

# *Rationalizing Conflict*

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The rationalization of conflict is another way to deal with conflict. Rather than solve the conflict, resolve or dissolve or any one of a handful of ignore, avoid or sweep under carpets, learn to rationalize it. This is a necessity for anyone who is more interested into building a community, or maintaining one as a cohesive entity, rather than producing winner and losers or imposing some 'solution' which will only guarantee further conflict in the days ahead. In essence, it is a simple process, sometimes referred to as 'agreeing to disagree' but it is more than this. It is the basis for continuing to work together in a collaborative fashion.

## **The Theory**

The theory was written many years ago now by Fred Emery in 1966, and like all OST concepts has its origins as much in the practice as in the pure theory. It works as well now as it did then. Of course now, the concept of common ground has become a commonplace.

## **Background**

The series of meetings to which these notes refer arose from the concern of a political scientist, Dr. John Burton, that political science could not advance unless it had an active involvement in international conflict. He had in mind the kind of involvement practiced by the Tavistock Institute. Because of Dr. Burton's personal contacts, we decided to tackle the confrontation between Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. At the time this situation was deadlocked. The conflicting parties agreed to meet with a small group under the auspices of the Tavistock Institute. These meetings continued over a period of months. At the point where substantial areas of agreement were reached, the representatives of two other nations were involved. These were nations that would be directly concerned in the solutions. The following notes are a personal interpretation of the scientific issues involved in this case study. They are based on notes made during the design phase and throughout the study. As little reference as possible is made to the content of the discussions.

As a social scientist I am a member of an Institute committed by its primary purpose to 'the mutual advancement of the social sciences and the significant affairs of men'. International conflicts rank amongst the most significant of men's present affairs. Our failure to be involved in such conflicts until now has, on our side, been due to doubts about how and where to usefully apply lessons learnt in other sub-national areas of conflict (concerning persons, families, class grouping, minorities, institutions, sectors of the economy). We have not been waiting until we are ready to move in with theories of great power and efficacy. We have, however, learnt the hard way that very special conditions of support, forbearance and protection are required to nurture social scientific knowledge in a virgin field. Until now these conditions have not been offering in the international sphere, at least for us. The conditions I have mentioned cannot be stably based on the character and perspicacity of leaders involved in international conflict. If these conditions are to be achieved, then social scientists must offer to enter into certain obligations. If these conditions are to be sustained, the social scientists must be seen to fulfill these obligations. At least this is how my colleagues and I interpret our experience. Together with C. West Churchman, I have, in the context of an

international conference of operational researchers and social scientists, tried to spell out the basic obligations. From these two different backgrounds of experience we concluded:

- a. that if one acts simply within the framework of the obligations that one has to his scientific discipline, then there is little chance either that he will adapt his theory to the realities of conflict, or that what he has to say will find any hearing and hence any test out from those who bear the burden of the conflict;
- b. that if one acts as if obligated to one of the conflicting parties, then he can act only to effect the means of conflict; he will be powerless with respect to the conditions determining the conflict;
- c. that one can accept obligations to the parties of a conflict only insofar as these are obligations to which they are similarly committed because the obligations are to some human grouping that includes all parties and the would be researchers.

Finding the larger community of interest can be a serious research problem. It is dangerously misleading to refer the conflict to such a high level of abstraction as mankind at large. In our past experience we have found it best to take the next higher level of social organization as the common reference point. In this particular instance we took the regional entity that these parties had themselves earlier identified as Maphilindo. This was not achieved simply by clever analysis and foresight. As I recollect, we had only half grasped the answer before it emerged in conferences. For the social scientists this meant that they had to discipline their own tendencies to think as Britishers, Australians, etc. It is, however, not easy nor even pleasant to contemplate that one might be acting in ways that would be judged treasonable by one's own nation. Perhaps a social scientist should be above such matters; I don't think so. For myself I took the position that if the solutions to the regional problems tended to create conflict with Australian interests, then after helping them arrive at their best solution, but not before, I would feel free to explicitly discard my obligations to the region and if necessary contest those solutions within the context of Australian interests. This is not a fully thought out solution.

The problems of value orientation are only one aspect of getting to grips with international conflicts. There are two other aspects that need discussion: (1) the 3 protection required if the parties in conflict are to be able to explore positions, attitudes, etc. which are not directly helpful, and which may in fact hinder the pursuance of their conflict; (2) the positive contributions that may be made by the social scientists. Let me start with the positive contributions. These seem to be threefold and all stem from the independence and objectivity of the social scientists qua social scientists and their professional knowledge and competence:

1. Helping to conduct a joint exploration or search and to sustain it in the face of hostile attitudes between the conflicting parties. That the parties were willing to come together was evidence of some forces toward cooperation but at a number of points their ambivalence emerged and had to be contained. The broad principles for conducting a search with conflicting parties include:
  - a) the direction and the pace of the search must be guided by the wishes of the parties and the relative strength of their momentary tendencies toward and away

from subject areas. Whether the social scientists are active or passive should depend on these wishes and tendencies;

- b) when the tendency is to dwell on and even exacerbate conflicts, the social scientists must adopt the passive role of a sounding board. By not rushing in to seek rationality in the partisan arguments and by avoiding immoderate expressions of concern they will enable such outbursts to be more readily contained and passed by;
- c) active help can be given when the social scientists sense a willingness to explore matters on which the parties have not got prepared public positions. However, sudden, too strong, or persistent urgings away from the public positions can reflect on the genuineness of the scientists' concern with the national interests of the conflicting parties. Because he is not burdened with these national interests, the social scientist must take a cautious step-by-step approach. Each step will probably be less than he wishes would be possible.

From our notes on the conference proceedings it is possible to detect a number of occasions where mistakes were made about each of these principles. In each case time was lost in recovering rapport. The mistakes were particularly frequent in the first meetings when rather too many social scientists were present, with the consequent incitement to play to the scientific gallery. Amongst the mistakes were attempts to lead the parties into areas that they did not wish to discuss.

2. Helping to shape the emerging views and perceptions into a 'theory' of the conflict. This theory should constitute an argument about the objective content of the conflict and hence provide the essential framework for the next stage. The social scientists should be able to guide this task with their knowledge of what constitutes a scientific exploration. The more knowledge they have of the area, the more they are potentially able to guide the process toward an objective theory. It is essential, however, that the theory be not only basically true but also accepted as such by the conflicting parties. Without their acceptance, no theory could provide a framework for investigating solutions. However, a theory is not only a most potent instrument for revealing possible solutions but is potentially dangerous in that it may commit one or both parties to 'cures that are worse than the disease'. We had one very angry scene when it was felt that some scientists wanted to build in the communal problem as part of the basic theory of the conflict. In this as in the other tasks, the scientists must be guided by the conflicting parties.
3. Guiding the conflicting parties toward solutions that offer the greatest convergence of interests. While this is the fruitful stage there is no question of simply working through the first two and then concentrating on finding solutions. It is most likely that the discussions will continually shift back and forth between stages. There is a basic principle that should guide the search for solutions. This has been formulated by Kurt Lewin in the social sciences, and Liddell Hart in military theory as the principle of indirect approach: "Its fulfillments seem to be the key to practical achievement in dealing with any problem where the human factor predominates, and a conflict of wills tends to spring from an underlying concern for interests. In all such cases the

direct assault of new ideas provokes a stubborn resistance, thus intensifying the difficulty of producing a change of outlook. Conversion is achieved more easily and rapidly by unsuspected infiltration of a different idea or by an argument that turns the flank of instinctive opposition.” (p. viii) In practice this principle has to be supplemented with another. It clearly warns against a bull at the gate assault on those areas that have been publicly defined as the focus of the conflict. One may even start as we did with explicit recognition that these particular conflicts may be unavoidable. However, if one does not start with these areas, where amongst all the others does one start? The supplementary principle which we formulated during the design of this series of conferences was to search for a fulcrum (or key link) in the most relevant area closest to the conflict areas. Two concurrent judgements were required – relevance and proximity. Relevance was to be assessed in terms of the convergence of the interests of the conflicting parties. This is not an entirely novel principle. It is implicit in Wertheimer’s discussion of ‘recentring’ as the key to productive problem solving (in human as well as cognitive problems). By finding such an off-centre area, we hoped to get some creative thinking and to effectively restructure the way the contestants looked at the prime conflicts. With this change the prime conflicts might well be susceptible to resolution. In fact, this is what occurred. Despite the principle, some of the social scientists attempted to tackle directly the key conflict area of Sabah and Sarawak. As could be expected, that evoked strong attempts to justify the public positions taken by each nation. Progress was made only when the focus of discussion was shifted to the problems concerned with the presence of the British Strategic Reserve based on Singapore and Malaya. This effectively re-centred the problem and led quite quickly to a resolution of the conflict. In the new context, the parties have had little difficulty in agreeing to a solution to even the apparently insoluble confrontation over Sabah and Sarawak. In this stage also it is necessary to be guided by the tendencies of the conflicting parties. One social scientist attempted to hasten convergence by a tour de force that would have had each party list its pay-offs, as in bargaining. This was firmly rebuffed.

At this point we can turn from the positive ways in which the social scientists can contribute to conflict resolution to the conditions needed in order to make the contribution. We have already discussed the question of values; beyond that there are at least two main conditions that must be met if effective search is to occur:

- i. protection from public perusal;
- ii. freedom from decision making.

The reasons for the first condition are probably obvious. Positions taken in public are a major factor in mobilizing political support and opposition. Once mobilized, these forces cannot be readily shifted to support new positions. Even to be seen questioning one’s position in public can have serious political consequences and in a conflict situation will invite one’s opponents to exploit the temporary weakness. To enable free and flexible exploration we felt it necessary to enforce conditions of secrecy and to prepare a cover story in case of any breach of secrecy. These had to be seen as adequate by the conflicting parties. The reasons for the second condition may be a little less obvious. Our past experience with designing and running search conferences

had convinced us that if people discuss with a view to themselves reaching agreed decisions then they will restrict discussion to those matters which are seen to have a significantly probable contribution to the decision. If they are to be led to explore 'mere possibilities', then decision making must be firmly exported to some other setting. The only decisions left to the meetings were agreements about what to explore and when. Even decisions about what should be communicated to the governments had to be left to the personal discretion of the participants. The points made above do not need to be summarized. However, in considering them it should be borne in mind that they reflect a very small portion of the social scientific knowledge and experience that could theoretically be brought to bear on international conflicts. Further, such participative case studies would seem to be the most hopeful way of testing and extending our knowledge and of course the ability of social scientists to be even more helpful. One last issue should be raised. How can such exercises as this aid political science? As can be seen from the above notes, the key theoretical matters do not specifically concern political science. However, participation with politicians in constructing a theory of a conflict in which the latter are deeply involved can provide an acid test for political science theories and a gold mine of serendipitous observations and hypotheses.

## **The Practice**

Here we see the theory in action and just as the theory states, the process is in two stages. The first stage, that of contextualizing the conflict, is most commonly pursued through doing a global scan of, and then working out the current state of the extended social field, the L22. This is the basis for the first part of the Search Conference (SC) as its participants do a thorough job of exploring this field which is exerting such forces on their system. (For a description of that theory and practice see the article in this section called the OST concept of the extended social field, environment.)

It can also be a productive component of any Unique Design as many tasks and/or problems can benefit from a contextualization. Things often look different when seen from a new or different angle; in fact recast perceptions often result in new conceptualizations. That indeed is one of the great virtues of a conceptualization and the reasoning behind the first stage analysis.

### *First stage*

Whatever the system of the SC, it does not exist alone or as an isolated entity. It is surrounded by an environment. The system and the environments are mutually determining, coimplicative as the existence of one implies the other. The open system is a model of coevolution so in order to get the best handle on the future of a system, it is necessary to understand the forces emanating from the environment onto the system. Participants firstly compile a list of the embryos of social change, changes that alert to possible new values or directions in the field. They then analyse and synthesize how those changes will work together to produce the scenarios for the most Desirable World and Most Probable World within the time horizon of the SC. There will normally be more than one of at least one of these scenarios. At this stage, the system of the SC or e.g. the problem the UD is designed to solve, has been contextualized.

If for a UD, it is determined that an L22 scan is not required but it is anticipated that for

e.g. the number of participants, integration, and therefore, possibly rationalization will be required, other forms of contextualization can be substituted. The L22 however, does remain the gold standard.

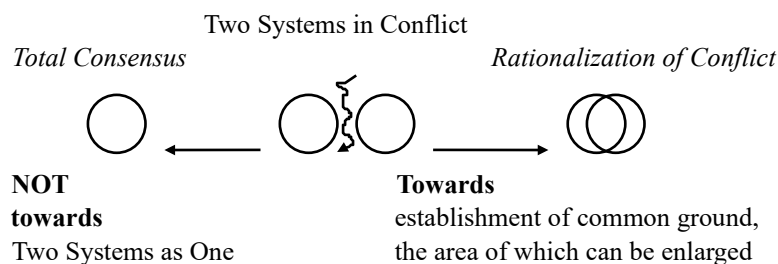
### *Second stage*

Here we will assume that the L22 has been explored to the point of having two or more scenarios which need to be integrated so that the community has one agreed picture of the most desirable and/or most probable future on which to work. The following description is relevant for that but the basic steps in the process are the same regardless of the nature of the contextualization.

It is in the process of reporting and integrating that we operationalize the second stage of the rationalization of conflict. Group reports on the Most Desirable World are hung next to each and both verbally reported. Two sets of questions are raised. First there are questions of clarification of the groups and then a question as to whether anybody is not committed to or is not prepared to work towards any item on any of the reports.

If there is such a response, it is firstly debated fully in plenary. If there is substantial disagreement, a couple of people from different sides may be detached from the community to see if the point can be negotiated, while the rest gets on with the task of integration. If negotiation fails, the item is put on a **Disagreed List**. It ceases to be part of the further work of the community.

This process is repeated for reports of the Most Probable World. The words change only slightly to reflect the different status of the most probable as a hard data, linear projection, e.g. is there anything that you disagree will be part of the most probable world.



### **The Rationalization of Conflict**

The rationalization of conflict, therefore, begins at the very beginning of the Search. Most conflicts concern some aspect of the L<sub>11</sub> and its function. The first phase of the Search, exploring the L<sub>22</sub>, contextualizes and therefore, **recenters** the conflict. Once this is complete, the second stage precisely establishes **common ground**. Critical to this is knowing exactly where lies the thin red line between agreement and disagreement. Conflicted groups tend to assume a greater area of conflict and less common ground than actually exists. Once the common ground and its boundaries are clarified, the community can continue work towards its goals on the basis of the common ground regardless of its size.

In this process we are not assuming that there will or should be consensus within the community. To do so is unrealistic, certainly in cases such as Industrial Relations where there are legitimate and institutionalised adversarial positions. It is also silly to expect 30+ people to agree about everything. When group reports come back, the commonality between them is obvious and usually much greater than anybody had anticipated. Participants have validated a common ground. In the case of the Most Desirable World which is based on the human ideals,

they have all given presence to the others of their basic psychological similarity. In the most probable, the common ground has been established showing that they do share an objectively ordered environment. Because the total process has been open to all, we have present the three conditions leading to the building of an open, trusting and communicative community. This community is learning, energetic and joyful where the future energy for action is derived from the positive affects generated during the event. SC communities exhibit the 'joy of learning' and as joy is a contagious, expansive affect (Tomkins 1962), it serves as a precondition for active, diffusive implementation.

By using this process of rationalization through the Disagreed List right from the beginning of the SC, a simple and controlled mechanism is available and practised for all further stages where more intense conflicts, closer to home may be waiting.

Do not assume there will be disagreement or put a Disagreed list before you know it is definitely required. It is more common for there to be total agreement than a disagreement. People in today's world always seem to assume there are more differences than there really are. And what disagreements are found, are usually in the Most Probably World. We are long past the point of having severe disagreements about the basic ideals.

Another point needs to be made here. In today's world there is much consternation about 'verbal aggression'. It should not be surprising that when people are engaged in planning around their most deeply held concerns and purposes, they may be excited over differences. If they were not, there should be concern that either the wrong people were in the room or that **dissociation** (Emery F 1977) had reached such a point that all such participative planning was useless. There would be little hope of active adaptive planning communities producing the energy and commitment required to see them through implementation. The advent of the dissociated individual has created a taboo on verbal aggression and challenge. Dissociation has led to people speaking "with little regard for the effect the utterance will have on the listener and thus their speech is non-social. The result is utter confusion and a total breakdown in communication" (Farb 1973: 66).

When all of the necessary pieces of design and management are in place, there is little to fear from argument or anger as these are respected for what they are in this context, the expression of care and concern for the outcome. As Ong points out (1967: 195), non literate cultures accepted verbal hostility as part of the manifest fabric of life to a degree beyond that conceivable today. But it was hostility within a network of relations and rituals which themselves guaranteed the peace through social and economic interdependence.

It is the affects that power diffusion and as the SC is designed and managed for effective, influential communication through spoken language, 'phatic communion' or 'social cement' (Malinowski in Farb 1973: 24-5) the whole range of affects can be expressed without destroying the bonding of the community around shared purposes. These provide the network of relations and the processes of the Search begin to establish a new set of rituals which support an expressive learning community.

Once any conflicts have been rationalized and common ground established, *integrating* the group reports is a simple process. Assign a number to each of the points on one report and ask the community which points on other reports are identical in substance or could be put together as different parts of the one point. These items are assigned the same number. Items which stand alone are assigned a number after the commonalities are accounted for. In this process, all of the richness is retained and nothing gets lost.

One or two people from each group are then asked to prepare the integrated list, usually over a break. The integrated Most Desirable and Most Probable Worlds are then briefly reported by the integrators, are checked by the rest of the participants and finally become the

agreed property of the whole community. They are then hung in a prominent place. From that point they act as benchmarks and guides for the direction of future work. They also serve to remind the community of the extent of its common ground.

The process is essentially the same whether it is a SC or another event requiring contextualization by the L22 or other. Once the process is established in the community as the way to handle differences, it can be automatically employed if such appear in any part of an event. People trust it.

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