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Revisiting Change and Conflict: On Underlying Assumptions and the De-Politicisation of Conflict Resolution

A Response by
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1. Introduction

The social sciences have, since their inception as systematic fields of inquiry, sought to somehow capture the notion of change, render it not just subject to explanation, but to predictability and ultimately control. These aspirations of explanation and control come to acquire particular salience when placed in the context of social conflict, for here we see an added impetus, one that seeks to predict the directionality of change in relation to conflict so that some intervention might take place either to facilitate movement towards resolution or to perpetuate or promote conflict. Each of these elements – explanation, control, and the directionality of change in relation to conflict – is subject to controversy and is hence steeped in political contestation. It is this distinctly political aspect of conceptualising the relationship between conflict and change that is missing in Christopher Mitchell's investigation and it is this that forms the subject matter of this response.

The first section focuses on the underlying assumptions informing Mitchell's analysis. This section suggests that while Mitchell's text exemplifies a rendition that is distinctly positivist in its avoidance of what we might refer to as the normative element, it nevertheless reveals certain ontological commitments in relation to knowledge and human agency. The second section draws on the first to reveal the implications of what I want to suggest is a de-politicisation of conflict analysis and resolution. The third section makes the case for bringing politics (and hence also ethics) back into our thinking about conflict resolution and change. The aim throughout is to show that agency (including that of the conflict analyst) cannot be conceptualised, nor even conceived, without at the same time recognising that agency is implicated in the structural continuities of social and political life, continuities that are both discursive and institutional.

2. Mitchell's Positivist Reading of Conflict and Change

One of Mitchell's major contributions to the field of conflict analysis and resolution is his thoroughly systematic approach to the subject. As a training toolkit, both for the academic engaged in understanding the specificities of any conflict and for the practitioner seeking to analyse prior to engagement, Mitchell's work remains unsurpassed in its clarity of exposition, its logical step-by-step ordering of the complexities of conflict, its separation of dependent and independent variables, and its classifications. Above all else, Mitchell's understanding of conflict is generic, enabling applications to conflicts from the inter-personal to the international, rightly showing that conflict is always a complex set of interactions and relationships that, over time, relate grievance to modes of behaviour and to psychological states of mind, each of which in turn comes to constitute feedback loops that can perpetuate, escalate, or even render possible some movement towards conflict resolution. Mitchell maps conflict like no other, a mapping process that aids analysis just as it provides a crucial tool for agents seeking intervention.

The text that is under scrutiny in this context seeks to provide exactly such a mapping for the relationship between change and conflict. Like any mapping process, it provides the reader with a picture of the directionality of change and how this might influence the dynamics of conflict, seeking ultimately a classification of "agents" of change and how these might impact upon conflict, specifically in relation to its resolution. There is, throughout, a recognition that constraints exist and these may derive from structures of inequality in the distribution of resources and from the relationships that constitute the conflict at hand. The emphasis is on the temporal shift from one point to the next and how each such shift feeds into transformations in relationships of conflict.

One way of responding to the text is hence to engage with its devices, adding here, subtracting there, taking its assumptions as given. Another is to delve below the surface, unpacking the various commitments that inform the text. It is the latter that I suggest is the more useful enterprise, for it reveals elements that have profound consequences for how we understand conflicts in the present-day global context and how we might think about intervention.

Mitchell's rendition on change and conflict is thoroughly inductive in its construction. It is, as Mitchell admits, largely anecdotal, but expressing an objective for correlation even as its primary aspiration is explanation. This last element presents a problem, for it suggests that a social phenomenon such as change, or indeed conflict, can be subject to causal statements; that particular factors when combined in distinct conditions may lead to particular outcomes. Or, framed in relationships of necessity: but for the presence of particular conditions, certain outcomes would not take place. Crucially, Mitchell's preference for the anecdotal prevents him from going down this necessitous path, a path that has always presented dire problems for the entirety of the social sciences. Nevertheless, Mitchell's inductive tendencies preclude the possibility of investigating change in relation to social continuity, namely the discursive and institutional aspects of life and the ways in which these not only constrain, but enable action.

Approaching the subject of change and conflict from a generic perspective again inhibits any thorough investigation into the specific sets of constraint and enablement that impact on interactions in conflict situations and interventions therein. While reducing the complexity of international conflict to the dynamics of the inter-personal may have its attractions, it nevertheless has the effect of de-historicizing conflict, dislocating it from its specificities in time and place, the differential ways in which institutional practices enable some while constraining others. The institutions of modern existence – the state and the international political economy – have profound implications for the choices available to parties involved in conflict just as they do in determining not just the capacities of potential third parties but the discourses they draw upon in conceptualising a conflict, the grievances involved and the outcomes envisaged.

Despite the generic framing of conflict that Mitchell adopts, there is, just below the inductive surface, a distinct ontological commitment in the text, namely one that places priority on the individual or party in conflict as rational entity, even as this rationality is recognised as being often distorted by the complexities of the conflict situation and its perceptual dynamics. Where structures that, for example, generate deprivation or scarcity are considered, they remain external to agency, so that we cannot see how agency as such emerges or how capacities differ from agent to agent depending on their location in relation to structures of domination, discursive frames, or modes of legitimisation. All are equalised, when in actuality – and in the conflicts that matter in present-day global politics – there is no such equality. Even in considering inter-personal conflicts, agents are enabled and constrained differently, a differentiation that impacts on how others respond and on the parties' own understanding of context, the linguistic and material resources drawn upon, and their capacities to engage with their institutional backdrop. We can but think of the impact of

difference relating to class, gender, race, and ethnicity to appreciate how these deeply rooted and structural forces are implicated in knowledge systems and relations of power. Such inequalities are not only of pertinence to parties in conflict, but directly influence the capacities of external others.

Analysing conflict through a generic lens again disables investigation into the specificities of transformations in conflict modes in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries. The late modern context is distinctly associated with the globalisation of social, economic and political aspects of conflict so that no confrontation can be isolated from its global context, a context that has its own distinctiveness in discourses, resources, and institutions. We can no longer, for example, conceptualise conflict simply in terms of grievance constructed in relation to an enemy Other. As the conflicts of late modernity have indicated, conflicts such as those of the Balkans and sub-Saharan Africa,[1] the violence perpetrated is largely directed against civilian populations, aimed primarily at large-scale intimidation, and connected with criminality and the control of resources. Ethnic difference in these conditions of mass violence cannot be assumed at first hand to constitute a source of grievance, but may also be a vehicle for the perpetuation of control over distinct populations. In such situations where it is not an easy matter to distinguish between conflict and criminality, conflict resolution may not be the appropriate response. Indeed, such a response may perpetuate violence, empowering those responsible for war crimes and the mass violations of human rights. That exploitative practices also serve a wider set of transnational interests, whether such interests are related to the global armaments market, the minerals sector or financial institutions, renders local conflicts of global concern, spreading the net of responsibility (and culpability) ever wider. Any critical response to international conflict and change must hence take such factors into account if it seeks the transformation of conditions that perpetuate violence.

The conflicts of the late modern context are also global in other respects. We might, for example, consider the invasion of Iraq as representative of a war to establish global hegemony, or indeed, global control.[2] Some have argued for understanding the present in terms of "network wars", perhaps best represented by transnational violent organisations and the so-called war against terrorism. How parties are defined in this context, the boundaries drawn, the grievances highlighted, are all situated within a complex set of political choices and contestations so that conflict analysis itself, and more importantly conflict resolution, cannot be subject to the "sanitisation" that positivist approaches confer on the study of conflict. We may easily construct statements relating to the directionality of change and its impact on conflict – that rapid change, for example, may lead to conflict escalation. However, it is the substance of change, the particularity of distinct conflicts, the discourses that surround them, the relations of power that enable some while constraining others, the various practices of legitimisation that differentially confer value to some while rendering others devoid of such, and all taking place within complex global matrices of power, that ultimately matter when we consider choices available for intervention.[3]

Mitchell makes the assumption that social kinds (agents, groups, communities, institutions, relationships) have an existence that is independent of the discursive frames that render them meaningful. Parties to a conflict, their conflict situation, behaviour and attitudes are rendered an objective existence independent of the discursive framing that the conflict analyst, as well as others on the ground, so to speak, give such constructs substance. As Mitchell well recognises, any change that takes place in parties, issues, mode of conduct is subject to interpretation and cannot be extracted

1. See, for example, Kaldor 1999: *New and Old Wars: Organised Violence in a Global Era*. While Kaldor's use of the term "new" to describe recent conflicts may be questioned, nevertheless her characterisation of the conflicts in the Balkans, for example, is relevant to the context of this discussion.
2. For an examination of how war is used as a mode of control in global politics, see Jabri 2006.
3. For a critical exploration of the relationship between war and global politics in the contemporary era, see Jabri, forthcoming.

from the world and its contests, the interpretative schemes that are always situated in politics and in relations of power. It is all too easy to assume a dualism between the object world out there and the explanations the epistemic subject confers to the world, the classic positivist subject/object dichotomy. However, when we recognise that analysis is itself implicated in the construction of the world, we begin to recognise that analysis is part and parcel of the signifying practices that come to constitute the discursive frames that confer content to a seemingly contentless classifying process. Parties to a conflict, in this sense, can never simply be parties to a conflict, but are sovereign states, factions in government, clandestine organisations, terrorist groups, criminal gangs, teenage thugs, and so on. Each in turn is imbued with meaning, each contested, each differently situated within global, as well as local, structural continuities.

3. The De-politicisation of Conflict Analysis and Resolution

Conflict analysis has historically sought to somehow extract itself from social and political theory, so that its language is rendered neutral, a management consultant's toolkit, ready for use in any context wherein conflict might emerge. There is here an underlying assumption of rationality, even as there is a recognition that such rationality might, at times of crisis, be subject to distortion. Nevertheless, the image of the actors involved is one that assumes the capacity for cost/benefit evaluation, even as the agent of conflict resolution might intervene to somehow influence how costs are calculated and what benefits might accrue through suggested courses of action. A third party aiming for the resolution of a protracted conflict, for example, the Israeli-Palestinian, might seek to influence how the parties articulate their identities so these are no longer conceived in zero-sum terms; that mutual recognition accrues mutual benefit. The interaction necessarily relies on a conception of agency that is rational to the core; it remains reliant upon cost/benefit evaluations and the only problem that concerns the third party is achieving change in how such costs and benefits are defined, or re-defined, by the parties.

There is, at first sight, absolutely nothing that is wrong with the above aspiration; mutual recognition, especially in the example I highlight above, is desirable not just for those immediately involved, but for the world as a whole, given that the world is now experiencing the consequences of the absence of resolution to this conflict. What then is the problem in the above formulation? The problem, as I reiterate here, is not the ambition to achieve mutual recognition. The problem lies in the extraction of the conflict resolution setting from its social and political context. This, in conflict resolution speak, is always portrayed as simply dealing with the constituency problem "back home". The frames of reference utilised in the conflict resolution process are assumed to be independent of, though possibly constrained by, the context of the conflict, so that the aspiration is to transcend such constraints, enabling the parties thereby to move beyond the present and towards some positive future.

The extraction of conflict from its socio-political setting constitutes the de-politicising move. This happens on a number of fronts. Firstly, the third-party resolutionary is assumed to possess a language that is managerial to the core, aiming to solve the problem at hand, and hence not implicated. However, we know that the language of analysis is not simply a mirror-image of the world "out there", but actively constructs the world, in its choice of parties to a conflict, its understanding of the issues, the historical trajectory to a conflict, and its conception of desirable interventions and outcomes. Just to return to the above example: mutual recognition is desirable indeed; however, the content of such recognition, its institutional manifestation on the ground, is

ultimately what matters. Secondly, the language of conflict analysis is subject itself to the linguistic repertoires that surround and constitute a particular conflict. When the question of identity, for example, is reduced to the "ancient hatreds" formulation, or indeed a majority-minority construction, conflict analysis and resolution do no more than simply reiterate the language of leaderships bent on such exclusionary frameworks and the practices they seek to legitimise.[4] If the Bosnian conflict, for example, was so represented, as it indeed was, then the language of Milosevic, Karadjic, Mladic, and Tudjman was simply taken as given, interpolating the populations involved in the ethnic terms that these leaders, all in one way or another implicated in war crimes, sought in their efforts to create ethnically defined, supremacist political entities. It is in this sense that conflict analysis, even in its most "sanitised" form, is always somehow implicated, always situated politically, even where it seeks to modify taken-for-granted constructions of a conflict.

A more crucial consequence of the extraction of conflict analysis and resolution from its worldly location is that its conception of agency comes to be limited to that of the rational actor model, wherein complexity is once again reduced to the capacity to be neutral, consistent and systematic. Mitchell's classification of third parties and their capacities to realise change towards conflict resolution suffers from its conception of agency in terms of role. These range from "monitors" to "enskillers", "facilitators", "implementers", and so on. Each has their designated role, each aiming to transform a conflict in very specific ways. All, however, are assumed to be engaged in a process that culminates in a negotiated outcome. Once again, each is provided with a toolkit from which they might draw as they enact their role. Again, there is no problem with the classification scheme per se. Rather, it is its formulaic representation, one that extracts the substantive content of each role in the specificities of a distinct conflict, that is at issue. There is no way that this analysis can, for example, inform on the consequences or desirability of these roles and their applications.

In the final section of this response, I want to provide a different understanding of agency, one that acknowledges that the agencies involved in conflict analysis and resolution are always located in a mutually constitutive relationship with the structural continuities of social and political life, so that far from seeking the extraction of conflict resolution from politics, it is actively re-located in politics.

4. Re-locating Conflict and Change in Politics (and Ethics)

It is necessary first of all to rethink agency by way of a return to the social sciences, their epistemologies (modes of justification of knowledge) and ontologies (assumptions relating to social entities). As is shown in the hermeneutic tradition (that knowledge is based on interpretative understanding), human action and human society possess their own distinctiveness that cannot be reduced to the terms of the natural sciences. When this tradition is taken further into critical thought, knowledge is understood as always situated in relation to interests (Habermas 1972) and power (Foucault 1980), so that its frameworks of understanding are unavoidably located in society and implicated in the constitution of its relations of power. Understood in this way, knowledge about conflict may be judged, not in terms of the criteria of science, but in terms of the interests that constitute particular frameworks of knowledge and in terms that reveal the complicities of different modes of understanding in relations of power.

4. For an excellent investigation into the complicities of diplomatic engagement in the Bosnian conflict, see Campbell 1998.

The second element relates to conceptions of agency, structure, and their relationship. Drawing on critical social and political thought, Giddens provides a way of thinking about agency that is not dualistically related to structure, but constituted in relation to structure (Giddens 1979). Agency understood in this sense is not simply reduced to particular roles, but is conceived in relation to the discursive and institutional continuities of social systems. These continuities are not simply constraining, but enable actors to make sense of the world.[5] Agents are hence always positioned in relation to symbolic orders, frameworks of meaning and structures of domination, drawing upon such continuities both consciously and unconsciously in social interaction. Even that most transformative of actions, dissent, is only meaningful in relation to existing linguistic frameworks and relations of power.

The implications for conflict analysis and resolution are profound, for these forms of agency come to be re-located in the social and political context, so that it is no longer possible simply to adhere to a toolkit approach, acknowledging that any intervention in conflict has political as well as ethical consequences, even when these are constructed in discourse in purely managerial and instrumental forms.

Conflict and change must hence be explored in relation to the specificities of context and not in generic terms. These specificities emerge in the distinctiveness of forms of struggle and contestation in relation to the discursive and institutional context of a conflict. Conflicts of the late modern period are no longer isolated occurrences, but take place in a globalised arena, drawing on the resources that this arena provides while being subject in turn to its differential enablements and constraints. Any critical approach to conflict and its resolution takes these differentiations seriously, revealing in turn the exclusionary practices that enable some while constraining the many, inequalities of access that in themselves are at the heart of the most serious and deadly conflicts of our age. Mitchell is aware of all of this; his analysis, however, conceals its political and ethical implications.

The implications for conflict resolution relate primarily to a shift away from a toolkit approach to the subject. Intervention is understood in political and ethical terms and not simply in terms that seek to divorce the procedural from the substantive. Conflict analysis is recognised as a "practice", and, in the critical vein, as one that reveals the underlying relationships of power that differentially give voice or confer legitimacy, as well as its own complicity in such relationships. Practices of conflict resolution are themselves subjected to close scrutiny, located in relation to, for example, their complicity in contributing variously towards the pacification of the weaker side, the perpetuation of exclusionary practices, and the legitimisation of discourses and institutions that are the root causes of violence. This re-formulation suggests that practices relating to conflict resolution are always distinctly political practices, and as such, always subject to contestation.

5. For the application of critical social and political thought, including Giddens's structuration theory, to the analysis of conflict, see Jabri 1996, where the agency-structure problematique in the context of war and peace is explored.

5. References

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