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Dealing with Normative Conflicts

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IF YOU HAD A CHOICE WHICH SOCIETY WOULD YOU pick to live in and spend the rest of your life? It's a question I often ask myself and my closest friends. One answer is, Dutch perhaps. Why? Because it's one society which does not know who or what the enemy is. It's a homeplace in which one can live in harmony and peace, hopefully for long.

Coming home, to me, is a very powerful metaphor. It suggests an image of our world becoming smaller but not coming together. In this day and age, the longing for some place more quiet and far away from conflicts has a universal appeal. But how can we satisfy such longing? And where do we find or can build such a place?

A cynical view

There will be conflicts and there will be conflicts. Look back to the Old Testament. Look at this century, and the centuries before that. That's the way the world was, is and will be. There's not much we can do to change it.

Many thought the end of the Cold War would bring about a more peaceful world. This was not to be, or at least it's not easy to say if things are better or worse now. If there's peace it's certainly a cold one like the winter you're now having here in Germany and elsewhere.

Today's conflicts happen mostly within national borders, caused mainly by policies of ethnic expulsion, exclusion or annihilation. Look at Bosnia, Kosovo, Algeria, Somalia, Cambodia, Indonesia. Out of the 96 conflicts that have taken place since the end of the Cold War 91 have been internal wars fought with conventional weapons.

The victims are mainly civilians – many of them women, children and the more vulnerable groups. Nine out of ten casualties are non-combatants. During the 1990s alone, there have been 39 major conflicts with at least 1,000 deaths per conflict in any one year. More than 4 million people have lost their lives in violent conflicts since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. About 20 million lives were lost in more than 100 wars during the past four decades.

By 1997, 35 million people were displaced by wars and conflicts from their homelands and now live as refugees within their own country or somewhere else. The numbers do not include the less media visible victims of development aggression and global poverty.

Anti-personnel land mines claim more than 25,000 casualties every year. More than 100 million land mines – over 25 per cent of these in war-torn Afghanistan, Angola and Cambodia – are deployed worldwide threatening lives and limbs everyday and making reconstruction and development efforts slow, costly and uncertain.

The 1997 Asian crisis, the worsening environmental situation and what consequences these can bring to us indicate more conflicts ahead.

Maybe, it's just right and perhaps a poetic justice, that our present troubles climax in a global crash. Why? It could be a humbling experience for the money world that has alienated itself so much from the real world of people, goods and services. And as the Japanese say, money, money, money but no happy. Who knows, the culture shock



effect of a great crash might turn out to be just the one quick, universal education we all need about how best to live our lives on this planet.

Conflicting perspectives

Ironically, people go to war for the same reason and set of values they will die to have peace and good life on earth. So? How do you then recognize right or wrong when you bump into one? To me, not so easily although I can tell oppression when I see one. I believe there are very few things in this world which can be considered absolutely good or evil. And I cannot even make a shortlist without any doubt.

What is the common good? If it can be reduced to a core minimum what will it be? Respect for life, freedom, democracy, liberty to pursue happiness?

John Lennon says all we need is love, love, love. Christians say follow the ten commandments. Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and many other faiths have each their own set of convictions about what is good for everyone. Ditto for the capitalists the communists, the greens and who else have anything to say about what is good and bad.

Fifty years ago this month, and six days from today, the United Nations came up with its Universal Declaration of Human Rights. From a majoritarian perspective the UDHR could be that common good. But we all know the commitment to this Declaration has been honored as much in adherence as in breach.

It does happen, as in the case of human rights, that people, nations and states can find a way to relativize the definition of common good. They do so for their own reasons, and for reasons that, sincere or otherwise, are deemed good from where they are coming.

The 1989 Tien An Men tragedy is one example illustrating the complexity of normative conflicts. The Chinese government believed, and continues to do so, that it is on the right. The democracy movement and its supporters claimed the same thing. What if the government simply let go and opened its closed society the way Gorbachev did for the former Soviet Union? It is not easy to project what China would be like in 1998. But we all know that Russia in 1998 is now a basket case like Indonesia. And China is the survivor of the present Asian Crisis. Was it because China remains a closed society and defines human rights in its own way?



Also in China, let's take the case of the Three Gorges Dam. Once built the dam will be the biggest ever and can power China's consistent high growth economy well into the 21st Century. But the construction also means flooding over 60,000 hectares of land and 160 towns, and forcing the resettlement of over 1 million people. Environmentalists the world over are up in arms, saying No to Three Gorges Dam and all other mega dam projects. Government insists it has a responsibility to feed close to 2 billion people in the near future. The other side claims the dam project will destroy communities and their environment. Both claim rightness in the name of sustainable development.

The case of Malaysia is another interesting illustration. Mahathir, condemned by many as a human rights violator, happens to be one of a kind among the world's leaders for standing up against powerful forces of globalization. How are we to judge him and his actions?

Or take Mahathir's arch-enemy, George Soros. According to Soros' philosophy, life is speculation. He plays the money game like no one. He wins big, he loses big, too. He gives to charity and other worthy causes, sometimes in much bigger amount than U.S. is prepared to commit. Soros is grand evil to many Asians.

Or how would you view the US embargo on Iraq which has been causing so much suffering among ordinary people in that society? Is it right for the US to be the custodian of the nuclear bomb and bad for India to have one? What's right and what's wrong in the Clinton-Lewinsky case?

These are intentional caricatures, intended simply to illustrate the complexities involved when judging the same reality. The difficulty is not only due to differing perspectives, we encounter the same difficulty even when we take off from the same starting point.

Cooperation in conflict resolution

Conflict resolution is and should be a common concern for both the voluntary and state sectors, not to mention the corporate sector and everyone else who care enough about building a civic and civil society. Needless to rub in, neither one of them can do it alone since even a multilateral approach cannot guarantee positive results. The challenge is to find modalities of working together to prevent conflicts, to control them once they have erupted, and to put an end to them the soonest. This is of course easier said than done.



The option of avoidance has little scope in today's world. The transborder nature of development and environment problems leaves hardly any room for escape. The hippie communities of the 1960s seem like a faded dream now. One may succeed by withdrawal but only for a while. Pretty soon problems and conflicts will catch up on all of us wherever we may retreat for safety, although some of us have the means to buy more time.

But intentional communities are still worth building. In the course of struggling against the alienating effects of globalization these communities can become little islands of self-sufficiency and self-governance. As outcomes of the struggle to reclaim personal and communal sovereignty, these communities will serve as the defensible spaces on which to rebuild states that have already lost much of their positive value because of globalization. Here is the terrain of voluntary organizations and social movements. State policies promoting decentralization, democratization and citizen participation will enable such communities to emerge as model civil societies and civic communities.

Cooperation in addressing conflicts is not easy to come by. Often the voluntary sector and government are divided in their perspectives, in the analysis of the conflict situation, in what goals and objectives to set and strategies and means to employ, not to mention the differentiated roles they each must play. So, how can the two cooperate and together move forward?

Mutual tolerance is essential. Both sides will have to accept their differences and strive to find common ground for action. Biases and agendas must be taken as given even as they continue to debate their differences. Neither side should be required to give up on its identity, point of view, principles and values. For all they care they might share a lot of things in common, precisely because they have the public interest and welfare as common point of departure and goal though these very same things continue to be contested.

Tolerance for differences can go a long way. But it is not enough. Both sides will have to demonstrate a deep sense of common humanity and justice. For how can anyone tolerate oppression, exclusion and discrimination? How can anyone stand the unbelievable capacity of some to inflict harm on others. In a sense, one can say also that intolerance is precisely what breeds inhumanity.



Participation in conflict resolution must be assured. Participation is a value worth promoting in and for itself. This means shared decision making and shared accountability at all levels and at every step of the way. The burden of making conflict resolution a participatory exercise falls mainly on government because of its power to deny it. Government must ensure that participation is both a lived and perceived reality of everyday.

Conflict situations are usually many-sided. Therefore their resolution will require an integrated strategic framework. A sound framework enables participating parties to acquire a profound appreciation of the roots as well as manifestations and consequences of conflicts. It provides everyone a clear perspective, direction and hierarchy of priorities even if efforts are simply focused on immediately actionable points.

Finally, persistence to get to the bottom of conflicts and determination to pursue solutions to their logical conclusion is a hallmark of cooperation.

But then again, most of these have been said before.



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About the author

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