

The Circularity of Conflict Dynamics. A Critical Review.

A Response by
Daniela Körppen

<http://www.berghof-handbook.net>

1

1. Introduction	2
2. The De-politicisation of Politics	3
3. Theories as Social Practices	4
4. The Gap Between Theory and Practice and the Overemphasis on the Role of Third Parties	5
5. Social Change as Cyclical Process	6
6. References	7

The Circularity of Conflict Dynamics. A Critical Review.

Daniela Körppen

1. Introduction

In his article “Conflict, Social Change and Conflict Resolution”, Mitchell intends to create a useful typology of change in relation to protracted social conflict and provides the reader with an interesting and comprehensive framework for thinking about change processes and conflict dynamics. He argues that to date there are few works that deal systematically and in general terms with the connections between the concepts of change and conflict. With his essay – “discussing the relationship between change and conflict in very general terms” (Mitchell 2005, 2) – he wants to fill this gap. He raises intriguing questions and aims to contribute to the development of a general theory of change and conflict or conflict resolution (ibid., 3). His article should, he suggests, be considered as a starting point for the development of a set of theories of conflict dynamics, as well as a practical set of guidelines concerning the modes and the timing of “resolutionary” interventions (ibid.).

Although Mitchell’s essay presents a comprehensive and useful analysis, the purpose of this commentary is to highlight that the endeavour of creating an overarching theory of (social) change must be seen very critically for various reasons. In order to spark a critical and constructive dialogue, I want to concentrate the following discussion on some shortcomings of the approach Mitchell chooses.

Given that there is already a large number of different peacebuilding and conflict resolution and transformation theories, which (implicitly at least) address the relationship of peace and change, or conflict and change, the discussion of social change should focus less on developing a new meta-theory, but instead on linking the existing approaches to practice.

With his technological¹ top-down approach, Mitchell broadens the already huge gap between theory and practice in the field of peace and conflict research. The contextualisation of peace and conflict theories is crucial since each theoretical analysis contains implicit values and underlying assumptions and thus shapes perceptions and actions in the field (Foucault 1981; Jabri’s contribution to this dialogue). The way in which a conflict situation and the various types of changes are analysed and categorised therefore strongly influences the intervention strategy and the guiding principles one applies, as is shown in sections 2 and 3.

Section 4 argues that Mitchell overemphasises the possibilities of third-party interventions from the outside and neglects to analyse the resources for change lying within the conflict system and the relevant parties in a particular region.

Finally, this commentary’s fifth section points out that conflict dynamics and societal processes do not follow linear principles and that a single intervention in a conflict system cannot be regarded as an external, neutral mechanism. An intervention becomes itself part of a conflict system

1. As will be shown in Section 2, the “technologicalisation” – or de-politicisation – of politics neglects the fact that each political concept implies a subjective method of knowledge and truth-production (Foucault 1981). A technological approach to politics fails to take into account the close relationship between knowledge and power-structures and presumes that there is a generic or – with Foucault, neutral – knowledge about politics which can be conceived through linear, monocausal result-chains.

and is influenced by many unpredictable factors. In light of this, the formulation of theoretically derived, generic guiding principles and the planning of intervention strategies as monocausal, linear result-chains seem highly problematic.

2. The De-politicisation of Politics

In his essay Mitchell follows a deductive method, arguing that it seems to offer the best alternative at least at the outset of any classification process. He rejects an inductive approach, because he tries to “pick out commonalities” of different conflict situations that would help in the construction of a typology of change (Mitchell 2005, 8).

This approach fails to take into account a crucial aspect of almost all protracted ethno-political conflicts: the act of identifying key causes of conflict and defining exact obstacles to change is fraught with controversy and therefore cannot be resolved on a theoretical level. Each conflict party follows its own assumptions about the root causes of a conflict and about the ways in which to transform it. So does every conflict analyst.

The situation in Aceh/Indonesia can serve as an example: Defining which stakeholders or which structural causes can be considered as obstacles to change depends very much on the perspective one adopts. For many Acehnese nationalists the conflict is essentially about identity. They argue that it involves the ‘rediscovery’ of an ancient Acehnese nationhood and the struggle for self-determination. For other observers, including those from the government of Indonesia, the conflict arises out of grievances in the Acehnese society about issues concerning economy, human rights or religion. Acehnese nationalists downplay grievances and emphasise what they see as fundamental incompatibilities between Aceh and the Indonesian state (Aspinall 2005).

It therefore must be highlighted that defining what an obstacle to change is, or what the root causes of a conflict are, is not so much a neutral act – which can be generalised as a fixed category and applied to other conflict situations. It means taking a political stance. By developing neutral, generic types of obstacles to change on a theoretical level, Mitchell de-politicises political processes.

Yet we must take into account that defining obstacles to change always implies certain political actions. Returning to the example of Aceh/Indonesia: When a third party decides that the Acehnese nationalists are an obstacle to change, and therefore supports the activities of the Indonesian government, the third party gets involved politically. This signifies that it downplays the components of the conflict that relate to (political) identity and thus ignores the interests and needs of Acehnese nationalists. Neglecting that the definition of obstacles to change is a highly political act could lead to the situation where a third party might block processes of change which could otherwise satisfy the needs and interests of all relevant conflict parties. Rather than becoming part of the solution, the third party might turn out to be an integral part of the problem.

With Foucault, it can be argued that the development of an overarching typology of change presumes that a neutral knowledge of certain conflict situations exists and that it can be discovered by means of scientific analysis and finally be transformed into theoretical categories. As illustrated by the Indonesian example, though, knowledge about the conflict and an assessment of the situation depend on the point of view of different parties and cannot be considered as technological processes in which all parameters can be fixed and measured.

A conflict situation can only be appraised satisfactorily if it is perceived as a complex social phenomenon in which the diverse perspectives of different stakeholders and their varying

assumptions about a specific situation compete against each other. Therefore, it is probably impossible to agree on what the main obstacles to change are. Instead of developing a theoretical categorisation of obstacles to change, then, they should rather be embedded in the respective political and cultural context. Different perceptions of a conflict situation have to be addressed in a joint conflict analysis with all relevant parties. An external conflict analyst is only able to assess the situation from his/her own cultural perspective and might underestimate some stakeholders' needs which are more foreign to his/her own culture.

3. Theories as Social Practices

Against this background, a key issue for peace and conflict research must be seen in the reality-constructing functions of theories. As stated before, each theoretical model of social change contains implicit values and underlying assumptions and thus shapes perceptions and actions in the field. The way in which a conflict situation is analysed and the reasons that are given for the formation of conflicts reflect certain world views and theoretical concepts.

Even if Mitchell develops neutral categories for classifying various types of social change, his analytic view is not as neutral as he proclaims. On the contrary, his arguments reveal a rationalistic and sometimes 'economistic' view of conflicts.

A first indicator can be found in his analysis of conflict formation, in which he predominantly picks out changes in scarcity and abundance as root causes. Furthermore, he focuses his discussion on conflicts of interest which can be 'solved' through negotiations only at a political level. He seems to presume that each human being is a *homo oeconomicus* who calculates his/her actions and is always able to make rational decisions. This becomes evident when Mitchell argues that each party's underlying needs and interests can be "reviewed" and that it is possible for an "outsider party" to see which crucial goal incompatibilities lie at the heart of the conflict (Mitchell 2005, 13). He furthermore seems to suppose that human beings are always aware of their problems and able to discuss them openly. Mitchell does not pay much attention to components of identity conflicts, such as intrapersonal fears and resistances, which often cannot be explained in rational discussion. (He mentions the dynamics of identity only in a footnote on page seven.)

This reflects underlying theoretical and normative assumptions and a quite rationalistic view of conflict situations. Mitchell's analytic inquiry downplays the reality that almost all protracted ethnopolitical social conflicts are characterised by a multitude of conflicting factors – from disputes of interest, such as conflicts over resources, to ideological differences and dissension over values and beliefs. He underrates the fact that there is a great need to work on two levels in ethnopolitical conflicts: on the more or less openly negotiated level of political demands and interests, and on the deeper level of collective experiences, stances and attitudes integral to the formation of identity (Ropers 1997).

Mitchell's normative suppositions about relations between human beings are mirrored in the way in which he develops categories for processes of change. His argumentation stems from a linear, rationalistic world view rooted in western societies. Hence his 'neutral' guiding principles have to be qualified, put into perspective and embedded in their specific historical and cultural contexts.

4. The Gap between Theory and Practice and the Overemphasis on the Role of Third Parties

A further danger of developing a technological top-down approach to the challenge of social change that resolves protracted social conflict lies in the widening of the already huge gap between theory and practice, and in overemphasising the role of third parties.

Mitchell argues that conflict analysts have to confront questions about the sources and impact of major changes and that practitioners have to deal with the practicalities of managing change and conflict (Mitchell 2005, 2). It could be inferred from this statement, that he advocates a separation between the analysis of protracted social conflict and social change and the designing of intervention strategies. This disconnection would imply that a ‘solution’ in a conflict situation can be developed by an analyst on a theoretical level. The possibilities for conflict transformation lying within the conflict system itself are largely ignored, and the conflicting parties are excluded from the process of designing an intervention strategy.

As already mentioned, I would argue that on the contrary, conflict analysis must be regarded as the first step of an intervention in a conflict situation and thus must be undertaken in cooperation with all relevant stakeholders. A profound conflict analysis should be based on the local perceptions of the conflict. Local actors must define what forms part of the conflict system and what its specific characteristics are.

It is one of the main hypotheses of the systemic approach to conflict transformation currently developed by the Berghof Foundation for Peace Support² 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 sub-systems in a political system are addressed and fulfilled (Wils et al. 2006). The borders of the conflict-system and the respective sub-systems – which can be formed by different identity groups, for example – have to be defined with regard to the specific conflict situation.

The necessary change of perspectives can only be obtained if the analysis switches between the overall system and a micro-analysis of the relevant sub-systems. This change between micro- and macro-perspectives is helpful in putting the interests of different sub-systems into a wider context. By regularly alternating between different perspectives, it becomes possible to analyse how the sub-systems relate to each other. Adequate hypotheses on how various sub-systems might affect the overall conflict system can be generated (ibid.).

Moreover, including such conflict analyses in the process of designing an intervention strategy helps bridge the gap between theory and practice by creating a constant feedback loop where each theoretical assumption of an ‘external’ analyst is tested and verified with the ‘realities’ in the field. An overemphasis on the potential of a third party will be avoided. Besides, conflict analysis will no longer be regarded as neutral assessment of a situation in which solutions for a conflict situation can be designed on the basis of a theoretically inspired, detached desk study.

That Mitchell overemphasises the role of third parties also becomes obvious in his section on agents of change. Even if he explains that enablers can come from a variety of backgrounds and do

2. With the systemic conflict transformation (SCT) approach, the Berghof Foundation for Peace Support seeks to provide a conceptual framework in which experiences from theory and practice are combined. SCT builds on the state-of-the-art practice in conflict transformation and combines it with systemic approaches from other disciplines such as change management, psychotherapy and cybernetics. It considers the activation and empowerment of the conflict system’s own resources as a key contribution to the transformation of a conflict (Wils et al. 2006).

not have to be the diplomatic representatives of foreign governments or international organisations, he underestimates the importance of mobilising agents of change, or agents of peaceful change, *within* the conflict parties and instead focuses on the role of “outsiders”.

This becomes evident if one takes a closer look at how he defines the tasks of potential agents of change. One of their most important activities, for instance, is seen in their monitoring of the conflict and providing early warning of “likely effects of such environmental changes on opportunities for removing or circumventing obstacles to ‘resolutionary’ change” (Mitchell 2005, 18). This kind of work is normally done by international or national organisations and not by the conflicting parties themselves.

It must be stressed here that it is crucial for achieving a long-term and stable peace that, first of all, agents of peaceful change must be mobilised within the conflict system and therefore also from within the conflicting parties. Successful conflict transformation requires key people from *within* who are committed and have powerful visions as individuals or small groups. It could happen that they do not know how to change the dominant relations of violent action and reaction within the conflict system. In this respect, external parties have an important contribution to make: Yet rather than acting as agents of peaceful change themselves, they must help to identify relevant persons and groups within the conflict system and support them with a range of capacity-building measures.

5. Social Change as a Cyclical Process

Even if Mitchell admits that speaking theoretically usually ignores practical problems of implementation, he does not give much advice on how to bridge this gap. Thus it is not very clear how his typology of change should be applied in the field. Apart from the problems of Mitchell’s deductive approach which I have discussed above, he also fails to explain which indicators should be applied for measuring “resolutionary” change, how to define what a successful process of (social) change is and how to define failures. How should we deal with the limitations of impact assessment and the impossibility of constructing a causal chain between input and impact in highly complex conflict systems? These questions are particularly relevant as the discussion about social change focuses predominantly on non-material impacts of interventions, which seem almost impossible to prove.

In conclusion, I believe it would be more useful if the discussion about social change switched its focus from theory to practice. Assumptions about processes of social change should be developed together with local stakeholders and must be embedded in the respective conflict contexts. Mitchell remains too wedded to his external, theoretical perspective when he asks in his conclusion how one might best carry out a systematic analysis of a conflict in order to distinguish those factors which are tractable. Questions like these need to be contextualised and answered on the basis of local perceptions.

In addition, it should be underlined that processes of social change must be regarded as a means and not as an end (Sprenger 2005). Mitchell repeatedly argues that “solutions must be found”. This gives the impression that he considers social change not as a process – which possibly also includes setbacks – but more as a definite goal. Rather than functioning by way of monocausal result-chains, however, dynamics in social systems are cyclical and to a certain extent unpredictable. It is impossible to trace linear lines into the past, construct them for the future and define goals on how processes of social change should come about and develop. As systems theory shows, complex

social systems are neither connected in linear ways nor can their relationship be characterised by simple cause and effect mechanisms (Wilke 1999).

Furthermore, interventions in social systems are never neutral mechanisms which engineer social change from the outside, but also become a part of the conflict system. When they are applied in the field, they are on the one hand influenced by the dynamics from within the conflict system. On the other hand, they also influence processes in the specific society. This shows once more that it is almost impossible to calculate the results of an intervention by applying theoretical concepts alone. Interventions are dynamic processes which can produce different results in different cultural contexts. As Wilke states, there are different models of societies and each societal model, as it were, anticipates the possibilities and limitations of an intervention (ibid.).

The fact that processes of social change within societies are not following linear principles complicates further the discussion about appropriate methods of monitoring and planning conflict transformation and therefore also processes of social change. This raises serious problems for developing theoretical and generalising categories of change and related impact hypotheses. It is an important step in the right direction when Mitchell stresses at the end of his analysis that answers to the questions he raised can be found only in empiricism. It is, however, clearly not enough to answer the questions raised by referring to empirical experiences. As demonstrated before, it is crucial that even the questions are developed with regard to practice. Radically, each classification of what an obstacle to change is, and each category of what might promote the transformation of an ethnopolitical conflict, must be clarified and created by means of a joint conflict analysis with all relevant stakeholders in the conflict region.

6. References

- Aspinall, Edward 2005. *Aceh/Indonesia. Conflict Analysis and Options for Systemic Conflict Transformation*. Berlin: Berghof Foundation for Peace Support (BFPS). Online at [http://www.berghof-peacesupport.org/publications/Aceh_final version.pdf](http://www.berghof-peacesupport.org/publications/Aceh_final%20version.pdf).
- Foucault, Michel 1981. *Archäologie des Wissens*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Ropers, Norbert 1997. *Roles and Functions of Third Parties in the Constructive Management of Ethnopolitical Conflicts*. (Berghof Occasional Paper No. 14.) Berlin: Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management. Online at <http://www.berghof-center.org/uploads/download/boc14e.pdf>.
- Wilke, Helmut 1999. *Interventionstheorie*. 3rd Edition. Stuttgart: UTB.
- Wils, Oliver, Ulrike Hopp, Norbert Ropers, Luxshi Vimalarajah, and Wolfram Zunzer 2006. *Systemische Konflikttransformation – Konzept und Anwendungsgebiete*. Berlin: Berghof Foundation for Peace Support (BFPS). Online at: [http://www.berghof-peacesupport.org/publications/Systemische Konflikttransformation.pdf](http://www.berghof-peacesupport.org/publications/Systemische%20Konflikttransformation.pdf).
- Sprenger, Dirk 2005. *The Training Process: Achieving Social Impact by Training Individuals?* Berlin: Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management/ Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation (online). http://www.berghof-handbook.net/uploads/download/sprenger_handbook.pdf.

The Author

Daniela Körppen is researcher with the Berghof Foundation for Peace Support. She holds an MA in Sociology and Latin American Studies (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe University, Frankfurt/ Main) and an MA in Peace and Conflict Research (Otto von Guericke University, Magdeburg). She has several years of work experience as a journalist, and is currently preparing her PhD on systemic conflict transformation.

See also...

This article has been published as part of the Berghof Handbook *Dialogue No. 5 on Social Change and Conflict Transformation*. Hardcopies of the complete version, including the following articles, can be ordered at the Berghof Research Center (order@berghof-center.org):

- Beatrix Schmelzle and David Bloomfield, *Introduction: Approaching Social Change*
- Christopher R. Mitchell, *Conflict, Social Change and Conflict Resolution. An Enquiry*
- Ed Garcia, *Addressing Social Change in Situations of Violent Conflict: A Practitioner's Perspective*
- Chris Spies, *Revolutionary Change: The Art of Awakening Dormant Faculties in Others*
- Ilana Shapiro, *Extending the Framework of Inquiry: Theories of Change in Conflict Interventions*
- Vivienne Jabri, *Revisiting Change and Conflict: On Underlying Assumptions and the Depoliticisation of Conflict Resolution*
- Daniela Körppen, *The Circularity of Conflict Dynamics. A Critical Review*

Downloads of all articles are available for free on our website (www.berghof-handbook.net).