Theorizing democratic conflicts beyond agonism

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Abstract

While democratic societies experience intense conflicts about topics such as migration and climate action, there is no sound theory of democratic conflict. Agonistic theories emphasize the importance of conflict for democracy, but disregard conflict dynamics. Conflict sociology has focused on international or violent conflicts and neglects democratic conflicts. This article shows how this lacuna can be overcome. First, it develops an innovative, empirically informed processual approach to democratic conflicts. To this end, it draws on a broad range of scholarship from sociology and social psychology, and integrates relevant insights into a processual framework for analyzing democratic conflicts that explores mechanisms of escalation, de-escalation, and reconciliation. Second, the article illustrates how this approach can ground a more elaborated democratic theory of conflict that concretizes how and when conflicts are beneficial to democracy, and explores the practices and institutions that democracies employ to cope with different conflict dynamics.

Keywords Conflict · Dynamics · Escalation · Reconciliation · Democratic theory

Introduction

Democratic societies experience intense conflicts about a range of topics such as migration, climate change, racism, and gender. Conceptualizing and understanding democratic conflicts is therefore an important task. However, the obvious relevance of conflicts in contemporary democracies stands in stark contrast to the marginal standing of conflict in contemporary research. While democratic theorists recognize

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that phenomena like pluralism and difference bear a potential for conflict, they fail to deliver a sound analysis of how democratic conflicts work. Conflict sociology, on the other hand, has turned away from democratic conflicts and towards international or violent conflict since the 1970s (Joas & Knöbl, 2009, pp. 189–197; Turner, 2014, p. 57). Despite intensified conflicts in contemporary democracies, a sound theory of democratic conflict is therefore missing. In this article, we show how this lacuna can be overcome. We develop an innovative, empirically informed sociological approach to democratic conflict and demonstrate how this approach can inform a democratic theory of conflict.

In contemporary research, agonistic theories are the prime effort at theorizing democratic conflicts. While they put conflict center stage to theorize democracies, agonistic theories somewhat surprisingly lack a sound analysis of how conflicts actually work. Agonists like Chantal Mouffe, William Connolly, and James Tully argue that conflict is constitutive of democratic societies and criticize consensus-oriented democratic theories for neglecting the depth and continuity of disagreement. Agonistic theory has inspired research on a wide range of topics, among them migration (Hansen, 2020; Schwiertz, 2021), populism (Pacewicz, 2023; Tuğal, 2021), urban studies (Verlinghieri et al., 2023; Verloo, 2018), protest movements (Smolović Jones et al., 2021; Sparks, 2015), and of course social theory (Buti, 2023; Erman, 2009; Koczanowicz, 2011; Selg, 2013). However, as we will show, agonistic theories lack both explicit conceptual efforts as well as empirical validation regarding their core concept: conflict. Consequently, agonists disregard conflict dynamics and mistake particular phases in the development of a conflict for the nature of political conflict as such. Their capacities to analyze conflict processes and evaluate the role of conflict in modern democracies are therefore severely limited.

We argue that a democratic theory that puts conflicts center stage should be based on a robust conflict theory. Otherwise, democratic conflicts will be theorized too vaguely, and scholars may overemphasize the benefits or the perils of conflict, or prematurely associate beneficial conflicts with certain (progressive) actors. To avoid such pitfalls, we propose a novel approach to theorizing democratic conflicts. We conceptualize conflicts as processes and explore major conflict dynamics by introducing a range of mechanisms that drive these dynamics, namely escalation, de-escalation, and reconciliation. In other words, we propose a conceptually elaborated and empirically informed theory of democratic conflict.

For this theoretical endeavor, we draw on a wide range of research from classical conflict sociology, social identity theory, social psychology of international conflicts, the sociology of violence, and social movements studies. We review extant research in these areas regarding their suitability for democratic conflicts, and integrate the insights by proposing a processual framework for understanding democratic conflicts. A processual theory of conflict can then inform democratic and social theory because it clarifies when conflicts are beneficial for democratic societies and highlights the complex practical arrangements that enable democracies to deal with a variety of conflicts.

Our argument therefore contributes to interdependent, but all-too-often separated strains of research. Firstly, it offers a conceptually elaborated and empirically

informed proposal to theorize *democratic* conflicts. Reviving a strain of conflict sociology that has been neglected since sociological conflict theory turned towards international and violent conflicts, such a framework can inspire and guide empirical research that analyzes contemporary conflicts in democracies. While there is widespread interest in conflicts about migration or climate action, research usually lacks the analytical tools to explore those conflicts *as conflicts*, rather than as discourses or protests.

Secondly, we argue that a robust framework is necessary to analyze and evaluate the relevance of conflict in contemporary democratic societies. We assert that a robust democratic theory of conflict requires empirical and conceptual foundations of a sort that agonistic theory has failed to deliver. If agonistic theory is re-invented as an empirically informed democratic theory of conflict, it would discover an extensive research program that includes various analytical and empirical, but also normative tasks. One of those tasks is to determine and discuss the role of conflict in modern democratic societies, which is where sociological theorizing meets democratic theory.

The article proceeds as follows. In the first section, we take stock of agonistic views of conflict by dealing with the theories of three recognized agonists: Chantal Mouffe, William Connolly, and James Tully. In the following sections, we lay the foundations for a more comprehensive and empirically informed understanding of democratic conflicts. In section two, we outline what we call a processual approach to conflict. In section three, we show what it may mean to ground a democratic theory of conflict on such an approach.

Conflict in agonistic democratic theory

Agonistic theories have become a major stance in democratic theory. Despite their differences, agonistic theories share the belief that disagreement and conflict are constitutive features of politics, and of modern societies in general. They criticize the normative bias towards consensus and neutrality spotted in deliberative theories (e.g., Habermas) and liberal theories of justice (e.g., Rawls), and argue that conflicts are not only ineradicable but also indispensable.

Agonistic theories have developed since the 1970s, when new social movements showed that the agonistic potential in democracies reached well beyond the class divide, while theoretical developments, in particular poststructuralism, offered new tools to theorize these conflicts and position such theories in the academic field. Chantal Mouffe's agonistic pluralism started from a critique of Marxist theories and their insufficient understanding of contingency and conflict. William Connolly's concept of agonistic respect focused on the religious confrontations that had unfolded in the U.S. since the 1970s, marked by a significant shift towards evangelical movements and the challenge it posed to liberal secularism. James Tully advanced agonistic arguments in response to the Canadian case of cultural pluralism.

In the following, we engage with these approaches because they are widely acknowledged as prime examples of agonistic democratic theory. They represent the

variety in the family of agonistic theories and have had significant impact. However, none of them offers a convincing account of democratic conflicts.

Mouffe's theory of agonistic pluralism

Mouffe's approach is arguably the most prominent agonistic theory. Grounded in her work with Laclau, she takes the *socio-ontological stance* that no social form can be permanently fixed; it remains open to contestation and change (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 122). Antagonism, a permanent potential for conflict, is therefore an ineradicable feature of social relationships (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 125), but there is neither a primary conflict in society nor a privileged subject of conflict, as assumed in the Marxist tradition. Instead, society is a "field criss-crossed with antagonisms" (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 153).

Beyond this socio-ontological statement, Mouffe does not explicate any concept of conflict (August, 2022). However, implicitly, she builds her democratic theory on two aspects of conflict dynamics: *affectivity* and *identity building* (August, 2022, p. 5). According to Mouffe, conflicts offer opportunities for identification with democratic alternatives that, within a democratic range, differentiate an "us" from a "them" (Mouffe, 2009, p. 97, 2022, p. 21). The identification with a group that defends a certain democratic stance is strengthened through emotional attachment (Mouffe, 2005, p. 25). Mouffe (2009, p. 95) argues that citizens primarily support democracy because they attach themselves to democratic identities in affective terms (Mouffe, 2009, p. 95). In the absence of conflictual relationships among democratic actors, possibilities for democratic identifications decline, to the effect that citizens may lose their affective bonds with democracy (Mouffe, 2005, pp. 69–72).

Mouffe thus not only stresses the ubiquity of conflict, but also the integrative role of conflict in democratic politics: if there is enough conflict (of the adequate sort), identifications with democracy are likely to be maintained or recreated. In this sense, she offers strong arguments that conflicts are not only ineradicable, but also necessary to stabilize democracies and beneficial to enhance the quality of democratic systems.

At the same time, Mouffe acknowledges that some conflicts can be harmful. For conflicts to be productive, they must be fought in particular ways. The purpose of her distinction between antagonism and agonism is precisely to separate conflicts that tend to undermine democracy from conflicts that stimulate and reproduce citizens' affective identifications with democracy (Mouffe, 2009, p. 102). The central purpose of democratic politics is to transform antagonisms into agonisms. She argues that a "conflictual consensus" on liberty and equality serves political actors in liberal democracies as a common ethico-political framework that facilitates such transformations (Mouffe, 2009, p. 103).

But Mouffe's approach has grave shortcomings (August, 2022, pp. 9–12). First, it remains silent regarding the dynamics that can explain the emergence and stability of political cohesion among heterogenous political identities (Erman, 2009). Mouffe refers to the notion of a conflictual consensus whenever she highlights that

an unlimited pluralism would undermine the possibility of democratic forms of conflict processing, but she explains neither what enables the emergence of such a common identity, nor how conflicts among the various political actors contribute to its stabilization.

Second, Mouffe does not consider how conflicts may escalate in ways that turn them into antagonistic conflicts. She focuses exclusively on the need to transform such conflicts and neglects the question of what causes or facilitates the 'antagonization' of conflicts in the first place. Thereby, she overlooks that the very same mechanisms that create affectivity and foster identity building in conflict also escalate conflicts towards antagonism.

Third, Mouffe's stereotypical distinction is therefore unconvincing (Menga, 2017). She does not determine what exactly separates an antagonistic from an agonistic conflict, does not provide any account of the dynamics that turn conflicts from agonistic to antagonistic (and vice versa), and does not engage with the range of conflictual modes within the agonistic category.

Connolly's theory of agonistic respect

Connolly (2002, p. 188) argues that contemporary societies are particularly prone to deep conflicts because late modernity renders "the intensive entanglement of everyone with everyone else" inescapable. The acceleration of life has amplified the intersections of constituencies that "honor different final moral sources" (Connolly, 2005, p. 122). Thus, late modernity is characterized by "conflictual interdependencies" without the prospect of a consensual resolution (Connolly, 2002, p. 216). Connolly's answer to this predicament is 'agonistic respect'. He proposes a "civic virtue" that calls for the "forbearance" and "presumptive generosity" of conflict parties (Connolly, 1995, p. 193, e.g. 2002, pp. xxvi–xxviii, 160). Acknowledging our own limitations, and restraining political engagement accordingly, will establish connections across differences despite each party maintaining distance from the other.

Connolly believes that agonistic respect flows from practices of self-critique. The self is a set of conjoined and conflicting elements shaped by contingent historical events, social relations, individual experiences, and biological aspects that accumulate during a lifetime (e.g., Connolly, 2002, pp. 174, 204, 2017, p. 53). If we acknowledged that contingency, difference, and conflict are folded into our own identity, we would enhance our ability to appreciate the difference with those who hold contradicting faiths. Connolly therefore proposes to cultivate agonistic respect by historicizing our identities, which can make us see that they result from contingent processes rather than essentialist logics (e.g., Connolly, 1995, pp. 34–39, 192–193; Westphal, 2018, pp. 163–164).

Practicing agonistic respect individually, then, has macro effects. It drives a self-enforcing process: the more constituencies experience the benefits of respectful conflict, the more constituencies will exercise it themselves, thus spreading a "generous pluralist ethos" (Connolly, 1995, p. 99). Over time, this diminishes the demand for an all-embracing identity and allows for further pluralizing moral sources (Connolly, 1995, p. 203, 2002, p. 167).

We can spot some implicit elements of a theory of conflict in Connolly's argumentation. Like conflict sociologists, Connolly points towards the associative effects of dissociation. If individuals are comfortable expressing themselves, this will advance social integration. But when conflict parties lack agonistic respect, conflicts threaten individuality and democracy. In Connolly's theory, 'ressentiment' is the antonym of agonistic respect. It destroys plurality and difference for a dogmatic concept of a unified, morally bound identity. Thus, Connolly is aware of the volatility of conflict and offers a diagnosis according to which late-modern conflict waging has a destructive signature.

However, despite the central role of conflict in Connolly's social ontology and his solution to the predicaments of late-modern societies, he does not offer systematic reflections on the forms or dynamics of conflicts. In particular, his distinction between agonistic respect and 'ressentiment' does not account for the *mechanisms of transition* or the *actual variety* between these two stereotypes, and he ignores the question of *what conflict practices* are appreciated within an ethos of agonistic respect. This casts doubt on the normative plausibility of Connolly's claims. For instance, it remains unclear how and when transitioning to agonistic respect is *actually feasible*. Agonistic respect has been criticized as an overly optimistic expectation, unfit to empirically describe or normatively guide democratic conflicts (Lloyd, 2010; Westphal, 2018, pp. 266–268). As we will show, the skepticism is appropriate in relation to some stages of conflicts, but not for others. Connolly does not deal with the collective, interactive processes of conflict management, and his focus on two stereotypes masks the variety and dynamics of conflict that are well documented in sociological and psychological conflict research.

Tully's theory of agonistic dialogue

In contrast to Mouffe and Connolly, Tully describes the conflicts contemporary societies face as products of cultural diversity. Cultural diversity includes a wide range of groups according to Tully (1995, pp. 2–3): movements that demand recognition as independent nation states or autonomous political associations, linguistic and ethnic minorities, feminist movements, and Aboriginal and Indigenous peoples. However, he highlights three similarities among these groups: they long for self-rule, claim that basic laws and institutions of their societies are unjust, and articulate their grievances on the basis of distinct "cultural ways of being a citizen" (Tully, 1995, pp. 4–6). Their demands for recognition are closely linked with the emergence of conflicts, because they seek to change the status quo in ways that affect other groups, and often in ways that those groups see critically (Tully, 2008, pp. 293).

Tully (2008, pp. 225–27) distinguishes between a democratic ("treaty") and a non-democratic ("colonial") way of dealing with conflicts arising from demands for cultural recognition. Colonial responses to indigenous demands, which were imposed during the nineteenth century and leave their traces in contemporary views of Aboriginal peoples as "subordinate and subject to the Canadian Government", denied the indigenous groups recognition as equals, rejected their demands for

self-rule, and treated them as inferior groups "who could be coerced into the superior Canadian ways by their civilized guardians" (Tully, 2008, pp. 226–227). In contrast, the democratic way of dealing with conflicts resorts to dialogue (Tully, 2008, p. 301).

The call for dialogical forms of conflict processing distinguishes Tully's theory from other agonistic theories. Unlike Connolly, Tully argues that responses to conflict must be products of interactions, not genealogical analyses of the self. Unlike Mouffe, he does not think that transforming antagonistic conflicts into agonistic ones suffices. Instead of seeking to realize as much as possible of their own political preferences in a tamed struggle for hegemony, conflict parties should act according to the principle of "*audi alteram partem*" (Tully, 2002, p. 218). This means that they should not only contribute and explain their own views, but also follow the belief that "there is always something to be learned from the other side" (Tully, 2002, p. 218).

In contrast to Habermasian discourse theory, Tully does not think that dialogue helps to determine or approximate a consensus. Political actors can create "bonds of solidarity across real differences" (Tully, 2002, p. 219) through dialogue, but they do not overcome their disagreement. Thus, like Connolly and Mouffe, Tully highlights the integrative effects of conflict. He offers an explanation of the causes of conflict (cultural diversity, grievances, and conflicting demands for recognition) and describes a mode of interaction for the settlement of conflicts (dialogue). But his theory has two grave limitations.

First, Tully one-sidedly describes dialogue as the proper mode of political conflict processing and ignores multiple other practices of conflict, such as protest, civil disobedience, and sabotage. He neglects to consider that such alternative modes of conflict are not only prevalent in democracies, but often necessary to create the inclusive dialogical situations he describes. For example, civil disobedience was an important means for the civil rights movement to place racial inequalities on the political agenda in the first place.

Second, Tully's theory has nothing to offer regarding the question of what, if anything, could or should be done if conflict parties are unwilling or incapable of listening to and learning from the other side and/or creating agreements across differences. As with the other agonists, his theory lacks the conceptual tools to analyze and evaluate conflicts in their different degrees of escalation, de-escalation, and settlement.

Theorizing democratic conflicts: empirical and conceptual foundations

We argued that agonistic theories lack a sufficient theory of conflict to ground democratic theory. To gain a more robust understanding of democratic conflicts, we propose a processual approach that highlights the dynamics and mechanisms unfolding in conflicts. Developing a full-fledged theory of democratic conflicts is obviously beyond the scope of a single article. Our goal is more limited. We present

a framework of three major dynamics that help explore democratic conflicts: escalation, de-escalation, and reconciliation.

Escalation, de-escalation, and reconciliation are common heuristics to analyze conflicts (e.g., Collins, 2012; Kriesberg, 1998; Shapiro, 2021). However, conflict research did not focus on democratic conflicts, i.e., conflicts concerning collectively binding decisions *in* democracies. While social psychology has traditionally dealt with group or inter- and trans-state conflicts, the sociology of violence obviously excludes most democratic conflicts from its field of interest. Social movement studies, on the other hand, overemphasize the protest and movement side of conflicts. Their focus on a particular sort of actors and its strategic actions neglects conflict dynamics resulting from the interactions of other actors as well as conflicts without social movements (Rucht, 2023, p. 154; Walder, 2009).

We therefore start from the broader conceptions of conflict research. Our approach is innovative as it connects insights from empirically grounded research in independent subdisciplines and translates them into a framework for *democratic* conflicts. For that purpose, we take the widespread but rarely theorized notion of conflicts as "processes" (e.g., Bartolini & Mair, 1990; Collins, 2012; Dahrendorf, 1958; Pruitt & Kim, 2004) and ground it by drawing on concepts from the recent rise of processual social science. In that perspective, processes are sequences of events over time, and distinct processes such as escalation are driven by a concatenation of mechanisms. Mechanisms are sub-processes, that is, causal concatenations of events in time that regularly lead to outcomes of a particular sort (Gross, 2009; Hedström & Ylikoski, 2010).[1] Combining empirical and conceptual insights in this way, we propose a range of empirically grounded mechanisms for each of the major dynamics driving democratic conflicts. Thereby, we create a framework for an empirically informed theory of democratic conflicts.

With its focus on escalation, de-escalation, and reconciliation processes, the following exploration mostly deals with a meso-level of conflict theory: we are interested in how conflicts develop over a range of situations/events. The interest in the eigen-dynamics of conflict is characteristic for multiple approaches to conflict analysis across the disciplines (Bösch, 2017; Collins, 2012; Kriesberg, 1998; Pruitt & Kim, 2004). With these approaches, we share some central assumptions about the nature of conflict. First, "social conflicts are dynamic and tend to move through stages", albeit in fundamentally non-linear ways (Kriesberg & Neu, 2018, p. 3; see also Bösch, 2017; Messmer, 2003). Second, the direction and shifts of conflict dynamics are shaped by multiple interdependent contingencies, in particular the evolving social constructions of the parties regarding their own status, their opponents, and the nature of their conflict, as well the material and non-material resources available to the actors involved (e.g., Collins, 1990, p. 68; Kriesberg & Neu, 2018, pp. 2–3; Pruitt & Kim, 2004, pp. 101–120). Third, conflicts are constitutive phenomena of social life that contribute to stabilizing, shaping, and changing

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[1] There is an ongoing debate about the specifics of mechanismic approaches. Therefore, we draw on a broad definition that allows for a range of ontological and epistemological commitments (Gross 2009).

social identities, relationships, and structures (e.g., Collins, 1990; Kriesberg & Neu, 2018; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967).

In classical sociological conflict theory, many approaches inspired by Marx and Weber focus on macro-sociological structures in the sense that they try to explain the distribution/stratification of power and resources, including its reproduction and change, via conflict (Collins, 1990; Turner, 2013, pp. 32–53). However, other sociological conflict theories reject a purely structural approach and instead stress the eigen-dynamics of conflict, which is the point of departure of our framework. Simmel (1904a, 1904b) pioneered a line of research that explores conflict as a genuine 'form of socialization' that can take a variety of shapes as the perceptions, organization, and interactions of the groups evolve in conflict. This proto-processual perspective influenced the Chicago School (Angell, 1965) and social-psychological conceptions of group conflict (Benard & Doan, 2011), while macro-sociological conflict theory adopted Simmel's argument to ground social integration in conflict dynamics (Coser, 1956). A second, related but distinct, line of conflict theory attempted to supplement macro-arguments with micro-foundations. These approaches base their processual arguments about the eigen-dynamics of conflicts in chains of interaction rituals (Collins, 1981) or sequences of communicative events (e.g., the systems-theoretical approach of Messmer, 2003).

With these processual approaches to conflict, conflict sociology offers a way to combine micro, meso, and macro perspectives. Here, micro, meso, and macro "do not stand for separate areas of social reality, […] but they represent segments of the spatiotemporal continuum of social reality" (Rössel & Collins, 2001, p. 509). With Collins (2022, p. 1), we assume that different scales have different dynamics and affect each other in complex ways. For instance, local group assemblies create ingroup solidarity that contributes to the emergence of escalating dynamics; similarly, violent encounters can facilitate the escalation of the overall conflict (Collins, 2012). The development of a conflict then may change the social status of organized groups and, inversely, the status of groups can then influence the resources they can bring to new conflict interactions. While we cannot explore the complex web of entanglements systematically, the following framework delineates conflict dynamics that span over multiple encounters. In the third section, we shift our focus and discuss how democratic macro-arrangement and conflict dynamics influence each other.

Escalation

In a processual view, escalation is *a self-reinforcing process* in which the intensity and extensity of a conflict increases. This process can be fueled by intended tactics and strategies, but also emerge accidentally, for instance through misunderstandings, situational dynamics, or unintended consequences (Collins, 2012; Vandermeer et al., 2019). There is an intuitive understanding of what escalation means: emotions rise, adversaries become more and more absorbed by the conflict, more distrustful, and more willing to believe rumors about atrocities; the tactics and weapons of choice get heavier; and in the end it is more about hurting the other side than about winning

Table 1 An analytical matrix of escalation

	Intensification	Extensification
Social	Increasing commitment and hostility towards adversaries	Increasing number of participants / parties
Thematic	Radicalization of goals	Generalization or proliferation of topics
Temporal	Acceleration of moves and countermoves	Protraction

(Collins, 2012; Kriesberg, 1998; Pruitt & Kim, 2004, pp. 88–91). However, to date, these diverse associations lack systematic conceptualization.

To clarify the dimensions of escalation and, inversely, de-escalation, we propose to distinguish between *intensification* and *extensification* (see Table 1). *Intensification* refers to the rigor, vehemence, or fierceness of the adversaries and their interactions: socially, it highlights the rising cognitive biases and emotional commitment of the adversaries; thematically, it refers to a radicalization of goals; and temporally, it captures the acceleration of moves and countermoves typical of highly intense phases of conflicts.[2] *Extensification*, on the other hand, refers to the breadth and length of conflicts: socially, it refers to the rising number of participants in a conflict; thematically, it captures the generalization or proliferation of conflict topics; and temporally, it refers to the protraction of conflicts. As this analytical matrix illustrates, conflict escalation can happen in multiple dimensions, but it does not necessarily occur in all dimensions simultaneously. Since clarity about the dimensions of escalation has been missing so far, the dynamics of and between these dimensions remains a task for further research.

However, the general dynamics of escalation processes are well understood and described similarly across disciplines. Conflict sociology as well as psychological research on international conflicts and group dynamics describe escalation as a *cohesion-conflict spiral*, that is, they stress the positive feedback loop between intergroup conflict and ingroup solidarity (Bernard & Doan, 2011; Bonacker & Stetter, 2022; Coser, 1956; Glasl, 1982; Messmer, 2003; Simmel, 1904a, 1904b). Collins (2012) has made particular efforts to synthesize the sociological accounts of conflict escalation. He argues that a positive feedback loop of intergroup conflict and ingroup solidarity takes place on each side of a conflict. External conflict encourages ingroup cohesion. Strengthening ingroup cohesion, then, mobilizes a strong commitment to the ingroup and its causes, while driving out neutral or deviant members. This intensifies cognitive biases and tactical hostility against the adversary. It also mobilizes moral and material resources. Escalating hostility on one side then further spurs ingroup solidarity and outgroup hostility on the other side, creating an

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[2] The rows follow a widespread distinction proposed by Luhmann (1987).

escalation spiral (see also August, 2022, p. 11; Pickett et al., 2002; Pruitt & Kim, 2004, pp. 101–120).[3]

In comparison with sociological research, sociopsychological research has put more effort into elaborating the individual identity-formation mechanisms that fuel the escalation spiral. In her comprehensive review, Brewer (2001) proposes four psychological mechanisms that escalate social identity formation towards aggressive conflict: *categorization*, *ingroup positivity*, *intergroup comparison*, and *outgroup antagonism*. As she states, "[v]irtually all current theories […] recognize social categorization as the basic cognitive process underlying all intergroup phenomena" (pp. 19–20). People draw on cognitive categories to "partition the multidimensional variability among human beings into discrete subsets" and then accentuate "perceived intracategory similarities and intercategory differences" (Brewer, 2001, p. 20). The more they define their identity in terms of group membership, the stronger they will show positive affects and behavior towards their ingroup. In the next step, groups evaluate their distinctiveness in comparison to the values and interests of outgroups. When ingroups feel threatened, this finally drives antagonistic, hostile, and aggressive affects and behavior towards outgroups (Bernard & Doan, 2011, p. 195; Brewer, 2001; Lasko et al., 2022).

While sociopsychological research grounds escalation in co-evolving changes of the cognitive-emotional infrastructure of individuals and groups, micro-sociological research argues that these changes in social identity emerge from chains of interaction rituals. In collective interaction rituals, perceived threats and emotional stimuli are transformed into group solidarity, along with an individual emotional energy, a sense of moral conviction, and a mutual focus of attention (Collins, 2005, p. 48, 2012, p. 3). In both accounts, however, the process of social identity formation in conflicts is linked to the proliferation of *cognitive and emotional biases*. When conflicts escalate, confirmation biases and intolerance for ambiguity rise, the antagonists tend to perceive the conflict as a zero-sum game, and hostile perceptions and evaluations of the antagonists such as de-individualization and de-humanization become more likely (e.g., Pruitt & Kim, 2004, pp. 102–113). Complementary, 'negative' feelings such as anger, fear, shame, or hate entwine with 'positive' feelings of belonging and solidarity (Bar-Tal et al., 2007; Bramsen & Poder, 2018; Halperin et al., 2011). In sum, these considerations of the complex emotional dynamics are much more elaborate than agonistic theory's vague statements about the important role of affects in political conflicts.

Sociology has discussed the organizational changes that come with the solidarity-conflict spiral: *homogenization* and *hierarchization* (August, 2022; Bernard & Doan, 2011; Collins, 2012; Coser, 1956, pp. 95–110; Sennett, 1992, pp. 265–266, 308–312; Simmel, 1904b, pp. 676–680). To develop and maintain clout in conflict,

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[3] The interdependence of association and dissociation in conflicts is a long-standing insight of conflict sociology. In a basic sense, conflict interactions can create social ties where none existed before. In the course of conflicts, not only ingroup cohesion is strengthened. Contact with opponents may result in *mutually accepted rules* that regulate the conflict or generate *social innovations that strengthen the cohesion of a society* in which conflicts unfold (Coser, 1956, pp. 120–128, 1957; Luhmann, 1983, pp. 357–404; Simmel, 1904a, pp. 493, 507–511).

conflict groups employ practices of homogenization that strengthen ingroup cohesion. Unifying heterogeneous groups of people requires creating a social identity that comes with its own symbols, narratives, rituals, and behavioral imperatives. Deviant opinions and reluctant behavior then become less and less accepted. If deviant, dissenting, or neutral actors do not exit on their own behalf, they may be forced out or even killed. At the same time, conflict parties tend to develop hierarchies and centralized organizational structures that correspond to the model of social unity. It is for this reason that international conflicts are often 'the hour of the executive branch'. In some cases, this may slide into authoritarian structures when the social cohesion "necessary for concerted action" is lacking (Coser, 1956, p. 92).

Finally, conflict interactions between adversaries unfold in front of an audience, including third parties and 'communities'. Here, *alliance formation* is another mechanism of conflict escalation. Conflict parties will lobby neutral or by-standing parties to support their cause symbolically or materially; or third parties could themselves seek to support a conflict party (e.g., Collins, 2012; Coser, 1956, pp. 139–49; Dyke & McCammon, 2010; Glasl, 1982; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). This becomes more relevant as the conflict escalates because escalating conflicts drain resources. To prolong or intensify the conflict, groups must mobilize support not only from within but also from outside their own membership (Collins, 2012, p. 8). If third parties are mobilized effectively, the conflict can escalate in both dimensions: additional resources may allow conflict parties to intensify or prolong the conflict, while joining third parties extend the scope of the conflict.

In sum, conflict escalation is a dynamic process, in which the interactions of the parties in front of an audience increase group solidarity, cognitive and affective polarization, the availability of moral and material resources, and the mobilization of allies, leading to a multi-dimensional intensification and extensification of the conflict. Over time, de-escalation practices become harder to enact. The more de-escalation efforts are needed, the less likely they are to happen and, if they happen, to succeed. This is because of the self-confirmation biases of the antagonists, the institutionalization of norms and vested interests over time, and the entrapment by former public commitments to the conflict cause.

De-escalation

If considered as an ideal-type, escalation is a self-reproducing dynamic, a vicious circle. "If we were to do a computer simulation, conflict would escalate to infinity", Collins argues (2012, p. 10). However, escalation to the extreme is obviously not the case empirically. Conflicts de-escalate. Yet, if the de-escalation process has even been in the limelight for trans- or inter-state conflicts (Kriesberg, 1998, p. 181), there has barely been any research on the de-escalation process in democratic conflicts. In the following, we provide some starting points.

Firstly, conflicts often discontinue in early stages because social identity building processes halt. As we described above, the social-psychological process concatenates categorization, ingroup positivity, intergroup comparison, and outgroup antagonism. However, Brewer (2001) pointed out that social psychology tends to neglect

the empirically proven gaps in this process. The four stages have distinct characteristics, and they are not automatically connected. Social identity building therefore is not inherently linked with outgroup antagonism. For example, the Planet Protection Society, a grassroots group studied by Blee (2012, pp. 126–130; McClelland, 2014), had high solidarity, but its distinct focus on fun and positive emotions led the group members to avoid external conflict and exclude negative emotions such as rage or anger. Likewise, many latent contradictions in society never reach the point of conflict manifestation, or dissolve soon after manifestation (Pruitt & Kim, 2004, pp. 8–9; Luhmann, 1987, pp. 541; Collins, 2012, p. 36). In these cases, escalation processes discontinue early, because groups shy away from emotional tension or disperse locally. However, *when* serious conflict occurs, social identity building is more likely to escalate towards outgroup aggression.

A different mechanism of de-escalation is the *burnout of emotional commitment*. Niklas Luhmann argued that "conflicts […] are subject to a natural tendency to entropy, to flagging, to dissolution due to other interests and requirements: one gets tired, stops fighting, parts ways, lets time pass, and reconnects over other topics" (1987, p. 534, our transl.). Based on extensive empirical studies on social movements, Tilly and Tarrow (2015, p. 130) come to the similar conclusion that mass protest of ordinary people is "eventually discouraged by […] boredom, and desire for a routine life that eventually affects most protesters."

Collins (2004, 2020) observed this dynamic with reference to group solidarity that emerged from external threats, such as terrorist attacks or Covid-19. He points out that the "emotional burnout" of conflict follows an *inherent time-dynamic* of group solidarity. While it rises quickly and then remains on a plateau, group solidarity inevitably starts to fade. Symbols and rituals that recreated group solidarity, such as flag-wearing or mask-wearing, dissipate. The less people engage in interaction rituals to maintain group solidarity, the faster it declines. Thus, "emotional burnout" is a self-reinforcing *social* mechanism inverse to the escalation spiral.

A related mechanism of de-escalation is *resource burnout*: "Conflict de-escalates when material resources are no longer available to sustain it" (Collins, 2012, p. 14). The causes for resource deprivation may vary: the resources may become exhausted or unacceptably drained; third parties stop supplying external resources; the logistics of resource delivery break down, either due to the opponent's tactics or bad organization; or one may simply need to go home, eat, and sleep (Collins, 2012, p. 14; Kriesberg, 1998, p. 214; Pruitt & Kim, 2004, p. 174).

Here it becomes obvious that escalation and de-escalation are interdependent. Rising escalation drains more resources and leads to de-escalation at some point. Actors also interpret conflicts along the lines of escalation, de-escalation, and their respective mechanisms, and draw conclusions for their behavior. If they expect further escalation and anticipate resource depletion, it can encourage them to either 'de-escalate' the conflict through conciliation or invest more in alliance building to tap into new resources. Strategic shifts and even tactical de-escalation can therefore lead to renewed or prolonged conflict escalation. If successful, the issue remains on or returns to the democratic agenda.

In our view, the above mechanisms of the de-escalation process are supported and complemented by mechanisms institutionalized in modern democracies. We

want to mention three such institution-based mechanisms: diversion, depletion, and cross-cutting.

Firstly, the social structure of Western democracies supports the burnout mechanism by *diversion*. Western democracies are highly differentiated societies that hold multiple options (e.g., go to the movies, watch sports, meet friends) as well as demands (e.g., work, parents' evenings). Differentiation supports conflict de-escalation because people are neither willing to forego these options, nor able to avoid the demands of a differentiated society. Thus, most cannot commit their full time and resources to a single conflict group or cause, at least not indefinitely. This hampers escalation in the first place or reinforces de-escalation processes. When emotional energy begins to burn out, the social context offers plenty of options and demands to divest attention.

Secondly, Western democracies have highly differentiated conflict arrangements that first encourage and then *deplete social conflict*. The great amount of conflict in modern societies is possible only because of a differentiation of arenas and forms for regulated conflict, for instance in the political system (e.g., election campaigning, parliamentary debate, demonstrations) or in the legal system (e.g., civil suits, constitutional courts) (Dubiel, 1998; Simmel, 1904b). These include mechanisms to bind and absorb conflict energy so that conflict peters out. Court proceedings are a prime example. They allow people to ventilate grievances, but also require them to invest their time and energy in multiple rounds of legal legwork, which depletes the antagonists' emotional and material resources and the attention of the public (Luhmann, 1983).

Finally, differentiation of modern democratic societies facilitates another well-known mechanism of de-escalation: *cross-cutting*.[4] On the one hand, cross-cutting refers to multiple conflicts that overlap but do not align, so that (a) unidimensional polarization is prevented, and (b) people experience alternating conflict alliances. In one conflict, two people stand on the same side, whereas they find themselves on different sides of another conflict (Collins, 1993, pp. 296, 301; Coser, 1956, pp. 77–81; Kriesberg, 1998, p. 51; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967, p. 41). On the other hand, cross-cutting refers to overlapping group memberships or differentiated social roles, so that conflict identities become less salient and escalation is hampered by the intention, or the necessity (e.g., in work relationships), to sustain relationships in other social situations (Brewer, 2001, pp. 34–35; Kriesberg, 1998, p. 134; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967, p. 17; Pruitt & Kim, 2004, p. 143; Selway, 2011). In modern democracies, high conflict salience usually comes at high costs for routine social interactions, which generates incentives for decentering conflicts.

To sum up, *emotional burnout, resource burnout, discontinuation, diversion, depletion,* and *cross-cutting* are different mechanisms that drive de-escalation processes. This is not an encompassing list, and we have not described these

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[4] While there is a general consensus about the effectiveness of cross-cutting, there may be trade-offs. Close relationships usually hamper escalation, but they can also exacerbate it in cases of perceived betrayal (Pruitt & Kim, 2004, p. 143). Also, cross-cutting might prove unreliable for de-escalation when conflicts are highly escalated (Goodin, 1975).

mechanisms and their concatenation comprehensively. Rather, we argue that a profound understanding of democratic conflicts needs much research to map the diverse mechanisms that can spur de-escalation and understand how escalation and de-escalation processes relate *in differentiated democratic societies*. Agonistic theories fail to deliver any consideration of this topic, and even conflict sociology provides no systematic treatment of it.

Reconciliation

Reconciliation has been recognized as an additional stage of conflict only in past decades (see, with many references, Bar-Tal & Bennink, 2004, pp. 11–12). Peace-building scholars began to study reconciliation as they realized that conflict resolution attempts, such as peace treaties, need further stabilization. Reconciliation happens *after* an escalated conflict has been more or less settled (Oettler & Rettberg, 2019; Pruitt & Kim, 2004, p. 218). We propose to include this fundamental insight from peace and conflict studies in a process theory of democratic conflicts.

Since reconciliation research originates mainly from the social psychology of international conflict, the general argument is that the "essence of reconciliation is a psychological process" that "changes the motivations, goals, attitudes, and emotions of the majority of society members" (Bar-Tal & Bennink, 2004, p. 17).[5] Unpacking this process, social psychology research discusses two sets of mechanisms. First and foremost, it addresses the *complex concatenation of psychological mechanisms*. Reconciliation here requires the (1) destabilization of cognitive and behavioral schemas, followed by (2) re-framing, re-categorization, and re-appraisal, so that "a new psychological repertoire" is formed, and ultimately (3) re-stabilized (Bar-Tal & Bennink, 2004, p. 23; for the emotional side in particular, see Halperin et al., 2011). Second, social psychologists discuss a *simple mechanism of social diffusion*. They argue that the psychological changes start from a small minority, usually the leaders of the involved states, while middle-level leaders such as prominent figures from religious, intellectual, or economic circles then mobilize psychological changes in the mass of people (Bar-Tal & Bennink, 2004, pp. 27–28).

To make reconciliation an element in a theory of democratic conflict, we must rethink some of the features of the reconciliation process. In peace and conflict studies, reconciliation "concerns the formation or restoration of a genuine peaceful relationship between societies that have been involved in an intractable conflict" (Bar-Tal & Bennink, 2004, p. 14). This focus is misleading when it comes to conflicts in modern democracies. Here, the outcome of reconciliation is rarely the establishment of peaceful (i.e., non-violent) relationships, since peaceful societal relationships are

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[5] Researchers agree that reconciliation requires the conflict parties to acknowledge committed atrocities on both sides, recognize each other's sufferings, and believe in the security of future interactions (Cameron, 2007; Halperin et al., 2011, p. 96; Kriesberg, 1998, p. 352). However, while some propose a more idyllic vision aiming at harmony, others see the goal of reconciliation in ensuring coexistence, for instance by facilitating cooperative interaction and routine conflict resolution (Bar-Tal & Bennink, 2004, pp. 20–21; Oettler & Rettberg, 2019).

usually sustained throughout conflict, even if violence occurs incidentally. Moreover, the simple devolution from state leaders to the majority of the population falls short of the differentiation of social systems and the simultaneity of multiple conflict cycles in democracies. Finally, many of the considered practices of reconciliation such as truth commissions, which are prime examples of institutionalized reconciliation, are rare phenomena in modern democracies.

However, reconciliation processes *do* happen in Western democracies. For instance, dealing with the conflicts of a multicultural country, the government of Québec submitted a report "Building the future: A time for reconciliation", written by Gérard Bouchard and Charles Taylor (2008). In addition, the intense conflicts about racial segregation and civil rights in the U.S. or the 1968 student revolts in Germany led to reconciliation efforts to re-integrate society after periods of intense conflict. As a final example, Coleman (2021, pp. 11–13) looked at the conflict of pro-life and pro-choice proponents in a Boston suburb that escalated up to the point of a lethal attack on a Planned Parenthood Clinic that left both communities in shock but helped little to resolve the issue. Years later, leading figures in their respective communities disclosed that they had had reconciliation talks, in which they learned about the trade-offs of their own positions and formed close relationships with their opponents.

So, while the psychological concatenation of destabilization, reframing, reappraisal, and restabilization is likely to be robust for reconciliation in general, we need to refine how – via what kinds of *social* mechanisms – reconciliation takes place in democratic conflicts. Without any claim for completeness, we want to propose some starting points for approaching this task.

Most importantly, collective *history writing and telling* drives reconciliation. This has also been pointed out by psychological research: "There is wide agreement that reconciliation requires forming a new, common outlook on the past. Once there is a shared and acknowledged perception of the past, the parties have taken a significant step towards reconciliation" (Bar-Tal & Bennink, 2004, p. 20). Dealing with the past in the form of telling a common history facilitates forgiveness, acknowledging the past while letting go of vengeance, and thereby allows for novel future interactions (Pruitt & Kim, 2004, pp. 220–223).

In democratic theory, the relevance of forgiveness and collective history writing for the processing of conflicts has prominently been put forward by Hannah Arendt (2006). She argued that any political order depends on stories and histories that create a common framework for future political action. Writing a common history can therefore be essential for stabilizing democracies. Arendt's preferred examples for the power of historical narration are the Greek epics (that usually tell the history of external conflict) and the narratives of the French and the American revolution.

In similar ways, other conflicts of the past have been transformed into narratives that present heroes, lessons learned, or histories of progress. First, formerly heated conflicts as well as contentious tactics such as boycotts, strikes, and sit-ins that were dismissed and criminalized have been re-evaluated. Leading figures of protest such as Rosa Parks have been turned into idealized symbols, even becoming reference points for pop culture. Second, many formerly heated conflicts have been re-evaluated not as decisive points in a history of progress, but as much less polarized and

outrageous than contemporaries thought. As Bouchard and Taylor (2008, p. 9) concede for the Canadian case: "we have concluded that the foundations of collective life in Québec are not in a critical situation."

History and story writing are part of a collective self-interpretation that (a) reintegrates periods of conflict into a cohesive account of a society, and (b) flags core experiences and values that are supposed to guide future behavior. They also build the groundwork for institutional mechanisms of reconciliation, such as *reparation and rehabilitation*. As judicial or symbolic acts, reparation and rehabilitation recognize previous harm done and even pay compensation. These material aspects in particular underscore the relevance of narratives as guidelines for social institutions. For instance, in Germany, citizens who were prosecuted for consensual homosexual acts (until 1994) have received an official apology by the head of state, have been rehabilitated by law (e.g., through the revocation of their criminal sentences and criminal records), and have received some forms of restitution (e.g., in the case of detainment). The practices of rehabilitation and reparation are located within a narrative of an alternated self-understanding (Bundesministerium der Justiz, 2022).

Another mechanism that might drive reconciliation is *organizational inclusion*. In highly differentiated societies, organizations – companies, public institutions, schools, etc. – must recruit new members to continue. They cannot afford to exclude major portions of society from these recruitment processes just because people have participated in conflicts, even intense conflicts such as the 1968 student revolts. Likewise, most of the conflict actors cannot afford to abstain from entering those organizations at one point or another, for instance to earn their living. Once in those organizations, former contenders must interact in accordance with the routines and goals of these organizations, for instance as co-workers or customers. In short, organizations absorb former conflict parties in routines of everyday life.

Agonists could argue that reconciliation is the foremost process that creates the "conflictual consensus", which Mouffe calls a necessary condition for beneficial conflicts, but remains silent as to how it is formed. In contrast to some harmonistic imaginaries in peace research (Bar-Tal & Bennink, 2004, pp. 20–21), reconciliation in democratic societies is a conflict-laden process. It mitigates and relocates conflicts, e.g., by transforming a general conflict about the best social order into an organizational conflict about management styles, workplace cultures, or job promotion. In addition, history writing and telling in modern democracies are rarely concerted efforts led by a central institution like a truth commission, but are driven by a plurality of actors. Intellectuals, academics, organizations, and institutions produce competing accounts of history, which, in turn, must find support in a wider public. Social self-interpretation does not refer to a monolithic shared history, but holds multiple histories of a common past (Arendt, 2006; Rosa, 2004).

Consequently, far from being harmonistic, reconciliation processes contribute to the reproduction of conflicts, either by setting the guardrails for future conflicts or by instigating new conflicts. *On the one hand*, reconciliation may reignite recently de-escalated conflicts (Pruitt & Kim, 2004, p. 220). In a processual view, conflicts tend to reignite when a new conflict episode occurs and the duration (or, accumulated history) of conflict interactions provides readily available beliefs, narratives, and memories (Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2013) that make it the most convenient option to

interpret the event in line with sedimented experiences and expectations of hostility, rather than, for instance, an isolated incident or a bagatelle episode.[6]

On the other hand, reconciliation at one point can later turn into a starting point for new conflicts. For instance, Western histories of progress re-integrated many past conflicts (e.g., between labor and capital), but they are now challenged for their obvious racist or colonialist biases (e.g., Blackhawk, 2023; Parkinson, 2016), and German narratives of reunification are subjected to criticism because they ignored the sellout of Eastern German businesses to Western investors and subsequent dein-dustrialization (Köpping, 2019; Mau, 2019). As histories of 'successful' reconcili-ation often translate into social identities and power positions, challenging these achievements easily triggers swift counter-escalation.

Towards a democratic theory of conflict

Based on empirical findings from research in fields such as sociology and psychol-ogy, we have outlined an innovative processual approach to democratic conflicts. This section discusses what it may mean to build a democratic theory of conflict on these empirical and conceptual foundations. Our basic claim is that democratic theory must acknowledge the *omnipresence* and *potential benefits* of conflicts based on a *realistic and sufficiently complex understanding of conflict*. We want to dem-onstrate, illustratively, how the processual approach to democratic conflicts can inform such a way of doing democratic theory. To do so, we consider two themes that should be central to a democratic theory of conflict.

The first is the general argument that conflicts are not only inevitable but also beneficial for democracy. This claim is very common, in agonistic theory and in democratic theory more generally, but it is often made in abstraction from the ambivalent and paradoxical dynamics of conflicts. As a consequence, formulations of this claim usually lack a convincing evaluation of the *benefits and dangers* of con-flict. We will show how the argument about the beneficial character of conflicts can be substantiated and nuanced on the basis of our processual approach.

The second theme is the *practices and institutions* that enable conflict transfor-mation in democracies. Conflict transformation means the channeling of conflict processes from one processual dynamic to another. For example, many democratic institutions such as collective bargaining strikes or rights to protest first facilitate escalation and then shape the resulting conflict towards de-escalation. A key insight from our discussion of conflict dynamics in the previous section is that the func-tionality and desirability of concrete practices and institutions depends on the level of escalation. We will give an overview of the suitability of different practices and

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[6] In fact, there seems to be a dual time-dynamic at play. On the one hand, long-lasting conflicts reignite more easily in reconciliation phases as the structure of expectation sedimented into oral history, mass media, books, etc. (s.a.). On the other, a dense series of annoyances or contradictions also seems to trig-ger conflict escalation (Messmer, 2003; Pruitt, 2011). Duration and frequency may therefore be key con-cepts to a processual understanding of how bagatelle events turn into escalating conflicts. Further con-ceptual and empirical research is needed to explore these hypotheses.

institutions for different phases of conflict and indicate how future research, both empirical and normative, could continue the engagement with practices and institutions to contribute to the further development of a democratic theory of conflict.

We should be clear that building a democratic theory of conflict on a realist, processual approach to conflicts requires theorists to face the complexity of conflict dynamics, but it does not require to agree on a normative view of democracy or one particular methodological approach. On the contrary, this section will demonstrate that a democratic theory informed by the proposed processual approach to conflicts needs both normative and empirical research, and is open to multiple perspectives and approaches in each of these fields.

The benefits of conflict

The normative conviction of agonistic theories is that conflicts are not only inevitable but also beneficial. According to agonistic theories, the normative value of democracy lies precisely with its capacity to build a political order that acknowledges the diversity of viewpoints and resulting conflicts. If its capacity to cultivate conflicts declines, the quality of democracy declines as well, and its stability is endangered (August, 2022). Avoiding or sedating conflicts may come with an autocratic closure from the top that eliminates democratic alternatives and results in an autocratic drift of the citizens who, in turn, seek other outlets to ventilate their grievances and desires.

These arguments have a tradition beyond agonistic theories. While mostly in passing, democratic theories have referred to the idea of 'integration by conflict' on several occasions in the history of modern political thought (Dubiel, 1998; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967; Rzepka & Straßenberger, 2014). Moreover, classical sociological conflict theory has elaborated on the theme as it positioned itself against the competing sociological argument that modern societies are integrated through normative consensus (e.g., Coser, 1956, 1957; Dahrendorf, 1972; also Luhmann, 1987). It proposed three major 'functions' of conflict: a) conflict facilitates *social integration* through the venting of grievances and the constitution and integration of new or marginalized social groups, which results in a transformation of society; b) conflicts, and protest groups in particular, serve as *early warning systems* for upcoming social problems (e.g., poverty, ecological collapse); c) *problematizations, proposals,* and *alternative solutions* to problems are ventilated in conflict. Taken together, these effects of conflict can stabilize democracies, in part precisely because they drive social change.

Normative arguments for accommodating conflicts are therefore backed by systematic research efforts. They contend that macro-level stabilization emerges from a variety of ongoing micro- and meso-processes that unfold in conflicts. However, our discussion of conflict dynamics suggests that agonistic democratic theory oversimplifies matters. Agonists show some awareness of the potentially destructive side of conflict, but they do not address the question of how, and under what circumstances, conflicts turn destructive.

A democratic theory that draws on the processual approach to democratic conflict can overcome these blind spots. It recognizes that the extent to which conflicts generate beneficial effects depends on what conflict mechanisms occur at what processual stage of conflict dynamics. As our discussion of conflict dynamics has shown, the *very same mechanism* can produce 'integrative' effects as well as 'destructive' effects. The processual stage of the conflict dynamic (e.g., low-level vs. high-level) will often determine whether a particular mechanism contributes to beneficial or detrimental conflict dynamics. For instance, social identity formation and homogenization facilitate social integration with a wider group. While group solidarity is necessary to build powerful civic engagement and therefore desirable in democracies, exacerbating group solidarity may defy democratic plurality and cross-cutting.

In addition, the processual approach enables a democratic theory to take into account that the detrimental effects that conflicts sometimes generate can look very different, depending on the kind of dynamics in a given situation. For example, conflicts can pose dangers when they become too intense (casualties, polarization), but less intense yet very prolonged conflicts may result in a perceived lack of problem-solving and loss of institutional trust.

Moreover, a processual democratic theory of conflict overcomes the simplistic distinction between 'good' and 'bad' conflicts, because it recognizes that conflicts can have beneficial and detrimental effects *at the same time*. The main reason for this is that multiple mechanisms operate in multiple dimensions: conflicts may integrate a social group but prevent reforms; radical tactics may create casualties but facilitate cooperation with more moderate movements, thereby enabling reform ('effect of the radical flank'); and so on.

Finally, a democratic theory of conflict is sensitive to *potential trade-offs* between the effects of conflict that need normative evaluation. For example, the stabilizing effects of conflict are often produced by democracies' capacity to absorb conflict energies. In such cases, integration by conflict is not at all emancipatory, but it conserves a particular democratic arrangement. Because conflict dynamics have multiple effects in multiple dimensions, democratic theory must detect the dimensions of merit and account for the ways in which different conflict dynamics affect them. The processual approach here opens a research avenue that explores how the variety of beneficial and detrimental effects emerge from different concatenations of micro- and meso-level conflict mechanisms.

Practices and institutions

If democracies want to exploit the beneficial effects of conflict and dampen their detrimental effects, they require a high capacity for conflict transformation. This leads us to *practices and institutions* as a second field of interest to a democratic theory of conflict. Democracies require a diverse repertoire of political practices and institutional arrangements that help to transform conflict processes in ways that avoid detrimental conflict dynamics. From this perspective, democracies are macro-arrangements that hold several organizations and institutions (meso) that

facilitate specific ways and practices of conflict-waging as they establish more or less loose boundaries for the timing, rhythm, duration, and concatenation of conflict interactions (micro). Yet, while macro-arrangements shape conflict interactions, they themselves emerge from previous conflicts. They are sediments of past conflict dynamics.[7] As resourceful actors have advantages in these conflicts, they are likely to introduce features into the democratic macro-arrangements that are to their advantage. However, as we argued, conflicts follow a non-linear eigen-dynamic that is not determined by the social stratification of resources. This allows for change and surprising outcomes.

Democracies have a high capacity for conflict transformation when they are able to acknowledge and handle the processual and dynamical character of conflicts. In Table 2, we illustrate how a diversity of individual practices and institutional arrangements correspond to particular conflict dynamics. To do so, we cross-tabulated escalation dynamics ranging from low-level to high-level escalation with practices and institutions that modulate the escalatory dynamic in the direction of de-escalation and reconciliation. A democratic theory of conflict must recognize that a high capacity for *conflict transformation* implies a variety of behavioral attitudes and institutional provisions suitable to address the complexity of conflict dynamics in an attempt to enhance the benefits of conflicts and mitigate their downsides.

Importantly, this means acknowledging that conflict transformation does not necessarily equal de-escalation. For conflicts to function as early warning systems or as processes of social integration, democracies need to allow for, and spur, conflict escalation. This is particularly the case if pressing issues are deliberately de-escalated ('de-politicized') by powerful actors. This is why democratic societies afford political and legal institutions that systematically allow for dissent and protest. Such democratic institutions are always institutions of escalation and de-escalation *simultaneously*. Rights to protest, for instance, support citizens and organizations in escalating conflicts, but also delimit escalation by setting legal boundaries. Democratic systems, therefore, are more complex than agonistic theories acknowledge since they provide multiple layers of practices and institutions that respond to multiple levels of conflict. Civil disobedience, for instance, is per definition illegal but can be accepted as a legitimate means of conflict escalation.

Moreover, Table 2 accounts for the fact that the *functionality* and *desirability* of a specific strategy of conflict transformation depends on timing and context. For instance, in the case of high-level escalation dynamics, mutual forbearance is unlikely to take hold due to the emotional, cognitive, and organizational biases described above. Conversely, employing state violence in low- to mid-level conflicts to shut down protests is a massive escalation that can be counterproductive, as it may entice counter-escalation, and potentially damages the conflict tolerance

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[7] Lipset and Rokkan (1967) famously argued that similar cleavages yielded different party systems in European, the variety of which is introduced through difference in timing and alliance-building. Their argument, thus, combines two major aspects: on the one hand, they show that conflicts produce democratic arrangements of conflict management; on the other hand, they show that these arrangements vary due to varying conflict dynamics.

Table 2 Some practices and institutions of conflict transformation in democracy

	Escalation	De-escalation		Reconciliation	
	Practices	Practices	Institutions	Practices	Institutions
Low escalation ^ | | | | | | | | | | | | | | v Sharp escalation	Petition Demonstration Blaming / shaming / scandalizing Strikes (limited) Civil disobedience (non-violent) Sabotage Kidnapping Systematic use of physical violence against people (Para-)military organization	Mutual forbearance Appeal to common norms / identity strains Accepting non-violent protest and civil disobedience Active listening Proactive legislation Negotiations Conciliatory signals Allowing time Face-saving behavior (e.g., concessions)	Governance / legal institutions of dissent and decision-making Institutional or ad-hoc sites for cross-cutting relationships (e.g., political, like citizen assemblies, or non-political, like sports or youth clubs) Legal framework for protests Formalized negotiations (e.g., collective bargaining) Third-party mediation	Apologies Self-critique Self-restraint of the winners Forgiving Narrating the past and the future	Bureaucratization / formalization of conflict achievements Institutionalization of cross-cutting relationships Official institutions for recording and processing the past Rehabilitation / judicial prosecution

Note: The table is not an exact proportional representation. There is no column for institutions of escalation as democratic institutions of escalation are always simultaneously institutions of de-escalation, that is: they are genuinely institutions of *conflict transformation* (as explained in the text). The thick black line indicates that the escalation/reconciliation relationship is temporally downstream from the escalation/de-escalation relationship.

of a democratic system, which would diminish the beneficial effect of conflicts. In short, what might be desirable and effective at one point may be counterproductive or unwarranted at another.

Following this insight, it is possible to integrate proposals from agonistic theories, as well as from other democratic research, into the more comprehensive processual approach to conflict transformation. For instance, the *ethical commitment to respect adversarial positions* has a long tradition in the history of political thought, in particular in the republican tradition since Machiavelli. Since then, "agonistic respect", as Connolly calls it, has appeared under different names, including "mutual forbearance" (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018), "Gemeinsinn" (Arendt, 2015, p. 342), and "civility" (Dubiel, 1998; Sennett, 1992). Sennett (2013, pp. 118–127) has stressed that diplomacy follows a similar codex. He argues that conflict management depends on very concrete practices of civility such as self-restraint and subjunctive expressions like "I would have thought" that make space for and invite responses from others.

Democracies can try to foster these mindsets. *Institutionalized conflict interactions* (e.g., parliaments and parties, as Mouffe points out, but also workers' councils and citizen assemblies) or *sites of non-political interactions* (e.g., youth clubs, sport clubs) allow conflicts to be carried out while mitigating escalation through arena-specific rules of conduct and the facilitation of cross-cutting relationships. For example, parties and parliaments use procedures that allow for the escalation of conflicts, such as electoral competition among candidates and fractions or debate formats that emphasize differences and opposition. At the same time, their procedural provisions mitigate escalation because they determine rules for the processing of conflicts that sanction activities associated with high escalation like the use of threats or even violence (e.g., calls to order and fines) and enforce de-escalation (e.g., requirements of coalition-building or fractional discipline). These practices are not only institutionalized in national parliaments, but also channel conflict interaction on lower levels,

for example in communal parliaments, local townhall meetings and other assemblies where citizens engage and habitualize regulated conflicts, as has long been argued by democratic theorists (e.g., Arendt, 2006; Tocqueville, 2019).

These theorists also argue that civil society associations can be key political sites of regular conflict interactions (e.g., protest movements) or sites of non-political interactions (e.g., sport clubs or youth clubs). Sites of non-political interactions contribute to the mitigation of escalation as they reproduce concatenated interactions that allow individuals and groups to gain social experiences in a variety of contexts. By doing so, they tend to establish cross-cutting bonds and reduce the salience of individual conflicts. Political and non-political sites therefore habitualize mutual respect through different types of interactions. Agonistic respect, thus, has its merits; but agonists neither discuss the complex practices and institutions democracies may employ to sustain agonistic respect, nor acknowledge that agonistic respect is most effective in situations of low- to medium-level escalation. When escalation increases, one-sided *signals of conciliation, allowing time,* or *concessions* can attempt to de-escalate, but may also backfire (Kriesberg, 1998, p. 202, 266).

Similarly, *negotiations* may have only limited chances of success due to the fact that heavily escalating parties underlie emotional and cognitive biases and usually have no interest in fair negotiation. In less-escalated conflicts from wage disputes to civil disobedience, however, negotiations are readily applied and often transform conflicts productively. The dialogical practices that Tully describes fit in here, as he focuses on negotiations that would assure mutual recognition between the parties and their grievances without assuming that the result would be a rational consensus. However, negotiations can also cope with higher levels of escalation by adapting negotiation settings and tactics, ranging from coercive negotiation tactics to specialized problem-solving methods such as brainstorming practices that detach problem-solving attempts from the person who proposes them (Kriesberg, 1998, pp. 265–268; for examples see also Sennett, 2013, pp. 238–240).

Highly escalated conflicts do not occur that often in democracies. In international conflict research, ripeness theory assumes that in highly escalated conflicts timing is essential for successful de-escalation. Serious negotiations as a "mild form of overt conflict" are promising only if the parties perceive a hurting stalemate and muster some optimism that at least a minimally acceptable outcome can be achieved (Pruitt & Kim, 2004, pp. 172–188, quote on p. 178). Democracies aim to cultivate the kind of optimism that facilitates successful negotiations. For instance, their temporal arrangement (e.g., re-elections) aims to entice conciliation as actors can expect that conflict outcomes are periodically revisited, while cross-cutting arrangements reduce conflict salience. Although democratic conflicts try to cultivate conciliation, some conflicts can end with a fundamental win of one side. However, even in these cases, the temporal arrangement of democracies allows for reconsideration through re-escalation. Democratic arrangements, thus, try to restrain escalation by promising future re-escalation. They temporalize conflicts strategically.

The relationship between *reconciliation and escalation* affords equally complex attempts at conflict transformation. *Apologies* are a (more and more) common practice of reconciliation when low-level conflicts subside. Apologies from high-ranking state officials remain a relevant symbolic practice even after highly escalated

conflicts, as we discussed above. Connolly's plea for practices of the self, including genealogical self-critique, is therefore crucial for reconciliation. Self-restraint and self-critique in general have stabilizing effects, in particular when winners of a conflict exercise it (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Sennett, 2013, p. 118). They are also essential preconditions for the practice of (re-)narrating a common history and future that is relevant for reconciliation after medium- to highly-escalated conflicts, like the conflicts surrounding the civil rights movement or the student revolts in Germany that escalated with the killing of Benno Ohnesorg and the attempted assassination of Rudi Dutschke. Democracies can install official institutions that record and process the past, or decree *rehabilitation* to facilitate these practices. In cases of lesser escalated conflicts, the introduction of *formalized*, *bureaucratic rules* ensures that the hard-won recognition is institutionalized, thereby routinized and cooled off until most people think of these rules as self-evident (Collins, 1993, p. 296; August, 2023, p. 94).

This brief overview of some political practices and institutions and their relation to conflict dynamics illustrates what it may mean to make a process theory of conflict fruitful for democratic theorizing. It represents both an independent contribution to and a starting point for further developments of a sophisticated, empirically informed democratic theory of conflict. As an independent contribution, it articulates and concretizes the understanding that beneficial conflict transformation requires democracies to be able to resort to multiple practices and institutions. Their effectiveness and/or desirability depends on timing and context. Analyzing, evaluating, and strengthening democracies' capacity to benefit from conflicts therefore depends on a robust understanding of conflict dynamics.

As a starting point for the development of a democratic theory of conflict, the overview can serve as a heuristic for future research on the role of different practices and institutions in democratic conflict transformation. *Empirical research* can investigate further the range of practices and institutions that contribute to the transformation of democratic conflicts. This is a task for historical research as well as cross-sectoral research, aiming to discover the variety of practices and institutions, and evaluate their efficiency at different times and in different social fields. Sennett (2013) made a first, albeit unsystematic effort to excavate detailed conflict transformation strategies from diplomacy, such as 'bout de papier' or 'démarche', as well as the interplay of formal and informal, casual settings such as cocktail parties to manage conflicts. Empirical research can also go beyond individual practices and institutions by investigating and comparing different 'cultures' of conflict transformation, that is, relatively stable combinations of practices and institutions that reproduce particular forms of conflict regulation.

Discussing and evaluating these cultures, practices, and institutions of conflict transformation from *a normative point of view* is an essential part of a democratic theory of conflict as well. We have highlighted some general normative claims of conflict theory. However, normative research can contribute further to the development of a democratic theory of conflict by evaluating in more detail specific practices, institutions, and 'cultures' of conflict transformation, for example in terms of criteria such as their capacity to realize democratic values or their suitability for current practical challenges. In addition, normative research can make proposals

for how democracies might better respond to intensified conflicts, either in terms of practical behavioral guidelines or institutional design proposals. In this respect, reflections upon possibilities of designing democratic innovations such as mini-publics in ways specifically tailored to help conflict parties deal with deep disagreements might be a valuable contribution to this endeavor (e.g., Westphal, 2019).

Conclusion

The significance of conflicts in contemporary democracies stands in stark contrast to the marginal standing of democratic conflict in contemporary research. In this article, we developed an innovative, empirically informed processual approach to democratic conflicts and illustrated how such an approach can ground an elaborate democratic theory of conflict. The processual theory of conflict we propose introduces a range of mechanisms that drive major conflict dynamics, in particular escalation, de-escalation, and reconciliation. We reviewed research from classical conflict sociology, social identity theory, the social psychology of international conflicts, the sociology of violence, and social movements studies, evaluated their insights for a theory of democratic conflicts, and integrated these insights into a processual framework.

This framework can inform both empirical investigations of contemporary conflicts as well as further developments of democratic theory. As we highlighted, this theoretical endeavor contributes to a research agenda that has been neglected since conflict sociology turned towards international and violent conflicts. Our proposal therefore aims to encourage further research. Theoretical research will refine the mechanisms we proposed, add mechanisms we did not cover, and specify mechanisms characteristic of conflicts in democratic societies. Moreover, our framework can inspire and guide empirical research that analyzes contemporary democratic conflicts about climate action, racism, colonialism, or gender. Empirical research can draw on the proposed mechanisms to explain conflict dynamics in particular cases, and test and elaborate the respective mechanismic sequences. Furthering conflict theory therefore requires a close cooperation between empirical and theoretical research.

The article further demonstrated how conflict theory can ground a development of democratic theory. Agonistic theory, which is currently the dominant approach employed to theorize conflict in democracies, lacks a systematic conceptualization of conflict as well as empirical validation for its arguments. Only if it is based on a consistent conflict theory can democratic theory adequately evaluate the benefits and dangers of conflicts. Agonistic democratic theories tend to overemphasize the beneficial effects and neglect the potentially detrimental effects. We showed that one conflict development may have beneficial and detrimental effects at the same time in different dimensions, and that there are trade-offs between potentially desirable effects. Thus, our approach offers a gateway to a better, realist evaluation of the role of conflict in democracies.

In addition, we illustrated how our processual theory advances a better picture of how multiple practices and institutions that can contribute to dealing with conflicts

at different stages during escalation, de-escalation, and reconciliation dynamics. A key insight is that both the feasibility and desirability of certain practices and institutions depend on the time dynamics of a conflict: what works well or is desirable at one point can be counterproductive at another. Based on these insights, we proposed a research agenda for the identification, comparison, evaluation, and even design of democratic practices and institutions of conflict transformation. As we highlighted, this endeavor is open to empirical and normative approaches and to research perspectives that draw on either historical or contemporary cases of conflict transformation. Our processual theory of conflict and its application to democratic theory therefore open up a whole new range of collaborative research on democratic conflicts.

One field in which such collaborative research might be especially useful is the scholarly debate on polarization, a term used to describe intensifying conflicts in democracies. Much of the debate currently focuses on measuring polarization (in the U.S. but also in multi-party systems) and differentiating issue polarization from affective polarization (e.g., Harteveld, 2021; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Reiljan, 2020). While the body of literature on polarization is growing rapidly, the debate suffers from conceptual deficits and a lack of theory. We argue that the processual approach that we propose promises to illuminate new perspectives both for the conceptualization and evaluation of polarization and for the search for possible responses to it.

For one thing, it can improve understanding of polarization as a phenomenon that occurs in specific places in democracies. It occurs in conflicts, more precisely in the *relationships between conflict parties*, which are shaped by mechanisms that are characteristic of escalating conflicts (social identity formation and homogenization). Oftentimes, it is elites who fuel polarization to strengthen their ingroup. Our approach can thereby help to clarify that polarization in conflicts is not identical with the polarization of an entire society and thus explain the often-mixed findings about the polarized character of democratic societies (Boxell et al., 2024; Lux et al., 2021). As a feature of processes unfolding in conflicts, group polarization usually takes place within a more heterogenous social context.

Second, as the processual approach proposes to interpret polarization as the product of distinct conflict mechanisms in escalation processes, it also enables a more nuanced evaluation of the role of polarization in democracies. From this perspective, polarization *can* become problematic (especially if it intensifies in high-escalation conflicts), but certain forms of polarization can also nourish the sort of escalation processes that democratic conflicts need to unfold in the first place and unleash their potential benefits for democracies.

Finally, our approach promises to give the debate on possible responses to "pernicious" polarization (McCoy & Somer, 2019) a fresh focus. When polarization is understood as a feature of conflict escalation processes, it is clear that knowledge-based interventions ("fact checking") cannot be effective remedies. Instead, it is necessary to understand the dynamics of the escalation process and refer to a pool of well-established arrangements and practices of de-escalation and reconciliation to achieve transformations of those dynamics. The knowledge that the usefulness of certain measures depends on the level of escalation can guide the choice

of remedies. If polarization occurs in sharply escalated conflicts, working towards cross-cutting ties, allowing time, and third-party mediation may be more suitable to reach de-polarization than the emphasis on shared norms or a reliance on regular parliamentary procedures.

These preliminary considerations show that our processual approach to democratic conflict has a promising potential to stimulate new directions in polarization research. The current debate on polarization would benefit from being embedded in a theory of democratic conflict.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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