
Book Review

The Study of Conflict Resolution: Is There Unity in Diversity?

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Louis Kriesberg, Terrell A. Northrup, and Stuart J. Thorson (editors). *Intractable Conflicts and Their Transformation* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1989). 249 pp.

Janice Gross Stein (editor). *Getting to the Table: The Processes of International Prenegotiation* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989). 273 pp.

Frances Mautner-Markhof (editor). *Processes of International Negotiations* (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1989). 541 pp.

If one were looking for evidence that the study of conflict resolution lacks coherence as a field, one would find plenty in the three books under review. All are symposium volumes, containing chapters written from diverse perspectives, asking different questions, employing different methodologies, and pointing to a wide variety of processes and variables that purportedly play a central role in conflict resolution.

Paradoxically, the three books also prove the opposite: that however disparate they may be, studies of conflict resolution are founded on a common

philosophical premise (distinct from an ethical premise) — that resolution of conflict through mutual agreement is usually more beneficial than the pursuit of unilateral gain through confrontation. The majority of authors also share a common optimism — that it is within our power to devise processes, reshape the context, redefine the issues, craft techniques and tactics, and invent solutions that can resolve conflicts to the advantage of all concerned. I shall return to these two themes — the common philosophical premise and the shared optimism — after commenting briefly on each book.

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Intractable Conflicts

Optimism is, of course, a relative term. *Intractable Conflicts*, as its name implies, is the least optimistic of the three. It deals with conflicts that are "obstinate." (One wonders: Are there conflicts that are impossible to resolve?) Introducing the book, Stuart J. Thorson suggests that not all conflicts can be resolved "by pointing out the existence of an efficient solution." The book explores "the contours of conflicts that cannot be characterized simply as inefficient" (p. 2) and discusses the deeper contextual factors that make many conflicts quite complex. The articles presented in this volume systematically examine the sources of intractability, its dynamics, and the transformations that can take place and render conflicts less, or more, susceptible to a solution.

The attempt to understand why some conflicts are intractable leads several of the contributors to grapple with the fundamental question of the nature of conflict. If some conflicts are not merely the manifestation of misunderstandings and misperceptions, what other elements go into the making of conflicts? This question is introduced in Stuart J. Thorson's chapter on the conceptual issues. In trying to provide answers, Fred M. Frohock examines the effect of different modes of reasoning, Susan Hunter the role of deep-seated beliefs, John Agnew the influence of "objective" material factors such as territory, and Terrell A. Northrup the impact of the need for one's identity to be asserted and recognized.

The dynamics of conflict and the possibilities for transformation of those dynamics are discussed from these diverse viewpoints. They are also examined with reference to different social domains and contexts. One context is the family — specifically, child

custody, in Anglo-American and in French practice (by Ruth L. Winn). Another context is that of disputes within a state — e.g., labor organizations, comparing the United States and Britain (by Jeffrey Haydu); environmental issues in the U.S. (two chapters, by Susan Hunter and by James F. Palmer and Richard C. Smardon); and the articulation of political issues through political parties in Germany (by John D. Nagle). A third level of analysis is that of disputes between societies: ethnic conflicts (John Agnew); the Middle East and Central Europe (Louis Kriesberg); and Arab-Jewish dialogue in the United States (Richard D. Schwartz).

The book concludes with a chapter (by Kriesberg) on research and policy implications of the study. One of Kriesberg's concluding observations, that the phenomenon of intractable conflicts suggests the need to pay more attention to prenegotiation (pp. 210-211), points to the link between *Intractable Conflicts* and *Getting to the Table*. I. William Zartman, in his introductory chapter to the latter book, agrees: "The core function of prenegotiation involves turning the problem into a manageable issue susceptible of a negotiated outcome" (p. 10).

Getting to the Table

Prenegotiation is the central topic of *Getting to the Table*, another symposium volume first published as a special issue of *International Journal* in 1989. Prenegotiation is defined as a phase in continuous interaction between parties. It begins "when one or more parties considers negotiation as a policy option and communicates this intention to other parties" and ends "when the parties agree on formal negotiations. . . or when one party abandons the consideration of negoti-

ation as an option" (p. 4). The phase is characterized by a shift in attitudes, when "the parties move from conflicting unilateral solutions for a mutual problem to a joint search for cooperative multilateral or joint solutions" (p. 4). In other words, it is characterized by a shift from regarding a problem with a "winning mentality" to a "conciliatory mentality" (p. 7).

In their discussion of prenegotiation, the authors direct their attention to several common questions: Why does the shift in attitudes occur? What does prenegotiation consist of? What are its functions? And what are its consequences? The book examines these questions through a combination of some abstract theorizing as well as case studies that serve as a basis for comparisons and further theorizing.

The theoretical agenda is set in an introductory chapter by I. William Zartman. Two case studies follow, examining the launching of negotiations on international trade: one by Brian W. Tomlin on the Canada-U.S. free trade agreement and the other by Gilbert R. Winham on the Uruguay Round. Three of the chapters discuss political-security matters: Franklyn Griffiths provides a historical perspective on Soviet attitudes to arms control negotiations from 1917 to the 1980s, Fen Osler Hampson examines American attitudes to arms control, and Janice Gross Stein discusses prenegotiation in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Combining both empirical data and theory, Ronald J. Fisher examines the contributions to prenegotiation of informal problem-solving consultation with third parties.

What, then, causes the shift from the unilateral pursuit of gains to a search for a joint solution? Janice Gross Stein synthesizes in the concluding chapter the answers given to this question by the contributors to the

volume. There seems to be wide agreement among the authors that the shift is often triggered by a crisis, by the perceived costs of the status quo, and by the prospect of increasing costs if existing policies continue. It is sometimes reinforced by the perception of opportunities if relationships can be transformed (261-262). In other words, the decision to enter into negotiation is associated with a better understanding of reality. Prenegotiation sets the stage for the negotiation proper by forming structures within which negotiation can take place. The structures define the boundaries of the issues to be discussed, identify the participants, set the agenda, and comprise a "formula" that helps to focus the bargaining process.

Processes of International Negotiations

Processes of International Negotiations is also a symposium volume, the product of a conference held in 1987 at the International Institute of Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) in Laxenburg, Austria. It contains 42 contributions, covering a wide range of topics related to international negotiation. Although the chapters are of uneven quality, the book contains a significant number of valuable scholarly contributions.

Let me start, however, with some of the weaknesses of the book. In contrast to the two previous volumes, this symposium lacks a clear focus. The absence of focus seems to reflect different understandings of the setting and the purposes of the conference that occasioned the book. For some, the conference appears to have been a diplomatic occasion.

This viewpoint may have stemmed from the fact that IIASA served as a forum for collaborative action between East and West during the Cold War.

Founded in 1972 by the academies of sciences and equivalent organizations of twelve countries, and located in neutral Austria, it listed among its goals the promotion of international cooperation in solving problems arising from social, economic, technological, and environmental change and providing advice to policy makers on such matters. This also explains why several of the contributions are exhortations about the need for research and the benefits of international collaboration.

Other subjects discussed in Mautner-Markhof's book include: the role of international organizations and multilateral mechanisms; cultural, psychological, and political factors in international negotiations; theoretical and methodological analyses; training for international negotiations; as well as studies of negotiations over international trade, development, and the environment.

The last contribution to the volume, appearing as an appendix, contains a remarkably deft summary, synthesizing the proceedings and papers and lending a semblance of coherence to the volume. However, one is still left with the impression that the range and variety of topics and approaches are too wide.

This is so despite attempts to introduce some unifying themes. One, stemming perhaps from the charter of the host institute, is the concept of system. This view is presented in the introduction by Frances Mautner-Markhof, where negotiations are described as "essential mechanisms for maintaining dynamic stability" of interdependent societies (p. 1). Several contributions are set in a systemic framework. But this is not enough to lend coherence to the volume. I. William Zartman's chapter, "In Search of Common Elements in the Analysis of the Negotiation Process,"

contains a strong argument that the study of negotiation, whatever the approach, methodology, or specific issue of analysis, has some common unifying themes. Perhaps the most important is what Zartman terms "the basic analytical question for all approaches. . . . How are negotiated outcomes explained?" (p. 242).

This is not a volume that many will read from cover to cover. It will serve better as a compendium of readings, to which one may turn in search of work on specific items and be richly rewarded.

A Coherent Field?

I said at the beginning of this review that the wide differences between the three volumes can be taken as evidence that the study of dispute resolution lacks coherence as a field. But paradoxically, these three books also support an opposite contention: that notwithstanding their different methodologies, empirical referents, and foci, the studies do reflect common underlying premises. These premises are that resolution of conflict through mutual agreement is usually more beneficial than the pursuit of unilateral gain through confrontation and that it is within our power to devise processes, to reshape the context, redefine the issues, craft techniques and tactics, and invent solutions that can resolve conflicts to the advantage of all concerned.

The three books also indicate that these ideas have wide appeal not only across different academic disciplines, but also across different nationalities and occupations — encompassing not only academics, but also public officials, as well as people in business and the professions.

The first book reviewed in this essay asserts this philosophical premise in its very title: *Intractable Conflicts and*

Their Transformation. Its subject is conflicts that are "obstinate" because they are difficult to resolve. Its implied assumption is that conflicts ought to be resolved. The book seeks to explain why certain conflicts defy resolution and how they might be transformed to lend themselves to resolution.

Lest we assume that all people share this ethical or philosophical predilection, it is worth remembering that an alternative ethic or philosophy may inspire studies on how to promote a cause or make a particular view of justice prevail over other views or values. Research into the sources of intractability, and the dynamics that make conflicts more or less intractable, implies that finding out more about intractable conflicts will help policymakers to devise appropriate policies to resolve even relatively obstinate conflicts.

The book does not stop at analysis. Its concluding chapter, by Louis Kriesberg, examines not only directions for further research, but also policy implications that emerge from the study. The policy goal is assumed to be "inhibiting the emergence of intractable conflicts and fostering their transformation into tractable ones" (p. 210).

To be sure, Kriesberg acknowledges that this goal may not be shared by a particular actor in a conflict (pp. 210, 218). But it is the goal of the contributors to the book. This is where the optimism of the book manifests itself: wisdom and skill can make a difference; it can help prevent a conflict from becoming intractable, and it can help make an intractable conflict more amenable to resolution.

Getting to the Table is inspired by the same philosophical premises. The explanation of why parties move from the unilateral pursuit of their goals to a joint and agreed solution boils down to a comparison of costs and benefits

of alternative policies. The process of prenegotiation enables the parties to assess these costs and benefits. That negotiation and joint problem solving is preferable to the unilateral pursuit of goals is also implied in the use of the term "learning." The term does not describe how an actor might utilize new knowledge to improve its ability to attain goals unilaterally. Rather, learning describes how better knowledge helps actors to enter into negotiation and overcome obstacles to cooperation.

The contributions to *Processes of International Negotiations* reflect the same philosophy. It is not surprising that the benefits of cooperation are emphasized in the programmatic chapters. The more interesting arguments for cooperative solutions to international problems are contained in some of the theoretical and methodological chapters that discuss the merits of alternative policies and strategies from the perspectives of politics, institutions, game theory, cognitive theory, and other approaches.

This normative disposition — shared not only by the three books under review, but by most studies of conflict resolution and negotiation — might be attributed to the authors' moral or ethical commitment to peace. It is indeed likely that students of conflict resolution and negotiation are inspired by such a commitment. But these books and most other studies of conflict resolution and negotiation are not discourses in morality. The vocabulary they employ is not spiritual, but materialistic, often borrowed from economics. Beyond the common ethics, this scholarship seems to share common philosophical premises.

I cannot present a comprehensive and systematic account of these premises but shall merely describe two of their components. An important

element of this common philosophy is a perspective that focuses on the collective benefit of all the participants in the process, rather than on the good of a particular actor. The preferred solution to a dispute is "win-win" rather than "win-lose." The search is for an "efficient" outcome, which also maximizes the gains for all participants.

This view is in sharp contrast both to Marxism and classical economic liberalism. The Marxists' dialectical interpretation of history regards conflict as the engine of social and political progress. Classic economic liberalism views competition as promoting economic efficiency. Studies of conflict resolution and negotiation, on the other hand, assume that conflict wastes away social resources and that efficient utilization of resources, benefiting everyone, requires harmony and cooperation.

If the central question of negotiation studies is how to explain outcomes, the implied question is how can the outcome be improved? Better knowledge can lead to better policies and higher gains. This is what I meant by saying that the philosophical

premises are optimistic. They do not allow for fatalism or for resignation; neither do they allow for a deterministic view of history. On the contrary: they assume that possibilities for change are wide open. Change for the better depends on learning, on drawing the right lessons from experience on how to minimize costs and maximize benefits. Individuals and groups can resolve conflicts and facilitate harmony and well being by acquiring knowledge and by improving their communication skills.

These are merely two of the philosophical premises shared by the three books, and by most studies of conflict resolution and negotiation. They probably did not develop in isolation, but appear to be related to other social sciences. Scholarship would benefit if the premises underlying studies of conflict resolution and negotiation were further explored. An elaboration and explicit formulation of these premises would facilitate building better bridges to social theory and other social sciences and would, thus, contribute to the further development of the field.