Social Conflict and the Influence of Sub-Natural Forces

by

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As a child of four I experienced the last battles for Vienna during World War II. Certain scenes of the fighting are still with me; how can people become so inhuman? When Austria was freed again by the Allies in 1955 and the Treaty signed in Belvedere Castle, I was a l4-year-old amongst the cheering thousands outside the castle, as glad as they were that Austria, like Switzerland, had declared its neutrality, no longer wanting an active part in war. In 1959 I became a conscientious objector and joined the International Fellowship of Reconciliation, a peace movement based on active Christian non-violence. My conscience, however, would not simply allow me to say 'no' to the horror of war, which seemed incomprehensible to me. I was looking for practical ways of coping with conflict, so I studied Political Science and, in particular, problems of war and peace. Later, my studies in anthroposophy gave me further insight into the nature of conflict that I now use in my work as a consultant with NPI (Institute of Organization Development, Zeist, Holland).

People make life hell for each other through conflict. They cause one another pain and have to wrestle with the most profound questions. As an adviser, I am often faced with existential questions: What does conflict mean in the lives of those involved and of those advising? What is its deeper meaning? Which forces are revealed in strife between people? What are our chances of developing through that strife?

Usually an adviser is called only in when the two opposing parties are already firmly entrenched in their position and threatening to be further drawn into the raging torrent heading for the abyss. Individually they can only resist with difficulty. What happens to people in conflict? My wartime questions re-emerge.

We experience how small tensions and frictions can grow into large-scale rows. At first we think these are under control, but when the differences are more pronounced, they become increasingly difficult to restrain. Both parties are gradually pulled down by the forces of conflict, their faculties of thought and judgment less and less differentiated. There is a polarization into black and white. Feelings become

extreme. The will is blocked or faced with apparently insurmountable obstacles. We are provoked into violent behavior and acts later irreconcilable with our conscience. Conflict always appeals to our darker side. Unknown, inhuman forces slumber in our subconscious and are awakened, further escalating the conflict.

Why are so many inhuman or sub-human urges released in us during conflict? Which forces are actually at work there?

Nine Stages in Conflict Escalation

In my work with conflict I notice that conflicts escalate according to certain laws.[1] They become more intense stage by stage. At each stage a threshold is crossed where one realizes that, as a party to the conflict, one could call a halt and turn back. Each phase of the escalation has several "landmarks"[2] that relate in a consistent pattern. These landmarks are as follows. The first three stages are concerned with co-operation and competition.

Stage 1: Tension and Crystallization

In discussion, differing points of view harden and 'crystallize' apart. The two parties in opposition shut themselves off and their stance becomes fixed. They oscillate between co-operative and competitive attitudes and become increasingly embarrassed and tense. Discussion comes to a halt. Then both sides make an effort to continue the conversation.

Stage 2: Debate

Differing points of view make for lively exchange; there is a natural ebb and flow between them. But, at some point, things change and we have conflict. Now they become extremely polarized and fixed. Thinking, feeling, and willing move to extremes, and become mutually exclusive. Each party speaks its own language and cannot listen to the other without prejudice. The disagreement is determined by pseudo-logical tactics and tricks: arguments are used to deal the opponent a blow in the emotions, making him feel ridiculous or insecure. The disagreement is no longer creative, but rather mechanical. An argument is answered by a counter-argument, which is followed by yet another – an intellectual game of tennis that could go on indefinitely, with both sides wanting to demonstrate their intellectual superiority.

Stage 3: Confrontation with a "fait accompli"

By now the two parties can no longer reach and convince each other with words. Because of this, they simply proceed as they think right and then present the opposing side with a completed set of facts. Each side observes what the other has done, interpreting it with great suspicion. As enclosed groups, the

parties mutually exclude each other. Empathy is totally lost; one side no longer cares about the thoughts and feelings of the other. Each group begins to bear the stamp of conformity, with its implicit concept of 'us-and-them.'

In the following stages four to six it is a matter of winning or losing. Both parties think they can no longer resolve the conflict.

Stage 4: Image and Coalition-Forming

Each party forms a particularly positive picture of its own side, and a correspondingly negative picture of the opposition. The latter knows less, is less able, is less attractive, and so forth. These images become firmly fixed and, when meeting the opponent, can no longer be corrected by additional information: one only sees one's original prejudice confirmed. Such prejudice is primarily a result of psychological projection: we recognize in our opponent the very qualities we subconsciously find so annoying in ourselves. We see the mote in our neighbor's eye in order to ignore the beam in our own.

Both sides also try to spread the conflict into the surroundings, enlisting the support of like-minded sympathizers. Both maneuver each other into extreme roles and fight in just this capacity.

Stage 5: Head-on Attack and Loss of Face

The moral integrity of the opponent is now attacked. Both 'de-mask' each other, seeing there only the 'Double,' that sum of negative personal attributes, and no longer the higher Self. And now passionate rejection rituals are enacted. Each side thinks it their sacred duty to condemn the opponent as the personification of evil. The rejected party is socially isolated and buries him- or herself in self-pity, seeking no more than rehabilitation, because his/her self-confidence has been deeply shaken.

Stage 6: Threats Prevail

The conflicting parties now want to force each other to surrender, and challenge one another. If this is not taken up, drastic action, which will cause considerable damage, is threatened. This is intended to impress the opponent and, in order that it is taken seriously, the threat must be in part carried out. Both parties identifying personally and publicly with their threats increase the pressure. In this way there can be no turning back, even if the whole process is later seen to be senseless or even personally damaging. Time pressure is increased, both sides issuing an ultimatum.

More coalition partners are actively drawn into the conflict, the consequences of the threat become increasingly far-reaching, and it becomes more difficult than ever to halt.

In the last three stages of escalation it is only a question of loss and losing. Both parties think the opposition has to be put out of action, and only then will there be an end to the conflict.

Stage 7: Limited Destruction

Threats turn into action to prevent the opponent from carrying out his counter threat. At first, only the means of carrying out the threatened sanctions are destroyed. Both sides have abandoned their belief in the human dignity of their enemy. He/she is merely a thing, an object; there is nothing more to be gained.

If the enemy has suffered greater loss than us, this is experienced as winning. Loss becomes joy, gloating (*schadenfreude*). The opponent is forced to pay his/her pound of flesh. The lie becomes a virtue of war, and moral values are reversed.

Stage 8: Destroying the Enemy

If those in conflict are groups or departments, then their vital functions are attacked and rendered useless. The relationship of the prime opponents with those in the background is severed. Through weakening the inner cohesion and laming important functions the opposition is beaten and disintegrates, spiritually and physically, past the point of regeneration.

Stage 9: Destruction and Self-Destruction

There is no return. The final confrontation aims at the total destruction of the enemy, and both sides are prepared to do the ultimate, even if this involves self-destruction. In their downfall they experience triumph that with them the enemy is thrown into the abyss.

With Which Forces Are We Dealing in Conflict Escalation?

In escalating conflict we can, as humans, give access and mobility to certain inhuman, subconscious forces. Once active in social life, they threaten to tear us along with them. And yet conflict does not always escalate automatically through to the last phase. At the threshold between each stage we can wake up and prevent further escalation, if we so wish. But if we ignore these alarm-calls to consciousness, and succumb to the emerging drives and passions, the scale of the destruction will grow immediately.

In my practical work and research over many years, I recognized and described empirically these nine stages of conflict escalation. It was only then that a colleague made me aware of Rudolf Steiner's description of the nine layers of the Earth's interior and their connection with evil.[3] Steiner shows that

in the Earth's spiritual interior, nine layers of Ahriman's influence can be distinguished. Human failings enable these spiritual forces of opposition to work through us: They enlarge and develop what we humans initiate, blinding and fettering us, dimming our consciousness unawares.

Through conflict we descend into the underworld, into Dante's nine regions of the Inferno, and awaken there powerful monsters, which rush into our quarrels.[4] Unconsciously, then, we possess great negative potential, which makes us capable of terrible, inhuman deeds.

The Nine Layers of the Earth's Interior

These can only be briefly characterized here:

First Layer: "Mineral Earth"

Life and movement are crystallized, just as the mineral layer of the earth is rigidified. This is shown clearly in the first stage of conflict!

Second Layer: "Liquid Earth"

Through the activity of the beings in this layer, all life is driven out of the living. Organic movement becomes mechanical. Polarity becomes polarization. As with electricity, the poles cancel, or destroy, each other when they come into contact.[5]

Third Layer: "Air-Earth," "Steam-Earth"

These beings cause sensation to die away. Coldness of feeling and insensitivity predominate. As humans, we shut ourselves off in our own thinking, feeling and willing.

Fourth Layer: "Water-Earth," "Form-Earth"

What lives in the inner world is transposed into the outer world. In conflicts this takes the form of establishing coalitions and shows itself in the process of psychological projection. Forms are changed into their opposites. The stereotyped pictures of our self and our group become a substitute for our own ego.

Fifth Layer: "Fire-Earth"

The beings of this layer of the earth insinuate themselves into our passions, lending them additional negativity. Where strong feelings are rampant these beings become rebellious and force their way into our will, which they increasingly darken.

Sixth Layer: "Fruit-Earth"

These forces lead everything into self-destructive and limitless growth, just as cancers grow blindly and malignantly in the human organism. This is growth without sense, without guiding wisdom. In the fifth and sixth layers magnetic forces are active that want to imprison everything within their sphere of influence.

Seventh Layer: "Earth-Reflector," "Earth-Mirror"

These evil forces pervert qualities and virtues into their opposite. Joy at pain, glee at the downfall of others, and so forth, are all characteristic of conflict in its seventh stage.

Eighth Layer: "The Fragmenter"

Here everything is split into senseless particles, disintegrates and breaks apart. These forces also work in radioactive decay.[6]

Ninth Layer: "The Core of the Earth"

The seat of archetypal evil, source of black magic—it is anti-evolution itself. Archetypal evil strives to destroy irrevocably the fruits of mankind's development up to the present.

Provoking Sub-Nature

Rudolf Steiner only gives a short description of these powers. But their effects were of greatest concern to him right until his death. Even in the last of the *Michael Letters*[7] he calls on us all with great urgency to grapple with these sub-natural forces.

Through modern technology, these beings affect our culture to an ever-greater extent. In conflict we allow these powers access into social life via our souls. The effects of evil do, however, have their significance in human evolution. For progress does not come about as a matter of course.[8] Only in the struggle with the forces that drag us downwards can consciousness and progress develop. We must wrest this progress inch by inch from the powers of machinations possessed within these powers and, with our own morality, assert ourselves against their influence in our souls—only then is progress possible.

In social conflict we also confront the effects of evil beings. To overcome them we have to make every effort to rise as far in our awareness of spiritual beings as the forces of evil want to drag us downwards.[9] What does this mean?

The evil beings in their nine-layered subterranean habitat are the counter forces to the Spiritual Hierarchies. The "mineral Earth" wants to lead the life forces of the Angels into ossification. The Archangels—Spirits of groups, peoples, and languages—find their antithesis in the life-banishing powers of the "Liquid-Earth." The free deeds of the Archai, Spirits of Personality, are inverted in the realm of the "Air-Earth." The effects of the Exusiai, Spirits of Form, are turned into their opposite within the "Form-Earth." The caricature of the Dynamis, the Spirits of Movement, is found in the "Fire-Earth," where the unbridled passions are let loose. In the cancer-like, rampant growth of the "Fruit-Earth," the reversed effects of the Kyrioleles, Spirits of Wisdom, are to be seen. The seventh layer, the "Earth-Reflector," perverts virtue and sacrifice into their opposite qualities, so that the sacrificial deeds of the Thrones, Spirits of Will, threaten to be undone. The anti-image of the Cherubim, Spirits of Harmony, is "the Fragmenter" who tries to create total dissonance and chaos. The deeds of love of the Seraphim stand opposite the negation of development as nurtured by the powers in the "Core of the Earth."

As human beings we constantly stand between these mighty beings. We can give access to, and strengthen, one side or the other. We can also transform the evil within us because benevolent beings give us the power of redemption. This can also happen in social conflict if we are sufficiently awake and take a stand based on our own morality.

Just as illness offers us the possibility of developing soul and spirit, so social conflicts challenge us to take the necessary developmental steps in our consciousness soul.

At present we are placed right in the middle of these challenges. They will increase over the next years: technology, energy problems, economic and social conflicts, and wars—in all these we will have to struggle directly with the powers of evil. Through this we will also be able to discover and develop the necessary remedy in ourselves. Anthroposophy provides the most important aids to knowledge for this task.

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Footnotes:

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3 Steiner, R. *Vor dem Tore der Theosophie* (At the Gates of Spiritual Science), Vortrag 4, September 1906.

4 Gleich, S. von. *Die Umwandlung des Bösen*, Basel: 1975.

5 Jurriaanse, T. "De innerlijke kwaliteiten van electriciteit, magnetisme en kernenergie," in *Mededelingen van de anthroposophische vereniging in Nederland*, September 1978.

6 Blattman, G. *Strahlende Materie*, Stuttgart: 1979.

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9 Bittleston, A. *Our Spiritual Companions*, Edinburgh: 1980.