

The Enemy and the Innocent in Violent Conflicts

Daniel Rothbart
Professor of Conflict Analysis and Resolution
ICAR

And

Karina V. Korostelina
Research Professor
ICAR

Conflict Resolution: Core Concepts, Theories, Approaches and Practices, Sean Byrne, Dennis Sandole, Jessica Senehi, and Ingrid Staroste-Sandole, Eds., Routledge Press, forthcoming.

Abstract

The scale of devastation of the innocents, caught violent conflicts throughout the world, is increasing. This is not incidental to the nature of identity conflicts. In today's violent conflicts the innocents die in far greater numbers than do military combatants. These victims are often targeted by protagonist groups for strategic or tactical purposes, or just as frequently for vengeance. In many cases, actions taken against the innocent Other are linked directly to their relations with the militant enemy. The civilians are viewed as contaminated, and therefore dangerous, because of their bonds with the militant enemy. Whatever the protagonists' rationale, the twentieth century is a time of unimaginable devastation of the innocent.

In this chapter we explore how the enemy/innocent relationship in identity conflicts is central to the continuation and ferocity of hostilities. We believe that the spiraling acts of brutality, retaliation, and retribution that have plagued so many recent wars are fueled in part by the repositioning of the innocent Other, who are characterized by conflict protagonists as malicious and threatening. In addition to asking "Why do militant protagonists engage in a spiral series of attacks and counter-attacks against each other?" we ask "Why do militant protagonists address their grievances against the enemy group by inflicting much greater devastation on the innocent Other than on their primary opposition?" Our research suggests that answers to the latter question will offer insight into the former. This chapter represents the first rigorous study that explains the interdependency of the Enemy and the Innocent in protracted identity conflicts. Redressing the radical failing of realist explanations of violent conflict, we resort to an unusual model of intergroup relations. Our model centers on the protagonists' normative commitments, commitments that unify the faithful, accentuate differences between groups, and define identities in terms of good/bad, right/wrong, and virtue/vice. These commitments, or unconscious beliefs, define the groups' collective axiology, that is, their normative assumptions about group virtues and vices, right and wrong, and good and bad. In conflict settings, these dualities tend to be essentialized in notions of group

differences. The rationale for control, manipulation, or conquest of the outside group becomes self-evident in the context of such dualities.