

**SOME PSYCHOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS
OF THE THIRD PARTY'S ROLE IN RESOLUTION
OF CONFLICTS ON THE SOCIETAL
AND INTERNATIONAL LEVELS**

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Abstract. This paper deals with the role of the third party in conflict resolutions. The contention is that the success of the third party is determined by satisfaction of psychological needs for stability and approval. Societal and international conflicts are set in focus. Regarding the former, the third party is to make sure that a just resolution is accepted, fair procedures are followed, and the losing party is not insulted. These measures guarantee that the resolution will be stable and enforceable. The effectiveness of justice appeals by the third party is explained through psychological motives of having one's actions approved and avoiding making personal enemies. Regarding the latter, the third party is to appeal to calculations of actual strength. The same psychological motives drive people to fight for their nations instead of looking for just principles on the basis of which a possible resolution of the conflict might be feasible.

Keywords: conflict resolution, psychological motives, third party, justice, balance of power

1. Introduction

The time when members of the human race were scarce on the Earth disappeared approximately a hundred thousand years ago. Since then individuals have increasingly interacted with each other: both within their own groups and on the inter-group level.¹ Interaction has bred, among other things, disputes and conflicts. Given limited, and often inadequate, resources and the human psychological makeup as we know it, no wonder that conflicts among people have frequently grown into bloody feuds and wars. At the beginning it seemed that to destroy one's rival, to vanquish one's opponent, and to conquer one's troublesome

¹ This interaction was by far more intense in Europe and Asia than in the Americas, Africa and Australia. For the reasons, see for instance, Diamond (1997).

neighbour were the best ways to deal with a conflict in hand. However, fairly soon people discovered that in many cases a more rational and advantageous way to tackle a conflict was to invite some neutral authority to arbitrate over the conflicting situation. Thus, the third party emerged as an additional party to the conflict between two sides (parties).

This paper deals with the role of the third party in achieving conflict resolutions. It must be admitted at the outset that much has been written on this topic. Just to name a few issues and authors: the problem of what conditions an individual, an organisation or an institution should meet to be deemed the third party is tackled in Pruitt and Carnevale (1993) and in Krolikowska (1993). The issue of strategies and tactics of the third party is dealt with in Fischer (1983, 1989). Psychological aspects of international politics are highlighted in Kelman and Bloom (1973) and Kelman (1991).

The interference of the third party has been studied both theoretically and experimentally (see, for instance, Zartman and Berman 1982 and Kelman 1987). Also, the influence of the third party has been analysed historically: historians have explained how the third party has operated, under which conditions, and with what success (for references see, for example, Burton 1984, and Rubin, Pruitt, and Kim 1994). And surely this issue has not been neglected by psychologists, who, by studying the role of the third party in conflicts, found a fertile ground for testing their hypotheses and theories.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, I will make a distinction between two radically different types of the role of the third party. Second, I will concentrate on one of the types and suggest a taxonomy that introduces three levels on which the third party may function. Finally, I will present an evaluation of psychological motives that exist on the two of these three levels.

My major contention will be that the success and effectiveness of the third party are mostly determined by satisfaction of psychological needs for stability and approval. Where such needs cannot be fulfilled, the role of the third party is negligible. At the end, I will venture a few suggestions as to how to make the intervention of the third party more compelling and efficient.

2. Two different types of the third party's role

The distinction I want to propose is a novel one. It is drawn between the third party as an *adjudicator* and the third party as a *humanitarian aid provider*. I will explicate the difference by briefly discussing both types. First, I will take on the third party as an adjudicator.

When there is a disagreement between two parties (these might be particular individuals or associations or even states) and when the two parties find it reasonable and beneficial to address some impartial force (the third party) and to invite it to settle their disagreement (or at least to pronounce its opinion on it), then we are dealing with the third party as an adjudicator. In this situation, the third

party is chosen by both conflicting parties either for one particular case or for a series of possible cases. For example, two friends are in disagreement and they ask their mutual friend (the third party) to arbitrate between them. Here is another example: two firms are at variance as to some article of their contract and they go to court and appeal to the judge to give a ruling.

By contrast, the third party as a humanitarian aid provider usually does not arbitrate. The cases when this type of the third party comes to the fore are cases when one side to a conflict manages to considerably overpower the other side to the effect that the other side is severely persecuted or is being exterminated. Then the third party engages in the conflict in order to stop the persecutions or save the losing side from extermination. While the third party as an adjudicator is called or chosen by the conflicting sides, the third party as a humanitarian aid provider interferes in a nasty conflict because it decides to do so by itself. Situations where one tribe (or national group) stirs hate towards another one and succeeds in torturing and killing members of the hated group, are paradigmatic situations engaging the type of the third party as a humanitarian aid provider.

If within one state two conflicting groups are engaged into a bloody clash in which one group is callously and ruthlessly subduing the other, it is obvious that the state authorities should immediately step in and stop the hostilities. However, the situation is not that clear if the state authorities themselves commit crimes against their subjects or are indifferent to violations of human rights within their ambit. Usually, the states are considered sovereign in the territories they control. Therefore, interventions in the state's internal affairs are prohibited. The documents to be invoked here are: the *Declaration on the Inadmissibility of Intervention in the Domestic Affairs of States*, General Assembly Resolution 2131 (20) 1965, and the *Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation among States*, General Assembly Resolution 2625 (25), 1970. Yet, taking the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) seriously enough, one can argue for the legitimacy of *humanitarian intervention*. And the humanitarian intervention will be a counterpart of the third party as a humanitarian aid provider (on the issue of humanitarian intervention see, for instance, Akehurst 1984 or Hoffmann 1995).

While the third party as an adjudicator attempts to *resolve a conflict*, the third party as a humanitarian aid provider puts all its strength into *blocking the escalation* of a conflict. It is not rare that after the intervention of the third party as a humanitarian aid provider, the third party as an adjudicator steps in and strives to settle the initial conflict to the satisfaction of all sides involved.

Now, I want to turn to a discussion of varieties of conflict and show how these varieties are related to the two types of the third party's role we have just considered.

3. Varieties of conflict

Imagine that person A agreed to play a chess game with person B. They both are passionate players and both want very much to sit at a board and start moving

chess pieces. The problem is, however, that while agreeing they did not specify whether they should meet at A's or at B's. Clearly, if A goes to B's and B goes to A's, then (assuming they do not bump into each other on their way) both will be bitterly disappointed that the game will not be played. However, if both go to the same place, either to A's or to B's, then both will be rejoicing at the prospect of an exciting entertainment.

Can we speak about a conflicting situation between A and B in this example? Though A may be very angry with B when he discovers that B went to the other place (and the same feeling may arise in the heart of B when he finds out that A is not there where B has come), *it is a mistake to say that A and B face a potential conflict*. In the example under consideration, it is more appropriate to speak about a coordination problem between A and B than about a collision of their interests. If there is no communication between these two persons, then they should take their chances. However, once communication is allowed, the whole problem disappears since they can easily stipulate the unique place for the meeting.

Instead of persons A and B, we may have two groups of people. If the structure of interests that the two groups express resembles the structure of interests held by persons A and B, then providing that communication is possible between the groups, the coordination problem will be resolved without much difficulty.

However, in real life there often occur situations that are more complicated than the one described above. Suppose that there is a need to enact some law or implement some policy. Group A supports one formulation of the law or policy (formulation 1), whereas group B is an advocate of another formulation, formulation 2. If formulation 1 is accepted, A gets more than B, yet both groups get something. In contrast, if formulation 2 is accepted, B gets more than A, mirroring the preceding scenario. It is also assumed that if no formulation is endorsed and adopted, then both A and B get nothing.

Can we speak about a conflicting situation between groups A and B in this case? The answer is *affirmative*, but it is important to see where the conflict is situated. There are *two* levels of preferences that both groups hold. At the first level, both groups want some formulation to be accepted, either 1 or 2. Here, there is no conflict between them. At the second level, however, A calls for formulation 1, while B wishes that formulation 2 is agreed on. This time, the conflict is clearly visible.

Now, the third party as an adjudicator typically deals with conflicts arising at this second level. The efforts of the third party are backed by the general understanding that the attainment of a resolution is preferable to both sides. Capitalising on this understanding, the third party as an adjudicator wields various tactical and strategic techniques of negotiation.

There are also interesting psychological and social mechanisms that offer the conflicting parties a direct hint at how a conflict may be settled. Take, for instance, a possibility of *pre-commitment*. If group A knows that formulation 2 was in the centre of the pre-election program of group B and it is paramount for B that this particular formulation is assented to (and at the same time formulation 2 is of

minor importance for A), then A will decide to agree to formulation 2 rather than not to have any formulation at all. Or assume that one of the formulations runs counter to the crucial value that one of the groups cherishes. It is then reasonable to expect that the other group whose values are not similarly endangered will make concessions (on the issue of pre-commitment see a renowned study of Schelling 1960). In such cases the third party as an adjudicator will only have to make clear what the real state of affairs is. In other words, it will have to ensure that the stakes and payoffs are correctly recognised by the parties in conflict.

To explain when the third party as a humanitarian aid provider usually enters the picture, let us examine the following example. Suppose there are two negotiating groups. Suppose also that the conflict between them is conspicuous. What group A demands is absolutely unacceptable for group B and, *vice versa*, what group B strives for is out of the question for group A since it loses something crucial (compared with the status quo), as B does in the reverse situation. Thus the payoffs for A are 10 units if it gets what it demands, 0 units if no agreement is arrived at and -10 units if B's demands are favoured. The same structure of payoffs applies to group B. (The outcome 'A insists on its demands and B presses for its demands' is the only Nash equilibrium in the example under consideration.)

It is a sad feature of our social reality that such conflicts exist between negotiating parties. Nothing essential can be done about those conflicts. It is natural to expect that both groups will fight till they get what they want. The conflict perpetuates and two groups become even more entrenched in their positions. Often one group begins to prevail over the other and uses its dominance in a merciless way. Then the third party as a humanitarian aid provider intercedes with the ruling group on behalf of the threatened group.

The aim of the third party's intercession consists not only in saving lives of the victimised and rescuing their property, but also in altering the existing perception of the conflict. The idea is that the third party may *change the structure of the payoffs*. This may be done if the conflict is not seen as a monolith. In other words, this may be done if it is possible to break the original conflict into smaller sub-conflicts. Imagine, for example, that the conflict described above is divided into two sub-conflicts with the following payoff structure. In sub-conflict 1, A gets 15 units if its demands are accepted, while B gets -1 unit if it agrees to what A lays claim on; A gets -1 unit if no agreement occurs and B also gets -1 unit in this case; finally A gets -2 units if the adversary group gets its way, while B then gets 2 units. The case of sub-conflict 2 is identical to sub-conflict 1, providing we substitute group A for group B. (Notice that here the 'insistence on one's best option/cooperation' outcome is not the definite Nash equilibrium in any sub-conflict; it would be too unrealistic if it were. This is to say, if the initial conflict (with the definite Nash equilibrium of disagree/disagree) could be modified to result in two sub-conflicts, each of which had 'the cooperative outcome' as its definite Nash equilibrium, then the world would be a much better place to live than it actually is – really intractable conflicts would be few and far between.)

What have we gained by the division of the initial conflict into the two sub-conflicts? We have gained that now the third party may assure group B that if it agrees in sub-conflict 1 to make concessions to A (i.e. to agree to what A proposes), then in sub-conflict 2 group A will agree that B can have what it wants. Two things are worth noticing. First, it has become rational for A and B to make mutual concessions in each particular sub-conflict. Second, each of the groups is better off at the end of the plan proposed by the third party, compared even with what it might have had if it had won the initial conflict (in the language of numbers: 14 units (i.e. 15 – 1 units collected from two sub-conflicts) are more than 10 units). To be sure, a positive alteration of payoff structure is not always possible to achieve at once. It may take time, but eventually it will have to happen if a resolution of a conflict is ever to be brought off.²

In sum, the point is that a violent and protracted conflict should first be stopped and a ceasefire established (this is the task of the third party as a humanitarian aid provider). Only then can real negotiations take place (the task of the third party as an adjudicator). Further, in my paper I will deal only with the third party as an adjudicator. Analysis of the other type of the third party requires a different approach.

4. Three levels: interpersonal, societal and international

The third party as an adjudicator can operate on three different levels. First, it can operate on the interpersonal level. We may think of family disagreements, frictions between acquaintances or friends, and clashes of opinion between neighbours as examples of conflicts on this level. The characteristic feature of the level in question is that conflicts are usually of face-to-face nature and occur between people who know one another.

Second, the third party as an adjudicator can operate on societal level. In other words, the third party as an adjudicator functions within a given society. For simplicity, I will assume that the range of a society equals that of a state. Of course, there may be political associations like states that do not overlap with the existing pattern of societies. Yet, for my thesis in this paper it is sufficient to presuppose that a state and a society mean the same entity. Thus, conflicts between professional groups, between interest clubs, or between companies are examples of the conflicts occurring on societal level.

Finally, the third party as an adjudicator can operate on international level. This is the level of interactions of state interests. States are entities that have sovereignty over the territories under their jurisdiction. No other state should normally interfere

² Payoffs should not be conceived as only material gains, of course. Satisfying one's ambitions, endorsing one's values, acquiring fame, etc. are also constituent parts of payoffs. Hence, in a broader sense, the alteration of payoff structure entails modification of stereotypes. See Bar-Tal (1997) about details on formation and change of stereotypes and Fiske (2000) on prejudice and discrimination.

with the decrees and regulations that the state authorities issue within their territory. However, the states also have interests which go beyond their borders. In that case, the interests of different states may collide and a conflict may arise.

I want to eschew tackling interpersonal conflicts. The level of interpersonal conflicts is a very special one and calls for a separate treatment. In what follows I want to carry out a psychological analysis of some motivations underlying the behaviour of the conflicting parties and the third party involved in the conflict. This analysis will be conducted for the societal and international levels only.

5. What regulates conflicts on societal and international levels?

The most important concept on the level of international conflicts is the concept of *power*. Power determines a great deal of aspects in international relations. The balance of power analysis is used in order to predict the development of the current state of affairs. And the vacillations in the sphere of power politics are immediately reflected in international treaties and agreements.

By contrast, the key concept on the level of societal conflicts is the concept of *justice*. Social policies and laws of any country are tested against the principles of justice. Many other values are either sacrificed or weakened by the claims of justice. And politicians of all political parties and groups tend to affiliate themselves with what justice requires.

The truth-value of the claim that justice is the key concept on the level of societal conflicts indeed depends on which society we take under consideration. The past may supply us with examples of societies where justice did not play a leading role among social values. Also, in the modern world, we may observe societies that are too preoccupied with pursuing other values or goals than justice. Nevertheless, it seems undeniable that in general justice is the key concept. It should be remembered that I do not speak of justice in the abstractly normative sense, but in the *perceived* sense. Thus, in the former Soviet Union, to take an example, the principles of justice were distorted and often morally dubious or even evil. However, there was a shared perceived sense of justice that was the background for resolution of societal conflicts.

The differences between the two crucial concepts of international and societal level manifest the differences between the roles the third party plays in conflicts belonging to those two levels. More specifically, if the third party is involved in a conflict within a state (usually the third party is represented by some state institution), it tries to resolve the conflict by appealing to what is just. Surely, to determine what is just is not an easy problem. Often, it is exactly the bone of contention between the two conflicting parties that they disagree over a proper formulation of what is just.

However, within a society or a state there are tools that enable some institutions to find out or to determine what is just. Long-lasting traditions along with procedural fairness, for example, make possible for the third party to establish a

reasonably just resolution of a conflict. If there are uncertainties over particular interpretations of some laws or regulations, there are usually important precedents that serve as a ground for developing the needed formulations of those laws and regulations. We can even speak about the *style* of interpretation of disputed laws and the *style* of resolution of conflicts that supposedly each country possesses (cf. Dworkin 1986). The resolution of a conflict usually consists in showing by the third party that one interpretation of the law should take precedence over all others.

Now, when the third party is involved in a conflict on international level, it usually lacks the means to refer to overarching principles of justice. The international arena abounds in various and often incompatible interpretations of the same principles. As a rule, the diversity of opinion on international level is of greater degree than on societal level. This makes appeals to justice less efficient as compared with the case of societal level. What is, then, left for the third party is the resort to power. But this resort to power is a special one. The third party undertakes the *epistemological* role and the *persuasive* role. As the epistemological agent it tries to explain to both sides what the advantages and disadvantages of their conflict are and what exactly the conditions for agreement can be. As a persuasive agent, it tries to make the clashing sides reflect on the problems that the perpetuation of the conflict would bring about.

'Power versus justice' symbolises the differences between international and societal levels. However, there is another concept which enables us to see yet more differences. This concept is the concept of *enforcement*. The effectiveness of the third party as an adjudicator depends on whether the third party may enforce the settled resolutions. Within the state or society, it is usually the case that the adjudicating institutions are either capable of enforcement themselves or delegate this task to another institution which enforces the resolutions with sufficient effectiveness. On international arena such enforcement is problematic. As said above, states are sovereign and there is no overarching authority that controls all the tensions among the states. The authority of the United Nations along with other international organisations has considerably increased, especially in recent years. However, it is still not like the state authority within the state if it comes to effectiveness and scope.

I want to argue that there is yet another significant difference between the roles the third party plays in conflict resolution on international and societal levels. This difference concerns a notion which is in an intimate relation to the concept of enforcement – namely, the notion of *stability*.

Usually, the study of the role of the third party is confined to the analysis of the means of settling conflicts that are open to the third party. It is maintained that the third party has to resort to the strategy of finding the 'win-win' solution, or to the strategy of decreasing the emotional level of the opposing parties, or to the strategy of enhancing the communication, or, finally, to the strategy of clarification of the goals of the parties involved. The question of stability is often thought to be either incorporated into the solution of the conflict or of minor significance. I

believe this is a shortcoming in the study of the role of the third party. And I intend to add a few claims in order to elucidate the problem of stability.

My first claim is that the reference to justice (on societal level) is not only important for finding a solution to a conflict, but also important (if not more important) for ensuring the stability of a possible agreement. To analyse this claim, I will focus on two psychological motives which are prevailing in this kind of conflict. The *first* motive is the motive to have one's actions approved by others. The *second* is the motive of avoiding making personal enemies.

I will explain how these motives drive the behaviour of parties by considering an example. Party A is in conflict with party B. The third party C is in a position of an adjudicator.³ Party C endeavours to throw light on what is at stake in the conflict and what would be the adverse consequences of prolonging the conflict. It also endeavours to interpret the conflict in a way which suggests an acceptable solution for both conflicting parties. By doing so, party C usually refers to the established procedures or to the basic shared normative principles of co-existence and interaction. Imagine that party A is a strong one and has means to substantially influence party C, which is an adjudicator. Also, imagine that party A is strong enough to threaten party B, so that if the threats were stated in earnest, party B would be compelled to conform to the conditions posited by party A. In short, imagine that the *force-based* resolution in favour of party A is possible. I would argue that even in this situation the role of party C is to persuade party A to agree to certain concessions that would lead to a just (or nearly just) resolution of the conflict as opposed to an unjust, forced resolution when no concessions were made.

The adjudicating party C has chances to accomplish its task and persuade party A because party A is driven (among other things) by the motive of having its actions approved and by the motive of avoiding making enemies. By offering a just resolution and discouraging the forced one, the third party C creates a chance of settling the conflict for good, i.e. a chance of arriving at a *stable* resolution. This scenario stands in total contrast to the scenario when party A exerts its influence on party C and party B. In the latter case, the resolution is not fair and just, and therefore party A cannot be sure that party B would accept this resolution for a long period of time and not resume the ostensibly settled conflict at next opportunity. Also, A is afraid that party B would be supported by general opinion in its resumption of the conflict. The *community of reference* is an important concept here.⁴ Since both party A and party B have the same community of reference, they both care about the approval of this community.

It is generally agreed that people want to feel secure and safe. Injustices around them make them anxious, apprehensive and irksome. When people perceive that

³ Here I omit a discussion of the features that the third party should exhibit in order to be accepted as such. The most noticeable among them are of course 'impartiality' and 'possessing practical knowledge'.

⁴ It is worth noting that the concept of the community of reference is close to the concept of group identification.

they act in a just way, they are certain that their behaviour will be endorsed and that they will not make personal enemies by doing so. The third party, if it wants to do its job well, should capitalise on these psychological motives.

The examination of the role of the third party from the psychological perspective allows us to understand why on the international level the third party is rarely successful if it appeals to justice. Let us recapitulate. The reference to justice is important both for the resolution of the conflict and for the stability of this resolution. The stability of the resolution is achieved when the conflicting parties are persuaded that the resolution has been just and that their acceptance of that resolution is a laudable act that leads to safety, non-violence, and even cooperation. Furthermore, the resolution is stable when the community of reference approves the behaviour of the parties.

While the third party is capable of using the psychological inclinations of people (longing for the approval of the community of reference and avoiding making enemies) and securing a successful result on societal level, it is not capable of utilising the same inclinations in order to attain success on international level. On the latter level, stability is usually achieved through the balance of power. There is no unified audience that watches and approves. Instead, each state represents a self-supporting group of individuals. If the state representatives achieve the maximal result (even if it is objectively unjust) and their opponents lose completely, they are most likely to be greeted as heroes back home. If they are unable to achieve even the minimum, they will certainly be severely criticised, regardless of what is really a just resolution of the conflict in question.

What also contributes to the inefficiency of appeals to justice on international level is the fact that what is just and what is unjust is not sufficiently precisely determined. Within a society, traditional procedures and shared moral principles are helpful in determining what is just. On international level, however, the hidden hostilities, tormenting memories of the past oppression, and lack of common procedural patterns of interaction are responsible for difficulties in establishing what justice dictates.

Consider, for instance, the European Union. If one hundred years ago peace between France and Germany or Austria and Italy was thinkable only in terms of the balance of power, nowadays the conflicts between these countries are generally resolved by reference to the good of the European Union, to the value of the European community, and to the agreed procedures. People within the European Union have begun to see themselves as Europeans along with being members of particular states. This reference to being an European makes possible for the third party to appeal to justice when conflicts within the European Union emerge.

5. Conclusion

I have argued that the role of the third party in resolution of conflicts on societal level differs from its role on international level. On the first level, the third

party tries to make sure that a just (or nearly just) resolution is accepted, that fair procedures are followed, and that the defeated party is not offended or insulted, or does not lose face. These measures guarantee that the resolution will be stable and enforceable. The effectiveness of justice appeals by the third party has been explained through psychological motives of having one's actions approved and of avoiding making personal enemies. Thus, on societal level, safety and security are connected with justice.

On international level, however, safety and security mean the balance of power. Therefore, the third party, in order to be successful in resolving conflicts and in maintaining stability, has to appeal to calculations of actual strength and potential resources. The same psychological motives of having one's actions approved and of avoiding making enemies drive people to fight for their nations instead of looking for a just principle on the basis of which a possible resolution of the conflict might be feasible.

There are of course such phenomena as lobbying within a state or a society that approach the power scenario of conflict resolutions. Also, it is true that an increasing number of international disagreements are at least considered from the perspective of 'what would be a just resolution'. The latter tendency can be explained, in total accordance with the main idea of this paper, by pointing to the fact that the more visible 'international society' becomes in certain areas, the more effective the appeals to justice appear to be. However, it should be remembered that people care for the approval of those with whom they are psychologically linked and affiliated. And since it is doubtful that people might become psychologically affiliated on global scale, it is also doubtful that the conflicts on international level would be resolved by the appeals to justice. Unless the human psychological makeup is considerably changed, the justice appeals are bound to be parochial.

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