

Constructive conflict transformation

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Resumen

El terreno de la resolución de conflictos contemporáneos, o conflictología, se ha desarrollado como una síntesis de teoría e investigación que, combinada con diversas aplicaciones y prácticas, facilita la participación en conflictos de carácter constructivo (Galtung 2009; Kriesberg 2008; Vinyamata 2001). En este trabajo examino de qué forma dicha síntesis ayuda a explicar la transformación constructiva de grandes conflictos violentos en los últimos años y propone estrategias para impulsar dichas transformaciones. En suma, los conflictos de carácter constructivo se gestionan y concluyen con una violencia mínima y con beneficios que pueden compartir ampliamente los miembros de las distintas facciones enfrentadas.

Abstract

The field of contemporary conflict resolution, or conflictology, has developed as a synthesis of theory and research combined with applications and practices that contribute to waging constructive conflicts (Galtung 2009; Kriesberg 2008; Vinyamata 2001). In this essay, I examine how that synthesis helps explain the constructive transformation of large-scale violent conflicts in recent years and suggests policies that foster such transformations. Briefly stated, constructive conflicts are conducted and concluded with minimal violence and with broadly shared benefits for members of the opposing sides.



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FOUNDATIONS OF THE CONFLICT RESOLUTION APPROACH

A basic concept in this approach is that social conflicts are not only inevitable in social life, but they are often useful, particularly if they are conducted or ended constructively (Kriesberg 2007a). Furthermore, destructive social conflicts generally emerge gradually and escalate as a result of the convergence of many conditions and actions, including: developments within each side, interactions between them, and external conditions and events. Many different people and groups act in ways that wittingly or unwittingly drive this destructive escalation forward and obstruct conflict de-escalation and transformation. Therefore, other kinds of conduct can limit and transform destructive conflicts.

I focus here on the ways the contemporary conflict resolution approach may be applied so as to limit destructive escalation and to hasten and maximize constructive conflict transformations (Crocker 2005). Particular attention is given here to the efforts of people who identify themselves as contributors to and applicers of this approach. They may regard themselves as conflict resolvers, peace builders, peace workers, or use other related terms. They try to convert conflicts into problems that can be solved by the adversaries, sometimes with the assistance of mediators. They may do so by re-framing or restructuring the conflict through expanding the parameters of the fight and discovering trade-offs that allow many elements within the opposing sides to gain some benefits.

The number of people studying and implementing this approach has greatly increased in recent years; but it still remains small (Fischer 2006). Some of the people are academicians doing research and building pieces of conflict theory. Some of them, whether based within or outside institutions of higher

learning, engage in teaching and training. Many others consult, mediate, engage in unofficial diplomacy (Track II) or otherwise perform conflict resolution tasks, and are based in non-governmental organizations. They are emphasized in this essay, but it should be noted that, with the growing recognition of the field, people holding governmental positions may think of themselves as practitioners of conflict resolution and indeed perform tasks that are derived from and congruent with the contemporary conflict resolution approach.

When we recognize that conflict resolution ideas and practices constitute a kind of approach toward analyzing conflicts and conducting them more constructively, then we can also recognize that the approach may be supported and implemented by people who are not members of organizations perceived to be conflict resolution organizations. They may be part of the wider conflict resolution movement and be sympathetic with its ideas and practices or even have adopted many of its ideas and practices, but without making them a central part of their identity or work. In addition, many people in government or corporate offices are familiar with and have had training in the conflict resolution approach; and they selectively apply ideas and practices from it in conducting and managing conflicts.

On the other hand, there are people whose official responsibilities include the waging of conflicts and ending them, but exercise those responsibilities in conventional ways that are inconsistent with the contemporary conflict analysis and resolution approach. They greatly rely on coercion and even violence and seek to impose their will with little or no regard to the interests or concerns of their adversaries. There are also non-governmental actors who, as partisans or as interveners in conflicts, conduct themselves in ways that are not in accordance with the approach discussed here.

It is my contention that the conflict resolution approach has grown and has contributed to reductions in violent conflicts because it is consistent with several global developments and trends (Kriesberg 2007b). I briefly cite the recent declines in various measures of mass violence and note how global changes and the related applications of the conflict resolution approach contribute to those declines.

CHANGING CONDITIONS

Data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program indicate that intrastate armed conflicts decreased from over fifty to under thirty, between the early 1990s and 2006, armed conflicts being defined as having at least 25 battle-related deaths per calendar year in one conflict (Human Security 2008). This decrease parallels an overall decline in other types of violent conflict, including interstate armed conflicts and conflicts between non-state entities. Similarly, a study conducted by the Center for international Development and Conflict Management, which used over 1,000 battle-deaths to define violent conflicts, also shows a decline in interstate wars since the end of the 1980s and a marked decline in societal wars after a spike in incidence at the beginning of the 1990s (Marshall 2005). The low levels of violence found in 2006 may be impressive by 1990 standards, but they are not below those found in the mid 1950s (Harbom 2006). The significance of the low levels in recent years, however, are more striking if we take into account the large increase in the number of independent countries that occurred since the 1950s, which raises the number of countries within which and among which violent conflicts can occur (Gleditsch 2008).

The incidence of armed conflicts is reduced when they are prevented from arising, when they are ended promptly, or when they do not quickly recur after they have been settled. Since around 1990, many large-scale conflicts were prevented from escalating destructively, for example, when Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia became non-violently independent of the former Soviet Union (Möller 2006). Many protracted violent conflicts were transformed and settlements negotiated since the end of 1980s, for example, in South Africa, Northern Ireland, Mozambique, El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua (Wallenstein 2002). Furthermore, many of these peaceful accommodations have been effectively sustained, without renewed mass violence (Paris 2004).

Of course, the end of the Cold War contributed to ending the several wars that had been sustained in varying degrees by the Cold War rivals. In addition, after the Cold War, the UN and other international governmental organizations were able to act more effectively to prevent the destructive deterioration of major conflicts and to stop large-scale violence. For example, UN's peacekeeping operations dramatically increased following the Cold War's ending.

Many global trends contributed to the ending of the Cold War and also directly contributed to the declines in large-scale violence and to the development and diffusion of the constructive conflict approach. These include the growing integration of the world in economic activities, communications, and movement of peoples. This raises the attention to and effects of violent conflicts beyond the borders of each country. Consequently, the readiness of people in many parts of the world to intervene to stop mass violence and recover it has risen. These effects are also strengthened by related changes in widely shared norms around the world, including those associated with the protection of human rights, respect for human diversity, and support for democratic institution and practices.

Another related development, fueled by those globalizing trends and contributing to them, is the expansion of transnational non-governmental organizations as well as the increasing numbers and functions of international governmental organizations. These organizations are the vehicles for applying contemporary conflict resolution ideas and practices to prevent, limit, and recover from violent conflicts.

There are increasing manifestations of the application of the constructive conflict approach, and they may be seen at each of the major stages of conflict transformation. First, as conflicts emerge and begin to escalate, some methods may be adopted that make constructive escalation feasible and likely. These include efforts by leaders and members of the opposing sides to understand each others' concerns, to avoid dehumanizing the members of the opposing sides, and to recognize the differences among people in the antagonistic camp. They include using non-coercive inducements, such as persuasive efforts, promised benefits and other aspects of "soft power" (Nye 2004). They also include the use of non-violent forms of protest and non-compliance (Sharp 2005), which have become increasingly attempted. They are often effective components in

changing governments and government policies; but those changes may be short-lived if not sustained by organizations that have a history of actions and significant internal democracy (Pace 2008). Finally, opponents may call upon various kinds of mediators to explore the possibilities of avoiding destructive escalation and constructing a mutually acceptable agreement, which helps transform the conflict.

As a conflict escalates and becomes increasingly destructive, various groups and people within one of the opposing sides, or external to the contending parties, may undertake conflict resolution practices that help limit, contain, or stop the escalation and help move towards a mutually acceptable accommodation. Such actions include efforts by intermediaries and by some members of one or more of the adversaries to explore possible de-escalating initiatives and possible acceptable accommodations. They include leaders of one of the adversaries undertaking conciliatory gestures (Mitchell 2000). Diaspora groups, which are becoming more important globally, sometimes contribute to moving antagonists in their former or ancestral homeland to a peaceful accommodation, as did the Irish-Americans regarding Northern Ireland (Guelke 1996). The transnational campaigns of activists can also help affect the course of a conflict, as happened in the struggle to end apartheid in South Africa without a massively violent escalation.

Many actions by many different parties are usually needed to forge an agreement to settle a large-scale conflict and then to sustain it (Dayton 2009). This often includes mediating efforts, ranging from largely facilitative work to relatively coercive deal-making (Ramsbotham 2005). It may also include armed peacekeeping operations, usually under UN's authority (Rubinstein 2008). Increasingly, international non-governmental and governmental organizations provide a variety of services to help recover from a destructive conflict and sustain the peace; these include assistance for economic development, fostering reconciliation, and assuring security (Poulligny 2007).

COUNTER DEVELOPMENTS

Despite all these positive developments, several highly destructive conflicts have erupted in recent years. Interestingly, these eruptions of terror attacks and wars in Afghanistan and Iraq involve actions by

groups that draw upon a few elements of the global developments discussed here, but are contrary to many of them. Osama bin Laden and his associates fashioned a transnational social movement organization, making skilled use of the newest communications technology (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 2004). However, their reliance on violence to impose a program of narrow religious orthodoxy exercising political power is greatly inconsistent with major global developments. Consequently, the endeavor has failed in many regards and is not likely to triumph or even endure in the long run (Wright 2008).

U.S. President George W. Bush and his Administration, influenced by the neo-conservatives regarding foreign policy, also drew from a few of the developments discussed earlier in this essay (Mann 2004). They stressed the primacy of democracy and the global free market, as they perceived them, reaffirming relevant global norms in their own way. However, in very many regards, their conduct was at variance with the global developments noted in this essay. Seizing upon the dissolution of the Soviet Union, they believed that the United States, as the only superpower, could and should be free to act unilaterally. International organizations could not and should not constrain them. They held unrealistic ideas about the capabilities of military force to impose ways of thinking and acting upon other peoples. As soon became evident, however, acting in such variance from the realities of the changing world did not yield the results that they desired. By the end of the second term of the Bush administration, they began to make some changes in relating to North Korea and elsewhere, acting more in accordance with the real world.

CONCLUSIONS

A useful way to think about the field of contemporary conflict resolution is to view it as a transnational social movement, which incorporates a wide variety of conflict resolution organizations and many supporters and sympathizers. The character of that social movement varies in different regions and countries of the world, but there is growth in most parts of the world and increasing influence that goes in all directions.

One implication of this perspective is that it makes evident that no single kind of conflict reso-

lution organization or set of practices encompasses the entire field. Important kinds of organizations include academic institutions and programs that pursue research and theorizing and that offer training in conflict resolution. Many other organizations are free-standing entities that offer conflict resolution training and services as mediators, facilitators, and consultants. Many of these are not-for-profit organizations, funded by foundation grants, individual contributions, and government contracts. Some are for-profit organizations funded by payments for the services they provide.

In addition, many organizations engage in actions to advance the protection of human rights, to oppose wars, to reduce poverty, to improve the status of women, and to improve the conditions of cultural minorities. The activists in such organizations help attain and sustain higher levels of positive peace. They also contribute to enduring constructive conflicts transformations

Many government agencies also draw on the ideas and practices of the conflict resolution perspective; this is particularly the case in the realms of labor management relations and environmental issues. It also has become the basis for the quasi judicial process of Alternative Dispute Resolution

(ADR), which uses mediation to settle interpersonal disputes; this has become mandatory for certain matters in some countries such as Peru.

In addition to this vast variety of organizations engaging in conflict resolution activities, there are many other organizations and individuals who support, sympathize, and selectively apply conflict resolution ideas from time to time in their daily activities. Such people and organizations also may provide financial assistance to more purely conflict resolution organizations, by individual contributions or by foundation grants.

Finally, an implication of this perspective is that people working in any specific conflict resolution or peace building organization can counter feelings of inadequacy and insufficient accomplishments by recognizing that they are one member in a very broad range of other people and groups who are moving in the same general direction, although in different ways. The transformation of destructive conflicts requires the convergence of many conditions; and no one actor can make that happen. Understanding how various groups in the conflict resolution movement complement and reinforce each other is critical in accounting for such transformations and crucial in working effectively to achieve them. ■

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