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Communicative Contact and Divided Groups

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Introduction

Managing deeply divided groups is fundamentally a communicative contact process. Issues related to conflict and peace are certainly interdisciplinary in nature. But at some point, culture contact, which is by definition communicative, is required. This essay defends this position and demonstrates how both communication and deeply divided societies can be theorized in order to maximize problem resolution and regulate the conflict produced by these divided groups. I begin with a brief theoretical positioning of the social and political consequences of deeply incompatible groups that use core values (e.g., religion and ethnicity) to make exclusivist claims on truth. This results in the problem of incommensurability (Ellis 2016), and questions about whether, or not the realities of divided groups can be reconciled. The theoretical strength of a communicative contact perspective is defended on the basis of three major points. The first is the basic question of the communicative potential between conflicting groups and consequently examines (i) the matter of incommensurability and how it remains a foundational philosophical issue but is not fatal. I then take up (ii) the issue of the nature and value of interactional contact, followed by (iii) an explanation and defense of the role of communication in the structuring process required to both change cultural realities and integrate micro and macro processes.

Intractable Conflicts

The participants in these intractable conflicts are not "rational" actors; they are "devoted" actors. Intractable conflicts are intergroup conflicts and are on the rise (Ellis 2006, 2009, 2015; Wimmer et al. 2009). The actors use a logic of identity (I must

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preference the maintenance of my identity) rather than a logic of consequences (I must maximize my gains), and thus set into motion the construction of in-group–out-group distinctions that produce communicative distortions (e.g., false polarization, stereotypes, and attribution errors) and generate misunderstanding and confusion at best, and violence at worst. Identity conflicts and the chauvinism that accompanies them are a major obstacle to peace and a major challenge to a liberal society based on pluralism and respect for differences (Huntington 1996; Ignatieff 1997). The most typical explanation for these ethnic conflicts is Samuel Huntington's clash of civilizations thesis that is seen as replacing the competition between communism and capitalism with fault lines attributable to ethnoreligious groups. These are intergroup conflicts (Giles 2012; Pettigrew & Tropp 2011) that require changes in how members of communities interact and perceive one another. Such conflicts are particularly defined by intense ethnic and religious forces and are a recent and virulent form of group conflict.

Divided societies have been studied in an effort to understand their causes and possibilities for resolution. Accordingly, analyses of psychology, economics, politics, and security dilemmas are typical. But a few exceptions notwithstanding (Ellis 2006, 2015; Ellis and Maoz 2002; Nagda 2006), the role of communication has received less attention. There has been a strong tradition of using rational choice theories to explain these conflicts along with social psychologically informed research traditions (Cordell & Wolf 2010). Security studies (Kaufman 2001), and economic theories (Collier 2001) represent a second and third strand of research, each of which draws on rational choice theoretical assumptions. Rational choice theoretical models assume that group behavior is driven by the consequences of a reward-cost payoff. The utility maximization assumption has been criticized as expecting humans to be cyborg-like maximizers (Boettke et al. 2003), assuming decisions are made in a world of perfect information, when they are not, and failing to understand humans as creative information processors that are subject to more than rational forces. Identity and cultural processes are at the heart of group conflicts and it is essential to explore how culturally constructed identities connect individuals through perceived common experiences. These connections, which are communicative contact links, organize behavior and are responsible for interpreting reality in such a way that conflicts can be mitigated.

Communication is central to understanding and working with these intractable conflicts for four reasons. First, communication is elemental to the conflict; micro level interactions structure behavior, and actors in intractable conflicts think about the communication process. They strategize, discuss, and manipulate symbols, all in an effort to control others and define themselves. The significant meanings of these conflicts do not reside in individuals, but are accomplishments of the participants driven by social and political circumstances. Second, communication is relevant to both micro and macro levels of society. At the micro-interactional level, people argue, persuade, inform, and develop relationships. And then these interactions accumulate into macro structures such as institutions, media systems, and cultural forces that constrain behaviors with respect to racism, sexism, prejudice, and a host of other cultural stereotypes and distortions. These symbolic processes of communication are what bind individuals to political systems. Third, simplistic communication processes cannot resolve intractable conflicts; we know conflicts require interaction. Diplomacy, dialog, mediation, negotiation, and

any form of conflict resolution is fundamentally communicative in nature. It is the communication process that reaches across cultural divides and provides the mechanisms by which conflicts are processed. Finally, modern intractable conflicts are ethno-political in nature and identity conflicts. They are deeply symbolic and complex with unclear boundaries. Such conflicts require deeper communicative engagement designed to widen the circle of identity and inclusion.

The interpersonal contact level of conflict is all-inclusive since it is the nexus of ideological belief (religion, ethnicity), and part of the world of power. The meanings of groups in conflict are relationally constructed; ideas and morals characterizing conflicting parties do not precede interaction but are created by it, and thereby serving the interests of the parties to the conflict. Consequently, communication is the theoretical foreground. It has a powerful line to advance describing how interaction creates subjective realities and relationships – either conflicting relationships or cooperative ones. As Randall Collins (1975) explained, "social structure is something enacted from moment to moment" (p. 111).

We still pose the dichotomy between the universality of science and the particularity of culture (Wang 2014). But the presenting question is not the truth of universality or particularity, but the interactive and mutually constitutive relations between paired cultures or concepts. Can the languages of each culture find points of articulation? Are the differences that define conflicting groups irreconcilable or can they articulate with one another in the service of peace or conflict management? This is the matter of incommensurability.

Incommensurability

The problem of incommensurability is one of the most fundamental problems facing deeply divided societies as well as contemporary issues in communication. There is a burgeoning philosophical literature on incommensurability that focuses on "irreconcilable differences" (cf. Chang 1997; Ellis 2016; Krippendorff 1993; Pearce 1991; Wang 2014), and the implications of living in different discursive realities. In the strictest Pythagorean sense, two things are incommensurable if they cannot be precisely measured by a single scale; that is, two values (e.g., cultures) are so different that they lack any common unit by which they can be measured, rather like trying to compare Newtonian mechanics to Aristotelian categories. But incommensurability is now associated with the humanities and social sciences. Diversity agendas that seek to value cultural particularity cite incommensurability, or the impossibility of truly comparing cultures, as an example. The gist of both the philosophical and empirical question is whether or not divided societies can be compared at all, and if so, on what basis. We can contrast the discourse of Zionism and Israeli Jews with the discourse of historical injustice claimed by Palestinians and pose a bleak possibility for communication (see Table 1.1).

Ethnically or religiously divided groups could theoretically invoke the discourse of objectivity and assume some ahistorical framework that identifies a "true" history, or knowledge, or reality. It is then only a matter of matching each culture to the standard

Table 1.1 Israeli and Palestinian traditional narratives of their history

Israelis	*Palestinians*
1. Israelis hold the Zionist enterprise as a moral imperative based on ancient Jewish descent. The Jewish people have inherited their right to the land and acquired it legally and morally.	1. Palestinians maintain that Jews have no inherent claim to the land and they are a religion not a nation. In fact, the Palestinians are descendants of previous inhabitants.
2. The Arabs of Palestine are not a national group and never have been. They were living on the outskirts of the Ottoman Empire. Palestine was never a state, and Jerusalem was never a capital.	2. Palestinian ancestors were there before the Israelites, and there is biblical and archeological evidence. Also, Palestinian national identity has been developing for a century.
3. Zionism is an authentic response to persecution, and the Zionists came as pioneers and redeemers. Zionism is rooted in the universal value of self-determination.	3. Zionism is a racist colonial enterprise that seeks to rob Arabs of their ancestral land. It is associated with oppression and occupation.

Source: Adapted from Scham et al. (2005).

of truth. Or, two cultures in conflict such as the Israelis and Palestinians could be compared by translating one discourse into another. But the impossibility of truly comparing cultures, combined with withering criticisms (cf. Rorty 1979; Wittgenstein 1969), means that objectivity discourse is indefensible with no single metalanguage by which rationality or empiricism can adjudicate all differences (Bernstein 1983).

Being free from the discourse of objectivity, means that all cultures are bound by their own logic (Leung & Cohen 2011), and to be understood as relative to its own conceptual scheme. There is a plurality of such schemes and no single metalanguage or system can arbitrate between them. But again, we do not want to abandon all hope because cultures can be fruitfully compared just on some basis other than incommensurability. Table 1.1 is an abbreviated illustration from Scham et al. (2005) of the incommensurability or incomparability of the Israeli and Palestinian narratives. In all three examples, the contrasts are incommensurate. But a number of scholars (Chang 1997; Ellis 2015; Pearce 1991; Wang 2014) make the distinction between incommensurate and incompatible, a distinction that moves the meanings for cultures in conflict into the realm of relationships and away from an established unitary concept of meaning. This exposes the richness and variety of meaning as well as the possibilities for pragmatically generating new meanings.

The assumption of meaning as located behind the words of others is a fundamental problem for the incommensurability position. Meaning resides in a relationship and the properties of that relationship. Meaning emerges from coordinated interaction. Consequently, the differences contributing to conflict can potentially be redefined on the basis of new relational interactions. If I ask a question or use a particular word or express an opinion, the meaning of those actions is not static and determined by my own control; rather, it emerges from our relational interaction, including our history with one another and symbols. The word *Zionism* (see item 3 in Table 1.1) can mean a moral

political aspiration or oppression depending on the relationship between the word and its users. There is nothing in our past that determines current meanings since we can unfold new meanings during communication. The oppositional positions displayed in Table 1.1 can be redefined, reframed, argued, or subjected to any conflict management technique. Of course, some of them will be particularly recalcitrant and remain characteristic of an intractable conflict. But language is a differentiating system that names something; whenever we use words, we privilege certain perceptions. The goal of managing conflict is to use communication to control these privileged perceptions.

Intergroup conflicts can drift over time toward increasing differentiation and end up as a binary contradiction. The statements in Table 1.1 are incommensurate because they produce false dichotomies and irresolvable contradictions. Both Zionists and the Palestinians cannot have primary legitimate claims to the land; both cannot claim to have been there first; and Zionism cannot be both a moral social movement and racist. Such binary oppositions that result in contradictions are illogical and incommensurate and cannot be measured against one another. Communication within these binary contradictions results in each side arguing for their own special privileged interpretations. Moreover, incommensurate binaries produce a dialog crippled by defensiveness and blame, along with assertiveness, anger, and aggression. Listening fades away and there is the ever present threat of hegemonic violence (cf. Hawes 2004). These binaries include a repeated habitual experience and a set of inconsistent injunctions that produce paradoxes, which result from a message having the opposite effect of its intention. A logical shift is necessary to break the binding logic. When each party to a conflict blames the other for its particular experiences then denial of responsibility becomes an example of the very act the party is denying. The efforts to communicate about the communication are trapped in a double bind and other forms of communication become unavailable. Still, if science and communicative engagement are characterized by the possibility of criticism and change then communication must be possible (Ellis 2015; Ellis and Maoz 2002). Two cultural realities can be very distinct. Strong diversity advocates want to maintain these distinctions, but such differences are a barrier to managing conflict when they are celebrated as cultural particularity. Nonetheless, translating between the two, while difficult, is possible.

Bridging the divides that separate groups is possible when two sides are not categorized as incomparable. Just as no two cultures are exactly the same, no two cultures are completely different such that communication or points of commonality are impossible. Even the most extreme cases (e.g., ISIS and the West), where the two groups are culturally orthogonal, can find strands of commonality that may serve as initial touch points for development. For example, Islam is concerned with issues of *face* and *honor* and these issues are present in the West as well. Both Islam and the West have traditions of nonviolence, including forgiveness and recompense. And both cultures struggle with the tensions between principles and practice that leaves room for adaptation and flexibility.

Hermeneutic interpretation can expose underlying worldviews, common knowledge, shared experience, and equivalent expressions that result in commensurability. The relationship between two seemingly divergent cultures is more symbiotic than dichotomous (see Wang 2014). The narrative elements that separate Israelis and Palestinians in Table 1.1 are approaching incommensurability when they become the binary endpoint

of increasing differentiation. The two sides are locked in frozen incompatible narratives. But symbiosis – the possibility of communicative contact – is the single perspective that reintroduces relational exchange and allows for paths and patterns of change. Communicative contact allows for interaction, critical clash, and constitution of new interpretations even if they are "reasonable disagreements" (Ellis 2015, Chapter 3) that may not transform perspectives, but will allow for perspective taking.

Communicative Contact

The most common theoretical perspectives on ethno-political conflict have been primordialism, instrumental, and constructivism. Primordialism assumes that conflict is biologically based and conflict with those who are culturally and ethnically dissimilar is inevitable (Gil-White 2001). Instrumentalism understands ethnicity as a tool to obtain material ends (Glazer & Moynihan 1975), constructivism relies on the purposeful acts of naming, categorizing, and mapping symbolic distinctions that result in socially constructed definitions of individuals and ethnic groups (Suny 2001). None of these perspectives are particularly helpful for conflict resolution, nor do they describe the actual processes that characterize intergroup conflict. But communication plays an elemental role in addressing ethno-politically divided societies. If we accept the common assumption that ethnic identity is developed within a matrix of cultural interactions, rather than something one is born with, then the divides between groups are social processes that make them fundamentally interactive. Allport's (1954) work set the stage for the positive effects of intergroup contact, but the early studies were simple input–output studies that measured an attitude, exposed subjects to some contact experience, and then calculated a posttest measurement to note change. These simplistic input–output studies, which ignored interaction processes between groups, are characteristic of the history of intergroup research (Ellis 2009; Nagda 2006).

More recent thinking recognizes that humans are open system information processors who are always subject to the influences of information. Even the most prejudiced person, with rigid boundaries and categories, can unfreeze or loosen these categories in order to process new information or integrate new meanings. The incommensurate binaries referred to above can be transcended through the communication process. The deeper change necessitated by binary contradictions requires a shift in a logical class. That is, we are required to escape the first-order change within a simple system of relationships that go back-and-forth. First-order back-and-forth change is exemplified by simplistic accusations and counter accusations (Table 1.1, item 3 "Zionism is authentic self-determination. Zionism is a colonial enterprise"; "You are racist. No, we are noble."), resulting in binaries as destructive cycles that can never be escaped. Second- order change involves a broader logical shift that transforms the system of interaction. It is a sort of Hegelian dialectic that moves to a new synthesis. The structure of this deeper second-order change is as follows: Something contentious is said. A Palestinian, for example, accuses an Israeli of stealing his land. The Israeli reacts by producing the opposite, so he or she denies stealing the land. This produces a no-win solution and spawns a pattern of

nonviable choices resulting from a paradoxical binary that produces little more than accusations and counter accusation with each side locked into his own cultural logic. The parties within the conflict cannot transcend these choices. Deeper change or transformation comes when the relational system offers more than simply two choices. The Hegelian dialectic mentioned earlier, where a synthesis transcends the dichotomy, is the essence of transformational change. This logical principle of deeper change is able to provide a generative foundation for many conflict situations that are the result of ethnically divided societies.

Change and productive control of issues that divide groups is less concerned with rational methods of analysis, judgments, and solutions than with building relationships and constructing new realities. The task of communication is to govern discourse by instantiating a set of habits and dispositions that cultivate shared realities and responsibility. New forms of discourse designed to assist with the interpretive process of integrating inconsistencies, puzzlement, and new information are effective in the hands of knowledgeable parties determined to use the principles of communication and contact to maximize the opportunities for conflict management.

For example, findings by Hammack et al. (2014) explain how contact theory is increasingly designed to reduce individual prejudice and stereotypes through interpersonal communication. And the experience of participants in contact activities varies as a function of the discursive environment of the contact. They found that confrontational and differentiating communication was empowering for the Palestinians and a negative experience for the Israeli Jews. The confrontational environment provided a legitimate route to expression and a challenge to the rhetoric of conflict. Consequently, vigorous deliberation (Ellis 2015) is associated with leveling power asymmetries. Communicative contact intended to foster coexistence and reshape identities, rather than direct confrontation of issues, was more likely to simply reproduce the conditions of low status groups (cf. Ellis and Maoz 2002; Nagda 2006). Pettigrew and Tropp (2011), reporting on their extensive meta-analysis, conclude that affective ties are the most powerful determinants of attitude convergence and relational improvement. These affective ties are, by definition, interactive.

Psychological, sociological, and political theories of communication find common cause when the subject is religion. Democracy at its core is a contestatory system of conflict management that relies on debate rather than fixed ideological positions. Religion's comprehensive worldview is contrary to democracies and their conceptual handmaidens such as pluralism, debate, compromise, and tolerance. The contemporary thinking on managing religion is liberal accommodationism (Dryzek 2010; Huntington 1996), where religion is not singled out as dangerous but is privatized and kept away from governmental legal considerations that are processed mostly in the public sphere. Political communication that pertains to citizens and their participation in the political process must support diversity and maintain the checks and balances on threats posed by any group. Managing religions requires "difficult conversations" but the theoretical pathway to maintaining the good order between competing comprehensive ideologies remains through dialog and deliberation designed to bridge differences. Bridging discourse (Dryzek 2010) is a component of a communicative contact perspective where the goal is to transcend differences among groups and find a bridge or pathway from one

reality to the other. It is the form of responding to the incommensurability problem by using communication to manage meanings and relationships. The experience of communicative contact in divided societies or between conflicting groups can be difficult as group members try to adjust or incorporate the attitudes and beliefs of others in some way. There are any number of psychological barriers, filters, and stereotypes that make bridging communication difficult, especially when one group is a discriminated against minority or holds a rigid and uncompromising position. Bridging communication must again redefine the logic of the relationship to find overarching shared values.

The Structuring Process and Divided Societies

Human communicative behavior is at the nexus of micro and macro issues. But much of the study of communication (rhetoric, speaking, interpersonal, media effects) has been micro in nature. This is a positivist bias that emphasizes the unitary controlling individual rather than the individual as a socially and culturally influenced entity (Ellis 1999; Lannamann 1991). Societies are a complex network of recurring social interactions and relationships among participants. They are not a structure that precedes interaction. Political conflicts are structured on three levels with communication having a salutary effect on each level. The first is a *macro political level* that stabilizes political order and the type of communication that occurs is diplomatic, including bargaining and negotiation. The goals at the macro level are to maximize interests and construct particular understandings of problem. A second level of the political process is the conflict management or *civil society level*. This involves communication about society, legal channels, and group identity. The third level is where conflict transformation takes place and it is more *micro* and deals with grassroots interactions. Macro structures such as categories called the *state*, or the *middle class*, or *ethnicity* are reifications or generalities inferred from individuals behaving in relation to one another (Alexander 1987). Communication theory has taken up the debate over levels of reality and the existence of a micro world and the macro world of symbolic interaction (Ellis 1999). Marx, of course, produced the most influential macro structural system in the social sciences and concluded that the macro structures ruled people. Individual behavior was a consequence of an inanimate structural system (e.g., social class). Others argue that structural constraints are never causal and the phenomenological reality of ordinary people must be taken more seriously.

Future communication theory and research will pose the micro–macro question not as an antithesis in which one is deterministic and not the other. The relationship between the micro and the macro is dialectical and forces attention to the process of micro–macro interdependence. A process perspective informs the structuring processes – where individuals are not either radically free to communicate as they please or a simple vessel of social structure influences – but rather focuses on how communication processes interweave action in order to produce larger social structures that have a logical relationship to individual behaviors. This will complement the network epistemology that holds increasing appeal in communication given new technology and opportunities for

electronic contact. Bennett and Segerberg's (2013) logic of *connective action* captures the set of links that make up the systems people interact in rather than their preexisting attachment to an intact organization. These networks of interaction have conversations rather than individuals as the network nodes and they are constitutive of an evolving organizational structure. This network logic notes how sequences of events produce structure from the bottom up. Connections of ideas or people gain scale as a result of being involved in intersecting networks. The theory of connective action forces attention on the perceptual networks of ideas rather than static organizations and illustrates the micro–macro structuring process. Bimber et al. (2005) have already begun to apply these ideas to issues in terrorism and emergent organizational structures.

Communication theories are positioned to transform and stabilize difficult conflicts through macro structure-institutional issues and micro interpersonal issues. This is pertinent because intergroup conflicts are rooted in political conditions and distorted by psychologies of individuals. Both institutional and individual conditions must be transformed to the mutual satisfaction of each party. Macro structural-institutional issues and micro interpersonal issues are complementary. Resolving intractable conflicts must be approached on both levels.

There are three ways additional structural conditions can facilitate problem resolution. Each comes from a "feet-first" perspective where behaviors are dictated and attitudes follow. The first is continuous efforts at *merging economic and political ties* so that shared orientations can dampen impulses toward conflict. These macro institutional ties produce individual organizational behaviors that maintain preferred structures. Second, *joint associations* in education, media, nongovernmental organizations, and projects of various sorts produce networks of interaction designed to incorporate the interests of each party and the establishment of networks that connect divided societies. And third, *legislative and policy changes* are a macro intervention designed to influence micro interaction. Anything that allows the participants to practice the habits of cooperation – a micro activity – helps fashion structures conducive to stability.

The micro–macro link provides a logic for our understanding of social processes, namely, conflict. And the strength of this structuring perspective is that individuals and social systems can intervene in the conflict for purposes of redirection. The dynamics of collective identities (e.g., activated ethnic groups) can be managed through, for example, information campaigns; individual grievances, including anger, fear, and confusion can be addressed as both structure and agency; and the known correlations between micro relationships and macro ones (e.g., everyday interactions between Israelis and Palestinians and the structure of occupation) make for a research program platform and the discovery of new relational structures known to mitigate conflict.

Too often political conflicts structure themselves into intractable and recalcitrant situations that resist resolution. And there is a tendency to think about structuring only as constraining in the negative sense of the term. But the structuring that results from the micro–macro link figures prominently in the role of actors and their agency. Typically, actors in organized political units exercise power and set into motion patterned rules and regulations that reproduce recurrent structures. These recurrent patterns of rules and regulations can result in authoritarianism, or asymmetrical power relations, or democratic processes, and so on. These political structures can be the result of economic

conditions, monopolistic control, ethnic divides, weak institutions, violence, and the like. Still, it is important to remember that agents make structures possible and there is no a priori reason that new and creative structures cannot emerge. Just as intractable conflicts are perpetuated by agents they can be ameliorated by other agents. This is an emphasis on human action that gives empirical sustenance to more theoretical concepts such as "ethnic differences," "weak institutions," "failure of civil society," or "violence." The goal, of course, is to create new structuring processes that make for interpretive changes and move the system toward more desirable configurations. All structuring is a result of the interactive relationship among individuals and their real-time talk and social categories. This continues to underscore the centrality of communication and contact for uncovering new forms of expression and sustaining challenges to old forms of oppression.

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