

# Conflict Analysis, Conflict Resolution and “Politics” A Reflection

Christopher R. Mitchell

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1

The set of responses by five of my colleagues to my initial essay on conflict and change are thoughtful, interesting and enjoyable. Each warrants a full, lengthy response but, unfortunately, I confront limitations of time and space, and I can only manage this scarcity conflict by taking up a few salient points that have emerged from the five comments and dealing, first, with some generally shared concerns and then with a few points raised by the individual respondents in their own papers.

One aspect of my original essay that disturbed some of the respondents was an apparent over-emphasis on “rationality” in explaining the causes of conflict or ways of seeking resolution, and also on the way in which people in conflict determine what they perceive as their most effective course of action. Someone even mentioned the dreaded phrase “cost benefit analysis” as a criticism of these assumptions, with their implication of utilising classical “rational actor” models. There were two reasons for my emphasising – perhaps over-emphasising – this factor. The first is that I am simply tired of people seeking to explain intractable and protracted conflicts by reference to the “irrationality” of those involved, as if labelling one side or the other in this manner fully explains why there is a conflict or why it continues. Given different worldviews, different cultures leading to different goals and different beliefs about optimal courses of action, I would argue that the concept of irrational behaviour begins to mean nothing more than “I would not be doing that in their place”, which is less than helpful.

This leads to my other reason, however, namely that, in my experience, people involved in a conflict do try to make reasonably rational – perhaps “sensible” – decisions to try to achieve their goals, always making allowances for lack of information, incomplete and distorting information processing systems, the impact of “groupthink”, the “sunk costs” and investment effects, the impact of risk aversion (which may

or may not be culturally determined) and the host of other variables that undermine the classical rational actor model. Humans – even humans embroiled in a highly stressful conflict – never seem to me to be “irrational”.

Secondly, nobody seems to like my list of suggested conflict resolutionary roles very much. There seem to be two reasons for this. The first is that the idea of a “role” is taken to mean some actor – individual or institution – that “comes in” from the outside but remains apart from the conflict in some way, when in reality, of course, that institution becomes part of the conflict system and intimately affects it and is affected by it. What I originally meant by third-party roles were tasks to be undertaken or “jobs to be done” as part of a dynamic process, and this was partly a reaction to a fairly general assumption that all third parties do is get adversaries round a table and help them devise ingenious solutions to the conflict in which they are engaged.

The second concern seemed to be that this list of “roles” implied outsiders intervening in somebody else’s conflict, but this is not necessarily the case. John Paul Lederach and Paul Wehr have long familiarised us to the concept of insider-partial interveners – a local bishop, a woman’s group, a council of elders, a regional NGO – who are already part of the conflict system but who can carry out all or any of these resolutionary tasks, often to greater effect than parties who are (at least initially) outsiders.

In passing, I should note that I don’t know anybody in the field (myself included but with the possible exception of people who write books with titles like “The Seven Basic Steps to Resolving Your Marital/Workplace/Organisational Conflict”) who believes in “linear, mono-causal-chains”, or who would be unaware of the fact that protracted ethnopolitical conflicts are “characterised by a multitude of conflicting factors – from disputes of interest ... to ideological differences and dissension over values and beliefs...” as argued by Daniela Körppen. If conflicts weren’t like this then they wouldn’t be protracted. The whole point is that conflict systems are complex, multi-party, multi-causal and dynamic, which is the reason why we need to try to understand change systematically – undoubtedly difficult but hardly “impossible”, as Körppen asserts.

A last widely shared concern seems to be about my assumptions regarding “neutrality”, whether this is an implied characteristic of an *analyst* seeking to understand the dynamics of a conflict or an *intervener*, seeking to do something about it. I will leave taking up the argument about the possibilities of “non-politicised analysis” until later. However, I do think that some of my colleagues have performed a service by reminding everyone of something we take so much for granted that we usually ignore it; namely that the practice of conflict resolution is always a political act, especially if we take “political” broadly, to mean value-informed (as well as theory-informed) and with particular ends in view. To attempt to manage, mitigate, settle, resolve or transform a conflict all imply a particular ethical stance and a view of what is an “acceptable” outcome, just as do efforts to create, recognise, prosecute, exacerbate or win a conflict. The only, limited way in which an intervention can claim to be neutral is if the intervener behaves in an even-handed way (and this may, indeed, advantage one side if the conflict is asymmetric) and does not try to impose his wishes or values on an outcome.

Let me turn from the three common concerns to the individual papers themselves, again with apologies for having to deal in a cursory fashion with some highly complex ideas. It is always useful to have theoretical formulations checked out against real world experience and nobody is better qualified to do this than Ed Garcia, long involved in practical conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Asia, in Latin America and elsewhere. His essay performs a great service by reminding us that, in the most fundamental way, solutions to protracted conflicts have actually to take the form of social change – often profound social change that meets the needs of the marginalised and excluded. The

key question is how to bring this about without the use of violence, and Garcia's analysis provides a number of persuasive guidelines about how this might be accomplished. I particularly appreciated his comments about the importance of developing "peace constituencies", a change process which I had quite neglected but which has to be a part of any process leading towards a sustainable solution. Of course, this particular aspect of peacebuilding is usually a long drawn out and fragile process, often undermined or even destroyed by the tendency of protracted conflicts to turn violent. Events recent and less recent seem to have decimated the peace constituencies within Israel and among Palestinians, and they will not be rebuilt easily or quickly.

Then again, there is the question of how – apart from the use of violence – one can change the mindset of status quo elites, dominant majorities, social "top dogs" or those who control "the commanding heights" of politics and economies to the point where they accept that change rather than resistance is called for. What might constitute the intellectual or perceptual equivalent of an actual tsunami to bring about such a realisation?

Using a somewhat similar approach to Ed Garcia, Ilana Shapiro's paper focuses on practical methods of bringing about resolutionary change, but also on the theories or "hunches" that underlie practice. Shapiro notes that most practitioners recognise the fact that, in trying to influence intractable conflicts, they are dealing with complex adaptive systems where nothing is simple or straightforward. However, underlying theories help to determine where in that system one should begin. Like Raimo Vayrynen, she distinguishes between efforts to change people, relationships and structures and for me it has been interesting to watch how, over the years, the focus of writings about conflict resolution has switched somewhat from changing people to changing structures to changing relationships. Shapiro's call for practitioners to make explicit the theories that underpin their practice is a welcome one. Moreover, she is quite right to argue that we need to study conflict resolutionaries' own assumptions about the theories that underlie their practice. Let's hope someone will do this – systematically.

In a third, most interesting paper, Chris Spies outlines a number of useful guidelines for bringing about needed change in conflict systems. Like Ed Garcia, these ideas are based upon the author's profound practical experience of dealing with intractable conflict systems, not least that in South Africa. His point that local people, even in the midst of an intractable conflict, have "...a great deal of resilience and dormant faculties..." is a useful corrective to my apparent propensity to write as though resolution usually depends on outside involvement, and I very much like his conception and characterisation of the role of "servant-leader" as a key player in any resolutionary process. (Equally, his story about "peace vultures" strikes an all too familiar chord, leaving one wondering whether it is necessary to look in a mirror to see if beak, feathers and claws are quietly developing.) Similarly, the whole concept of creating a "safe space" for those in an intractable conflict so that they can search with one another for possible alternatives, seems to me to be central to the idea of reaching – or constructing – a solution that will be durable. The practical implications of this guideline for intractable conflicts involving large numbers of people has troubled me for a while, however. How does one – realistically – construct such a safe space for all the stakeholders when these might number tens of thousands?

I think the one place at which I part company with Chris Spies is over the issue of conflict transformation being "a skill and an art". This resembles too closely statements I used to encounter from senior British diplomats whenever it was suggested to them that some understanding of the theories on which they (implicitly) operated might well be clearly articulated, at least in order to assist in the training of their next generation. There is a lot of skill and art in trying to move conflict systems towards nonviolent interactions, but there are also underlying principles, lessons, guidelines

and theories that can and should be passed on, especially those hard won through experience.

While I enjoyed the papers that improved upon some of the ideas in my original essay, oddly enough the ones that made me think most about what I had written – and how I had written it – were those which took issue with the general approach, with the very idea of being able to construct some general theory of change and with what they termed efforts to de-politicise the practice of conflict analysis and resolution.

The most challenging paper was Daniela Körppen's which took up a number of shortcomings in the original and wrote about these with vigour, although I found some of her assertions quite puzzling – for example the argument that I rejected an inductive approach because I tried to “pick out commonalities from different conflict situations”. Trying to discern general patterns from a variety of specific cases – rather than deducing from general principle – is an inductive approach and, indeed most of the general ideas I have gained over the years have come from my observation of specific instances.

One of Körppen's concerns focuses on the presumption of “neutrality” involved in developing and then presenting general, theoretical ideas about the causes of conflict – or about obstacles to conflict resolution – to parties in a conflict who have their own ideas about these issues. At one level, of course, this cannot be a “neutral” act, at least in the sense of not affecting the parties or the situation in some way. However, Körppen – and Foucault – are mistaken in asserting that a knowledge of conflict situations cannot be gained by analysis (let's leave out the loaded terms “neutral” and “scientific”). Suppose, after being able to observe a large number of protracted conflicts, one comes up with the idea, the hunch – let's even dignify it with the label “theory” – that one of the phenomena one regularly observes in such conflicts, and which will prove a major obstacle to any resolution, is the fact that the adversaries will, indeed, possess widely different explanations of what the conflict is about, what has caused it, what keeps it going and whose fault it all is. Hence, one of the first steps in moving towards a resolution is very likely to be to get them to agree on what the conflict is about, or at least accept that it is perfectly reasonable for those involved to possess different views about this question. Is presenting this idea to the Indonesian Government and to GAM a political act? Maybe. But it is also a theory-informed action and the theory also says that, unless the adversaries can get over this conceptual hurdle, they are likely to remain locked into their protracted conflict for some time to come.

In any case, Körppen herself does not really seem to believe in the argument that one can't develop general theories through analysis when she comes to discuss alternative approaches later in her paper. That, to achieve results (of some sort), conflict analysis “...must be regarded as the first step in an intervention in a conflict situation ... and undertaken in cooperation with relevant stakeholders...” and that “equitable and sustainable peace is only possible if the resources for political and social change inherent in the conflict system itself are activated and supported, and if the basic needs of all subsystems in a political system are addressed and fulfilled...” sound to me pretty much like general hypotheses or even theories – and most conflict resolution practitioners, myself included, would agree with them. But where do they come from? Presumably from some kind of analysis – scientific or not – of cases of protracted conflict.

Körppen is also concerned that my arguments increase the probability of further divorce between the analysis of protracted conflicts and social change and the designing of intervention strategies. I have obviously failed to make myself clear on this point. What I was trying to do was to help systematise some of the things we think we know about the dynamics of protracted conflict so that those designing an intervention strategy would have some guidelines that might be – tentatively – applied to particular cases. I meant to emphasise – but clearly didn't – that one cannot usefully

become part of a conflict (in whatever role) if one enters with a “10 step cook-book” of remedies to be applied irrespective of local conditions, the views, beliefs and sensitivities of stakeholders, the cultural and historical backgrounds of the adversaries or the aspirations of the neglected. Equally, however, it is important not to delude oneself that one is becoming part of a conflict system wholly free from prior theories (whether one is using prospect theory or the Berghof systemic approach to conflict transformation) and will only be learning about the nature and causes of the conflict from those involved. For a start, one has to decide who are the stakeholders from whom one is proposing to learn.

While Vivienne Jabri has serious doubts about my epistemology and ontology, we seem to be able to agree about a great number of issues to do with conflict and change – although I don’t see why a positivist approach should necessarily fail to take normative factors into account in an attempt to understand any conflict; or why (cautiously) using generic/general theories as guides should deny also giving weight to the importance of specific, local and historical factors that are inevitably part of any intractable conflict. Nor am I sure why an inductive approach should render impossible an understanding of continuing, underlying structures that underpin conflicts that protract or re-emerge time and again.

What I do applaud is Jabri’s insistence that those involved in a conflict should not be regarded simply as “parties” – a linguistic device which masks the reality that these are entities with a whole range of other characteristics that will affect their aspirations, attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, capabilities, relationships with other entities in the system (governments, markets, resistance movements, potential intermediaries) and – perhaps most important of all – their ability to change. Link this point to one of her other arguments about those in conflicts frequently having very different capacities, depending upon their place in some “pecking order”, their resources, their degree of recognition by others, the extent to which they are the dominated or the dominating and you have one of the great weaknesses of contemporary conflict analysis – its tendency to ignore asymmetries between the adversaries in a conflict. Much of the literature on conflict analysis pays lip service to the idea that many conflicts are between unequals – often between entities that are highly unequal – but then goes on to treat those relationships as though they can be understood by using what might be termed the “standard model” – as a contest between equals, between “parties”. The implications of this for suggested “solutions” don’t need much emphasis.

I have talked earlier about my reasons for emphasising the aspects of rationality – based mainly on Herbert Simon’s concept of “bounded rationality” – that seem to me to underlie a lot of behaviour in conflict situations. Scholars working on entrapment theory and prospect theory have done a pretty good job of undermining any belief in “rational” choice in its classical sense but they have also raised an issue that reinforces Jabri’s insistence that a full understanding of any individual conflict has to take into account the understandings of those involved – and the latter may change over time. This is one crucial aspect of “change” in relation to conflict and its resolution about which we know far too little – how and why do people involved in conflict change their evaluations of possible outcomes? Why do “things” sought initially as infinitely desirable and worth any sacrifice become, at a later time, of much less worth especially in relation to other things? As Jabri argues – and I don’t disagree with her – one has to take notice of the substance or nature of the change as well as its direction and impact on the conflict in order to fully understand the connection (not, please, the correlation) between this kind of change and conflict – but, again, I am not sure why a positivist approach should necessarily fail to take notice of this particular dimension of change.

I agree with Jabri’s insistence that conflict resolution is a “political” act, based on certain values and with a certain range of goals as desired effects. “Doing something” about a conflict has

an impact – however minor – one way or the other, as does “doing nothing” which usually means the powerful triumph, unencumbered. But surely it should also be a “theory-informed” and cautious intervention, besides being “political”, so that choices are made – for example, about which parties or stakeholders to involve initially in the process – not necessarily on the basis of who is powerful or who is “legitimate” or who is paying, but on the basis of what existing theory tells one about who needs to be included to make it more likely that the outcome will be a durable and generally acceptable solution – and that often means involving so-called “extremists”.

If we can agree about these issues, then where do we disagree? Mainly, I think about some fundamentals of epistemology and the nature of analysis. I do not, for example, agree that – *pace* Habermas and Foucault – knowledge about conflict has to be (Jabri uses “may be”) judged in terms of the interests that constitute (underlie?) particular frames of knowledge. Suppose one’s “interest” is in understanding or getting as accurate a picture of a conflict or of conflicts as a class of phenomena (the “criteria of science” as Jabri terms it) rather than helping to perpetuate – or to undermine – a system of dominance? Nor do I believe that another key criterion is that the analysis should “reveal the complicities of different modes of understanding in relations of power”. Analysis should be able to reveal the nature, extent and reasons for the existence of those relationships of (relative) power and powerlessness, perhaps as a preliminary to doing something about them – or not. Of course, the market for ideas, including ideas about conflict, is a highly imperfect one and who can use knowledge is a matter of power, resources and wealth. But this is a different issue and only warns those in the conflict resolution business that they have to be very, very careful whom they work with, and on what.

Probably our main difference, though, is in our approach to the nature of the “knowable world” and the process of getting to know it. As Jabri emphasises, I am a fairly unregenerate positivist and empiricist, so I do believe (but ultimately can’t prove beyond any shadow of a doubt) that there is a world “out there” full of things, some of which we have agreed to call “conflicts”, worth trying to analyse and understand. Foucault’s idea that we somehow “create” or “construct” this world ourselves seems to me to be fundamentally mistaken and misleading – and also one of the most intellectually arrogant ideas I have yet come across. We do not “construct” the world, or that part of it we are interested in trying to understand. If anything, we inherit it. While we cannot “construct” it, we may – or may not – be able to affect parts of it by our actions, not least by the labels (words, phrases, categorisations) we agree to stick on it. Talk, for example, to any Turkish Cypriot about the Turkish army’s “invasion” of the island in 1974 and he or she will very rapidly inform you that this was not an invasion but an “intervention”, with very different implications for how one thinks about or reacts to that event. This pretty universally observable phenomenon, incidentally, seems to me why one of the central tasks of any third (or thirtieth) party is to help create a set of non-provocative labels that adversaries might accept as descriptors of events. However, this process is still a reaction to, and attempted description of, the inherited part of this particular mini-world of conflict.

So Viv Jabri and I must continue to disagree profoundly and (maybe) protractedly about this. But one of these days one of us may change his or her position, or both of us may change our epistemological understanding – in which case the change may lead towards a resolution of this particular conflict. We will have to wait and see.

## The Author

**Christopher R. Mitchell** is Professor Emeritus of Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University's Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution (ICAR). In the 1960s he was part of the pioneering research team at University College, London which, under the leadership of John Burton, developed the basic ideas of conflict resolution, problem-solving workshops and informal Track Two interventions into protracted conflicts. He has since been involved in numerous such interventions between (among others) Greek and Turkish Cypriots, Israelis and Palestinians, British and Argentinians as well as diverse Liberian factions. Most recently, he headed ICAR's "Local Zones of Peace" project, which analyses local communities' efforts to establish neutral and secure "zones of peace" in countries such as the Philippines and Columbia. His publications include *The Structure of International Conflict*, the *Handbook of Conflict Resolution: The Analytical Problem Solving Approach* and *Gestures of Conciliation: Factors Contributing to Successful Olive Branches*. He is currently working on a textbook that will summarise the current state of knowledge in the overall field of conflict analysis and resolution.

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