

The Dimension of Culture in Violent Conflict

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In his piece 'The moral imagination' John Paul Lederach expounds on a long neglected space in current efforts of transforming violent conflicts into motors of peaceful social change. He is at pains to change the ways in which people and societies respond to challenges through features of human nature that are normally not considered as integral or necessary parts of conflict transformation initiatives. Lederach makes a point in involving the artistic, cultural and creative dimension of human beings. He holds that human imagination and our ability to create, that serendipity and allowing moments of epiphany and chance discoveries to occur can play a major role in getting traction and finding sustainable solutions to seemingly intractable internal and international conflicts. But how can we translate this call for more imagination into practical terms of conflict transformation? What does it mean to embark on culture for these purposes?

Putting culture in context

On everyday basis we face the challenge of acting in a complex and chaotic world with its myriads of events, actions, phenomena, causalities and underlying interdependences. Amongst other tools and factors, culture supports individuals in providing bearings in the world by reducing contingency and complexity. These tools are assumptions, norms, values and practices. For the sake of interaction, however, we proceed from this basic foundation of sharing the same values, norms and, thus, framing expectations towards the others.

In this sense, culture is a guiding framework that is normatively charged. Through it we tacitly know or rather feel what is good, beautiful or the right thing to do. This includes, in turn, that we also tacitly know or feel what is bad, ugly or the wrong thing to do. It is a normative framework that is deeply internalised and given as a shared instructing system.

Culture in this notion denotes a specific human mode of life, which is inextricably intertwined with a (moral) evaluation. To a certain point, it portrays a desirable lifestyle that is intended to be valid for all members. There is no space for the plural – cultures - but instead it is predominantly used in its singular form simulating a joint agreement to doxa. Its normative basis and symbolic violence or power is most of the time denied. It taps our internalised shared understanding of how the world should look like and how not in order to 'naturally' impose norms and values on all members – thus creating boundaries, distinctions and also a 'We' that is in the possession of the 'right' way (of life). Culture in this notion is an ultimate argument, monolithic and excluding.

Since Huntington's thesis about the clash of civilisations we can detect a mounting resort to cultural aspects. It is a prominent example of social sciences embarking on the unchangeable nature of culture that ultimately is destined to steer individuals within its orbit towards a battle of good against evil. Sarazin in Germany stirred up a similar debate. He argues that Germany has an integration problem due to cultural differences. Turkish and Arab immigrants are, according to him, culturally unwilling to integrate. His stances on integration revealed a culture of misunderstanding, upheaved a deep,

underlying assertion of the unteachable, immutable immigrant. Sarazin thus reduced social, political and economic problems and shortcomings to cultural differences.

Traces and notions of simplification, reductionism and 'culturalism' can be found in numerous other explanations of cultural and social phenomena which contributed to the fact that culture fell out of favour in social sciences and conflict theories. It cannot be emphasised strongly enough that we reject culturalism but that we render culture as just one dimension of social reality that is, notwithstanding, worthwhile in its own right. When reflecting on culture one needs to put it in relation to the social structure manifested in the society as well as the individual agency.

In this way, social reality can be seen in form of a triangle. At one pole one can put structures, institutionalised relations within and between societies, enabling actors to operate, but also tend to influence the behaviour of those actors; this is the realm of the 'outside' world. At the second pole, one can put culture as deeply internalised meanings – the shared world of societies and collectivities and their shared patterns of assumptions, attitudes and meanings, including the collective psychology of groups; this is the shared 'inner' world. The third point is human (inter)action, dealing primarily with the actors, individuals and groups, which act out conflicts in the social world, endowed by a level of agency, and therefore also the behaviour of those; here the inner and the outer world meet, shaping and influencing the behaviour of the actors, whether of individuals or groups.

The 'missing link'

We claim that it is paramount to understand that culture is just one dimension of social reality. Culture informs, frames and structures individual behaviour. Yet, this perspective does not give justice to individuals and social structure. People are not just 'cultural dopes'. They have the potential to be creative - apart from socio-cultural impacts. Social interaction is creative and transformative at times. Social structure is culturally laden, which gives us an impression how modes of domination are signified and symbolised. This falls short, however, on a more structural account of how power or domination is typically established (in terms of possession or exclusion). Therefore, it is pivotal to take into account the dimension of society, of social structure – especially when engaging in conflict transformation. To put it bluntly, it is counterproductive to gear initiatives towards cultural change without considering or addressing structural power asymmetries. Such a transformation would result in the "pacification" of groups without social justice.

In this relational (triangular) context culture has much to offer. It bears insightful potential that should not be conflated with 'culturalism'. Our understanding of culture defines it as the totality of internalised norms and values, of knowledge and practices required for meaningful membership of groups and intersubjective actions. Thus culture can be the 'missing link' in conflict theory - the mediation between the adversaries of structure and agency. It is one dimension of social reality that enables us to understand the 'why' and 'how' of human conduct. Culture, in this notion, is an essential part of social practices, which are in fact always culturally dyed. Internalised shared meanings and practices impinge on our behaviour – they inspire and encourage certain forms of behaviour as much as they dishearten or discourage others. The tacit, bodily knowledge of this normative structure includes us into groups,

communities and makes us to members. They mark boundaries – geographically as much as emotionally. In this way, culture creates a ‘We’, a cultural, social identity that connects us to our community and its history. Culture enables the ‘lived’ internalisation of and identification with emotionally laden events in history – adopting it through shared symbols, rituals or other cultural tokens.

Destructive cultural dynamics

We rarely, in fact hardly ever, question the governing and guiding aspects of our culture; not to speak of assessing their destructive, malignant or even violent elements. It is for this quality of deep-rooted and predominantly unconscious nature of these sensuous guidelines that it is tapped or instrumentalised at times. They are the raw materials for the dynamics of escalation of conflict, polarisation and ultimately de-humanisation of the other, which are in turn exacerbated by populist and fundamentalist policies.

Especially in times of crisis, when a group is faced with a complex situation yet needs to maintain consensus in order to (re)act effectively, the cultural meanings are steered towards creating emotional social cohesion, which does not allow for pluralistic viewpoints. Rather polarisation sets in and mentalities of ‘Those who are not with us, are against us’. Cultural meanings are misused to create enemy images and to portray the other as non-human. De-humanisation is, in fact, a socio-cultural frame of perception that creates images of people, who we mourn about, and people, who cannot be mourned as their existence as human beings is denied in the first place. Individuals or parties dragged by personal and situational dynamics into a vicious cycle of violent conflict can advance to a point where violence is legitimised and directly centred on the human condition, shattering social ties and divesting individuals or groups of their humanness. This is, however, just one mode of moral exclusion. ‘Psychological distance’ (perceiving others as objects, as inexistent), ‘condescension’ (patronising others as inferior or irrational), and the like all hamper genuine human relations.

Culture as coping mechanism for trauma

Large-scale violence affects collectives as much as individuals. How comparable and similar this may sound, as different we have to imagine the effects. We cannot simply render ‘collective trauma’ to have the same properties as individual trauma. The individual trauma responds to forms of therapy. But we cannot put groups, communities or societies on the psychologist’s couch. Communities try to cope with collective traumas in a different way. Culture is in fact one of the coping mechanisms of groups for dealing with traumatic events.

Enduring violence demands for a narrative framing, a meaning schema. Individuals and societies need to make sense of it answering both the why and how to grapple with the on-going violence and its effects. In the course of it, groups and communities develop certain beliefs that enable coping with it and creating sense for senseless suffering. Meaninglessness is an existential fear – as opposed to basic human need – that generates a momentum towards a meaning schema that provides us with a framework for life conduct, with values. Values tell us not only *why* we live but also *how* to live.

In situations of protracted conflict the narrative of where one comes from, what one is doing in the present, and where one is heading, is damaged by the experience of large scale violence and collective trauma. This damaged narrative is passed on from one generation to the next through norms, values, symbols, myths, songs, poems, monuments, street names etc. The narrative of the victim is dyed by the longing for revenge and the narrative of the perpetrator is dyed by the addiction for victory and glory. The narratives are maintained by various actors, like media or collective agents, which take the narrative and modify it through a 'spiral of signification'. Thus, the coping mechanism for collective trauma in the past becomes the basis for legitimising violence in the present.

Culture as resource for conflict transformation

Culture can not only pose a considerable obstacle to efforts of conflict transformation, it also can be a vital resource. As such, societal beliefs, narratives and values are a helpful signpost for navigating in the respective cultural field.

What it needs then is to foster norms and values, which enable an environment or culture of responsiveness. To arrive at the shared understanding that the 'pathological' cultural adaptations need to be addressed and transformed. Change and transformation is not intended to be exclusively externally triggered or co-opted. It is the assertion that the local culture holds as much the obstacles as it does hold the remedies. It is therefore to jointly find, foster and corroborate peace promoting cultural resources that are able to surmount persistent obstacles such as de-humanisation.

One way of how conflict transformation can engage in the cultural field is to facilitate the re-framing, the re-negotiation of those perceptual frames. Re-humanisation, here, is the reversal of the destructive dynamics of conflict and violence on values and attitudes towards others. A pivotal affair of conflict transformation is therefore fostering a culture of re-humanisation and responsiveness. Besides this relational notion of re-framing and dismantling enemy images, re-humanisation also includes us in relation to our victimhood and perpetrator-ness. In violent conflicts, we can lose our inner link to humanness. Sexualised violence cuts deep into the social fabric, leaving stigmatised victims behind. Victims in general often find themselves ostracised, marginalised and excluded, fuelled by the loss of honour, reproduction values and fears of 'contamination'. Yet, also perpetrators, which are pervasive in protracted conflicts, lose some of their human nature in the haze of atrocities. Thus, they develop the psychological need to restore their self-image of a moral person. Feelings of guilt due to the breach of shared values and norms puts perpetrators outside of their cultural community. They may be excluded, marginalised or suppressed, too.

Having said this, it is paramount to integrate the backdrop of the ultimately different experiences of victims and perpetrators in violent conflicts. Whatever perpetrators may have gone through, it resulted from destructive actions and policies against the victims. As such, we repel premature efforts of perpetrator integration, which happens, when social structures remain untransformed and asymmetric power relations are still in place.

For that matter the importance of a culture of responsiveness gained topicality over the last decades as the bolstering or deteriorating effects of the political and socio-cultural environment for traumatised

victims were increasingly acknowledged. It is hold now that social and collective support helps the individual in coping with probably traumatogenic events. Scholars and practitioners of transitional justice highlight the positive impact of acknowledgment, reparations, truth commission and war tribunals in this context. Fostering a culture of responsiveness is, thus, a vital part of conflict transformation. As such, it includes the re-negotiation of enemy images, paving the way for a culture of responsiveness (acknowledging harm inflicted on victims) and the re-integration of victims and perpetrators into the moral community by dealing with the past.

Cultural activities and events can provide the reflective social space which is needed for transforming norms and values. An example is the establishment of the Cultural Resource Center in the Palestinian refugee camp Talbiyeh in Jordan supported by the Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

The Cultural Resource Center conducts art workshops, with subjects like photography, filming, animation, social media, and organises public lectures and video screenings. Through these art workshops the participating youth can not only express their creativity, but they also find a constructive way of challenging norms and values, petrified in the diaspora setting which do not fit into the present society. Through public installations the camp society is invited to start a public discussion about contemporary identity. By interviewing and filming in the camp the survivors of the Nakba (displacement of Palestinians that followed the Israeli Declaration of Independence 1948) the youth addressed the collective trauma. These historical archives might in the future become a source for healing the “damaged” Palestinian narrative. At the same time, engaging with contemporary Palestinian culture and art is reviving the cultural life in the camp, which had become a mere folkloristic feature.

The Cultural Resource Center thus caters to the transformation of norms, values and social practices (culture). However, it also addresses the transformation of institutionalised relationships (social structure). The Center is run by women, and for the first time girls and boys have been trained together.

The establishment of the Cultural Resource Center in Talbiyeh shows that development cooperation must not be restricted to supporting the fulfilment of tangible basic needs, but also intangible basic needs such as identity, and that socio cultural empowerment fosters creativity and thus supports what Lederach calls the “moral imagination”, this major piece in the sphere of conflict transformation.

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