culture and politics are not in themselves causes of armed conflict but can be used by politicians to mobilize masses for political gains.

Key words: conflict, theory, perspectives, humankind, aggressiveness, culture, politics.

1. Introduction

Reasons for taking up arms of war differ from one group of people to another. Whatever the reasons; the idea of an armed conflict is abhorrent. Prerequisite to the onset of any armed conflict are two fundamental stages whose roles are, to convince the operatives into believing that engaging in an armed conflict is not criminal but beneficial. Those orchestrating the armed conflict must of necessity win the hearts of the would be operatives through a mobilization process; details of which are outside the scope of this paper. Second, the need for a resource and logistical team cannot be over emphasized. This will ensure that a sustainable execution of operations are not only systematic but are effectively done. The question of sustainability is a critical success factor here. Decision-making will be guided by numerous questions some of which could be:

- Why is this conflict necessary?
- Who is sponsoring the procurement of resources, training of operatives and other related logistical resources?
- How long is the conflict likely to be; assuming all resources are available?
- What degree of trust can be put on the leadership in this conflict?
- What are the fallback positions in the event that other contesting party proves to be more powerful?

In other words people do not simply wake up one morning and claim to start an armed conflict. The existence of an armed conflict implies a systematic and deliberate prior planning process without which the attempt is a nullity.

The purpose of this paper is to explore possible causes of armed conflicts. The discussion will be delimited to two positions along the continuum of the “primary and secondary causes “(theories) of armed conflicts. A brief world background to the problem will be given. The terms ‘conflict’ and ‘armed conflict’ will be defined.

2. Definition of terms

Conflict: In his analysis of the concept of conflict, Baumann, (1987:35), defined a conflict as, “a disagreement through which the parties involved perceive a **threat** to their **interests and concerns**”. Key features of this definition are that the conflict is spurred by a **perception**. The existence of this perception warns the parties of possible threats to their interests and concerns; the defense of which may result in a conflict.

Armed conflict: Wallenstein, (2009), shared the view that, an armed conflict is a contested incompatibility in which government and/ or contesting party or parties use **armed force** resulting with at least **twenty-five** battle related **deaths** per battle per year. Outstanding features of this view are:

- The use of armed force, where arms here mean any material from mere stones to sophisticated bombs.
- There must be at least twenty-five battle related deaths per battle per year. From these citations, one can sum up that, armed conflicts involve parties (people) who perceive each other as threats to interests and concerns. In order to defend or correct what is seen as wrong a choice could be the use of armed force.

3. Background

Smith (1997), shares with us that between 1990 and 1999, there were 118 wars in the whole world. These involved 80 states and two par-state regions. The death toll was at six million people. It is important however, to warn readers that the death toll was not the central area of focus as it is not safe to put more trust on published war deaths due to the effect of propaganda. All the same, the message remains unaltered, that is, in the recorded

wars, human life was lost. Whatever the degree of propaganda, the collateral damage in any war is skewed towards defenseless women and children. Like in all wars, atrocities included gruesome killings, rape, mutilations and displacement of people. Africa alone had a total of 16 wars with the Horn of Africa remaining a troubled spot to date. The issue is, ‘what are the causes of these armed conflicts?’

4. Possible causes of armed conflicts.

As earlier alluded to, the reasons for engaging in an armed conflict are not universal. There are schools of thought who purport to offer answers, some with convincing credibility as to the causes of armed conflicts. This paper has chosen to have the pendulum of the discussion oscillate between the claims put forward by the “primary causes” and “secondary causes” theories.

4.1 Primary causes of armed conflicts.

The basic tenets of the primary causes of conflict theory are segmented into three distinct strata namely human nature, socio-psychological needs and economic needs.

4.1.1 Human nature.

Research findings on the human nature and how the human nature is linked to high propensities of engaging in violent activities stem from the evolutionary theory. It is argued that findings from both anthropological and archeological work point at the evolutionary development of the human intelligence as primarily being a responsible factor (under specific conditions) for the origin of aggressiveness in human behaviour, which in turn developed to be an inherent culture of war in the history of humankind. Further arguments point at the assertion that the present state of human warrior culture has to be seen as inevitable and a continuous evolutionary process that will stay in humankind for generations to come.

Subjecting the above assertions to critical surgery triggers the exposure of this part of theory to a lot of unanswered questions. First, the theory is borrowing from the works of Darwin’s evolutionary theory of human development. Note is taken that the evolutionary theory has been challenged particularly in the Biological domain by the Mendelian genetics. Second, the phenotypic and genotypic characteristics of the human species are better explained by scientific discoveries in the area of genetics than the evolutionary theory. If aggressiveness and desire to go to war is universal, why are some nations so peaceful and never at war? Third, the theory fails to observe that though the evolutionary traits are adaptive in nature, there is no cause and effect relationship leading to a war culture. Further observations in actual war situations show that the real leaders of armed conflicts are rarely found at the battle field. The implication being that the conflict is a means to an end and not inherent in the evolutionary cognitive development of humankind. The study of Biology indicates that all animals become agitated or excited as a result of levels of a hormone called adrenaline. The aggressiveness in human kind therefore is a biological response to stimuli than an evolutionary precursor. Despite these grey areas, it cannot be refuted that all wars are a schematic product also inherent in the inbuilt system of individuals.

4.1.2 Socio-Psychological needs

Pearson in Haralambos and Holborn (2000) took a behaviourist claim that human beings behave the way they do because they have basic needs. Any condition that denies, ignores or suppresses the acquisition of these basic needs creates conflicts results of which may lead to the use of arms of war. To assume that the needs of people are socially, biologically and psychologically homogeneous is a serious understatement. Research by Sulliman (1998) on the genocide in Rwanda indicate that not all Hutus had specific needs which they sought addressed by taking part in the killing of their neighbours. Instead, they feared victimization for non – participation. They took part because the conflict itself was a threat to them. Mention of this serves to highlight that failure to get one’s needs is not reason enough to take up arms of war and wage an armed conflict.

Research by Dressler (1994) informs us that, nations have developed through evolutionary phases. This evolutionary development has been faster in other nations than the others. Globalization demands that all nations interact with minimum growth differences. Differences in the development levels among nations create pressure on less developed nations as developed nations focus on global handling of human needs beyond country boundaries.

The contemporary world order is emphasizing the upholding of human rights globally. Any regime that upholds the rights of its citizens has the highest chances of positively responding to the social, psychological and biological needs of its people. The majority of developing nations particularly in Afro-Asian countries is still focusing on protecting the sovereignty of their nations; characterized by repressive regimes. This is not in tandem with the world order. Resultantly a lot of armed conflicts have mushroomed the greater part of Africa. Typical victim nations have witnessed regime changes in North Africa in 2011 through the “Arab Uprising.” The current turmoil in the Middle-East is characteristic of this new world order. Note is taken that, the socio – psychological needs in themselves are not causes of armed conflicts but failure by certain Heads of States to

accurately interpret the current world order creates conducive grounds for armed conflicts.(BBC News.)

4.1.3 Economic Needs

In his seminar paper on the armed conflict in Southern Sudan, Suliman (1998) shades light that environmental degradation due to erosion and droughts has more to do with the conflict in this country than ethnicity and religion. Competition for the dwindling resource base creates more tension amongst different groups. People will fight for water sources, pastures and even arable land.

The land question appears to be at the core of such contestation as is the case in the controversial land reform programme in Zimbabwe. The land policy in Zimbabwe remains a heavily contested economic need to the extent that it could be a spark plug for a massive armed conflict if future office bearers will be myopic. The discovery of oil in Sudan in 1981 by Chevron also made the rebels in that country to scale up armed activities (Suliman, 1998). There are unsubstantiated claims that most armed conflicts of an economic nature are normally sponsored by bigger nations as a way of creating an environment for looting natural resources under a chaotic situation. If this assertion is something to go by, the issue then changes from being an economic driven need to an external looting motive. Whatever the case, one has to explain why most poor nations are not at war even if there are a lot of unexploited natural resources in their countries.

4.2 Secondary causes of armed conflicts

Under this category are two causes: politics and culture. Studies of Socialism argue that, society is made up of two basic segments; the infrastructure and superstructure. These two are in a dynamic relationship such that a misnomer in one will have a dysfunctional effect on the other. Thus in a country under 'good' governance, a state of equilibrium between the two is assumed at macroscopic level. Any mismatch between the two will result in disequilibrium. According to a Chemist-Chartier (1985) when a system in equilibrium is disturbed, processes will take place to restore this equilibrium. Taking this analogy into the politics of any given State, gross amendments to the national constitution or deviation from the demands of the constitution will cause a form of disequilibrium between the service sector (superstructure) and the resource base (the infrastructure). This may cause people to demonstrate against the leadership and may lead to an armed conflict.

The law of marginal gains reminds us that, the utility of an economic good dwindles as more of the good is supplied. The phenomenon in most African states is that of leaders who want to die in office. They have exhausted all their initiatives and have nothing new to offer. Their continued stay in office may trigger mass actions where the use of arms of war is a possibility.

5. Critique

Claims by the evolutionary theory in justifying the nature of humankind as potentially imbued with aggression and being desirous to engage in armed conflict are inconclusive. Genetics explain human aggression better than this theory. The heterogeneous nature of socio-psychological and biological needs of different societies presents a challenge for this part of the theory to be causative of armed conflicts. However the propensity to mobilize people by politicians for personal gains using this claim is very high. Economic factors are more manipulated by both internal and external persons with own interests. It is not conclusive that when people go to war their economic standing will be better after the war. For now, and even in bigger nations, war veterans are not economically envied. There exist a number of variables controlling the nature of politics in any given country. To simply judge the leadership's performance as causative to armed conflicts will be handling the matter below the belt.

6. Conclusion

The paper takes the position that whilst there are active armed conflicts in different parts of the world, there are no universally agreed causes of these conflicts. The paper identifies multi-conclusions from the handled theories. Thus, knowledge of the inherent aggressiveness in humankind, the presence of human needs, culture and politics are not in themselves causes of armed conflict but can be used by politicians to mobilize masses for political gains.

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