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Dialogue in
polarised
societies

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INTRODUCTION

Dialogue in polarised societies

ICIP

International Catalan Institute for Peace

After the 11 September 2001 attacks, the then US President George Bush warned: “Every nation in every region now has a decision to make: Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists.” That speech laid the basis for a Global War on Terror which, hundreds of thousands of deaths later, has been shown to be disastrous. This example illustrates an extreme consequences of the dynamics of polarisation, a phenomenon that is not new but that has returned to the public arena, because it has become so widespread in different countries.

In polarisation processes, the polarising actors lay down absolute truths and refuse to allow space for doubts and for alternative visions. Complex realities are simplified and reduced to confrontations between fixed positions, in identity-based dynamics of “us against them.” When a political issue enters into a dynamic of polarisation the possibilities of a constructive debate are reduced and the quality of democracy is diminished.

Catalonia and Spain —immersed in a very complex political conflict— do not escape this dynamic. Like any conflict of this nature, the very attempt to define it leads to a clash between opposed interpretations. The only point on which there seems to be agreement is in considering the situation to be one of the most serious challenges since the transition.

The conflict is old, historic. The novelty is a massive civic mobilisation in favour of independence and this giving rise to parliamentary majorities in Catalonia committed to this aim. Within the social sectors opposed to independence, some of the people perceive this unprecedented situation as an undesirable but understandable

development, while others see it as inconceivable and offensive.

“ When a political issue enters into a dynamic of polarisation the possibilities of a constructive debate are reduced and the quality of democracy is diminished ”

Regardless of the analyses of the causes of this situation, one of the consequences has been a sharp polarisation between supporters and detractors of the independence of Catalonia. This is a social and political polarisation strongly based on knee-jerk reactions, where extreme positions proliferate, interest in understanding the opposing viewpoint disappears, language takes on warlike terminology (positions, trenches, attack, treason) and self-criticism disappears. Even concepts themselves have become weapons in the confrontation, so the use of terms like violence, democracy or social fragmentation carries political connotations that vary depending on who is speaking, and which hinder mutual comprehension.

All of this has brought us to a time of enormous confusion, with a political conflict that will be difficult to resolve and the risk that perceptions and conflicting views become set in stone. Where we are used to offering solidarity to initiatives for dialogue and reconciliation in other parts of the world, we now face the challenge of doing that in our own society.

This special edition of the magazine *Peace in Progress* aims to contribute to this objective. We want to offer concepts and practices that can help us identify openings where now we can only see obstacles. And we want to do that by sharing reflections from people who have faced up to similar challenges in other contexts.

After a glossary of concepts written by the ICIP director, Kristian Herbolzheimer, in the main body of the publication you will find a description by the researcher Jennifer McCoy of the dynamics and dangers of polarisation, based on a comparative analysis of

various countries. Following that, the Professor in Constitutional Law Christine Bell reflects on how other conflicts concerning independence have ended. Irish activist Avila Kilmurray contributes her experience of promoting dialogue in highly divided societies, while Iñigo Retolaza and the Bakeola mediation group describe a couple of initiatives to promote dialogue and coexistence in the Basque Country. The section closes with an article by Helena Puig that explains how social networks can become tools for depolarisation.

These seven initial articles are accompanied by brief interviews with four experts in conflict and dialogue. Tom Woodhouse (United Kingdom), María Jimena Duzán (Colombia), Mariano Aguirre (Spain-Argentina) and Paul Ríos (Basque Country) give us their views of the Catalan conflict, in each case from a certain distance and with different perspectives.

The final section of the publication gives references to books, web pages and documentaries related to dialogue and the analysis of polarisation.

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Concepts for navigating a sea of uncertainties

Kristian Herbolzheimer

Director of the ICIP

All conflicts are unique and, therefore, difficult to compare. However, conflicts also follow certain dynamics that have been well studied. After all, the questions are usually similar: How can the conflict be resolved? Who can resolve it? How long will it take to resolve?

This article reflects on some of the concepts that can offer guidelines to lead us through the complexity of conflicts¹. Inevitably, the interpretation of concepts involves the author's subjective viewpoint and can therefore be called into question or need complementing. Meanings can also be different depending on the geographical and cultural context from which they are read. In any case, we hope to contribute to the effort of finding solutions to high intensity political confrontations.

Conflict. Clash of ideas or interests between two or more people or groups. Conflicts are social phenomena, and inherent to human nature; in other words, they are natural, inevitable, and even necessary. When they are managed in a constructive manner they allow for social development. The problem arises when those involved do not know how to manage them: the conflicts then become entrenched and can lead to a prolonged or violent confrontation.

Positive conflict management requires the acknowledgement of the conflict's existence and of the legitimacy of the disputing parties.

Polarisation. Conflicts polarise opinions, in the sense that people or groups in conflict position themselves at opposite extremes. This becomes a problem when dynamics arise that reduce complex conflicts to binary views of "good and bad"; that fuel the

conflict, “us against them”; and that construct absolute truths that are suspicious of or exclude other viewpoints.

Coexistence. Since people are different by nature, we need to equip ourselves with tools that let us live together while respecting these differences. These tools are normative – laws and institutions to settle differences – but also cultural. Both norms and cultures are constantly evolving, precisely in response to the conflicts inherent in society. One of the most recurrent challenges for coexistence is the ability to understand how what we do and say can affect people with perceptions that are very different from ours (putting ourselves in the shoes of others).

Parties to the conflict. It is usually easy to identify the people, organisations or institutions in conflict, but most conflicts have multiple dimensions that are not always obvious. The parties to the conflict themselves often end up experiencing internal conflicts in relation to difficult decisions.

Conflict analysis. Systematic study of the causes and actors in the conflict, as well as the factors that may influence its resolution. There are multiple tools of analysis. One of the most important exercises is to differentiate between the “positions” of the opposing parties in public debate (what they say) and their “interests” or “needs” (which is what explains their positions). This exercise makes it possible to identify the incentives that could reduce the distance between opposed positions.

Conflict resolution. Initiatives to transform the dynamics (political, social, economic, cultural, etc.) of destructive or violent conflict. This is often also referred to as conflict *transformation*, which means that the destructive dynamics of conflicts can be prevented or transformed into constructive dynamics. Conflict resolution requires the will and ability of the parties to the conflict, and may require the support of third parties.

“ There are no easy solutions for resolving complex conflicts. The obvious option for one

party is usually unacceptable to the other one ”

Win-win. A successful transformation of the conflict will allow all the parties involved to feel they have won something. This is only possible if the parties are willing to modify their initial positions.

Red lines. Conditions that are considered non-negotiable. However, many negotiation processes require the parties to end up by modifying their initial red lines.

Dialogue. The most basic way of dealing with conflicts in a constructive manner. Dialogue is a process of communication based on the value of personal relationships and trust, which requires a willingness to change opinions as a result of actively listening to the other parties.

Negotiation. Dialogue with the aim of reaching an agreement. It is a way of obtaining concessions. Good personal relationships are important, but not essential. The negotiators need to have a mandate and the power to sign an agreement. In politics, formal (visible) negotiations are usually preceded by preliminary (discreet) negotiations that make it possible to evaluate the real willingness of the other party to reach an agreement, and to determine the agenda, actors and formats of the negotiation.

Democratic institutions are the usual scenario of political negotiations. But when the usual mechanisms can't prevent the stagnation or worsening of a conflict, it becomes necessary to establish extraordinary negotiation processes.

Complex conflicts need a **negotiation infrastructure**: a wide array of actors who play different but complementary roles. These actors often work behind the scenes, aware that their actions may be publicly disowned if they are not successful. Tasks include:

- Suggesting innovative ideas and proposals.
- Exploring the interest of the parties in these types of ideas and proposals.
- Looking for external backup (technical, political) to assist in the negotiations.
- Training the opposing parties in negotiation processes.
- Generating synergies among actors that may have influence over the opposing

parties.

- Offering political and economic endorsements for difficult decisions.

Mediation. Negotiation with the intervention of an external actor who directs and aids communication.

Facilitation. A process that is less formal than mediation, helping the parties reach an agreement or, at least, to improve mutual trust. Many external actors prefer to play the role of facilitator rather than mediator in order to leave the leading role to the negotiating parties.

The opposing parties request mediation or facilitation when they are unable to reach an agreement on their own. There can only be mediation or facilitation with the approval of all the negotiating parties. Agreeing to the necessity (and the identity) of mediation or facilitation may require a negotiation process of its own. It is common for the party defending the status quo to prefer direct negotiation, while the party pushing for political change seeks external support as a way of gaining recognition and legitimacy, and thus compensating for the asymmetry of power.

Other typical functions of third parties are **good offices** (offering advice and support), acting as a **witness** (observing the negotiations without intervening), **host** (when it is agreed to negotiate on someone else's terrain) or **guarantor** (offering guarantees – generally political – for the carrying out of the negotiations).

Neutrality and impartiality. Normally it is assumed that the person or entity that mediates or facilitates a negotiation must be *neutral*. In practice neutrality does not exist: everyone has their own opinions that can coincide to a greater or lesser extent with those of the actors in the conflict. However facilitation and mediation may demand *impartiality*, that is, an attitude that prioritises the dynamics of the negotiation process without influencing the outcome. Increasing recognition is being given to the value of “inside mediators”: people who have a clear ideological orientation but are still acknowledged by all the parties involved as being capable of prioritising the reaching of an agreement over the defence of their own preferences.

Agents of change. One of the key questions in politics is how social and political changes occur. The answers are usually quantitative: through electoral or parliamentary majorities, in institutional processes; or through a *critical mass* of people mobilised in the street. However, when dealing with polarising dynamics, which reduce the space for differences, the researcher John Paul Lederach states that “we need surprises, surprising people, willing to get together with unexpected individuals”. A *critical yeast* is needed, the smallest ingredient in bread baking which, if well mixed in, can make the dough rise. This metaphor is an invitation to people and organisations to be creative and put forward innovative proposals, with unexpected alliances.

“ There are no short-term solutions for the conflict in Catalonia. As a society we have to learn to live in conflict, without harming each other ”

In short, conflicts are basically resolved in two ways: with the victory of one party and the defeat of the other; or with some type of agreement between the opposing parties. The natural tendency is to want to win, but victories are often ephemeral because no one is willing to accept defeat. In this sense, dialogue and negotiations usually provide more stable results. However, incentives, willingness and skill are needed for dialogue and negotiation to take place. In the absence of incentives, willingness and skill, conflicts can become entrenched. And the more entrenched they become, the more difficult they are to resolve.

In the specific case of the political and social conflict in Catalonia, perhaps there has not been enough reflection from the viewpoint of resolution. We are in a phase of political confrontation where the actors can't even agree on the nature of the conflict, let alone how to deal with it. Everyone has many reasons to contradict – and delegitimise – the other. But it is hard to imagine that any of the options will accept defeat. So, sooner or later, a process will be needed that allows the search for a solution based on the premise that all the proposals are valid and worthy of respect.

For now the political conflict remains deeply entrenched. We need a paradigm shift: a *critical* yeast that can mobilise a *critical* mass that supports creative initiatives so that what now seems unthinkable becomes possible. There are no short-term solutions. As a society we have to learn to live in conflict, without harming each other. To navigate this sea of uncertainties, I propose that we treat each other on the basis of CARES: **C**uriosity for different opinions, **A**nd **R**espect for all the people regardless their opinion, and **S**elf-criticism, because nobody has absolute truths.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kristian Herbolzheimer is an analyst of peace processes and expert in the role of civil society during transitions, especially in the Colombia and Basque Country cases. He has been observer and he has also participated in the peace processes of Philippines (2009-2014). After being the Director of the Transitions to Peace Programme of the international NGO Conciliation Resources, in September 2018 he became the Director of ICIP (International Catalan Institute for Peace).

1. The definitions that appear in this article are mainly based on the following references: [*Berghof glossary on conflict transformation*](#) and [*USIP Peace Terms*](#)

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Polarization harms democracy and society

Jennifer McCoy

Professor of Political Science, Georgia State University, Atlanta

Severe polarization makes democracy vulnerable. In healthy democracies, opposing sides are seen as political adversaries to compete against and at times to negotiate with. In deeply polarized democracies, the other side comes to be seen as an enemy needing to be vanquished.

A collaborative research project I led¹ on polarized democracies around the world examines the processes by which societies divide into political “tribes” and democracy is harmed. Based on a study of eleven countries including the U.S., Turkey, Hungary, Venezuela, Thailand and others, we found that when political leaders cast their opponents as immoral or corrupt, they create “us” and “them” camps –called by political scientists and psychologists “in-groups” and “out-groups” in the society.

In this tribal dynamic, each side views the other “out group” party with increasing distrust, bias and enmity. Perceptions that “If you win, I lose” grow. Each side views the other political party and their supporters as a threat to the nation or their way of life if that other political party is in power. For that reason, the incumbent’s followers tolerate more illiberal and increasingly authoritarian behavior to stay in power, while the opponents are more and more willing to resort to undemocratic means to remove them from power. This damages democracy.

Drivers of polarization

Our research finds that severe polarization is affected by three primary factors²:

1. Politicians Divide

First, it is often stimulated by the rhetoric of political leaders who exploit the real grievances of voters. These politicians choose divisive issues to highlight in order to pursue their own political agenda. They might exploit real grievances and anxieties about unemployment or crime, or they may even manufacture a threat, such as Donald Trump calling Central American refugees an “invading army”.

In extreme polarization, people feel distant from and suspicious of the “other” camp. At the same time, they feel loyal to, and trusting of, their own camp – without examining their biases or factual basis of their information. Thus they are susceptible to the rhetoric of political leaders aiming to generate votes based on fear of the “other”. Although this is a common phenomenon long identified by social psychology, it is even more pronounced in the age of social media 24-hour news cycles and more politicized media outlets who repeat and amplify the political attacks.

“ In extreme polarization, people feel distant from and suspicious of the “other” camp. They feel loyal to, and trusting of, their own camp –without examining their biases or factual basis of their information ”

2. Oppositions React

Polarization, though, is a two-way street. How the political opposition reacts is the second factor explaining the impact of polarization on democracy. If the opposition returns the bitter rhetoric and winner-take-all tactics with similar political hardball and demonizing language, they risk locking in place a cycle that leads to entrenching the politics of polarization.

On the other hand, if they mobilize voters around a positive democratizing message and resist tit-for-tat strategies, they can begin to depolarize.

3. Polarizing Rifts

The third, and most difficult, obstacle is what our research found about the underlying basis of polarization. When countries polarize around rifts³ that reflect unresolved debates present at the country's formation, then that polarization is most likely to be enduring and harmful.

These rifts are often around concepts of national identity and citizenship rights. This type of polarization is particularly pernicious because it revolves around debates over who is a legitimate citizen and who can legitimately represent them. For example, the U.S. was founded on unequal citizenship rights for African-Americans, Native Americans and women. As these groups reasserted their rights in the 1960s civil rights movement and the 1970s women's movement, polarization around these rights and changing group status grew.

In Spain and Canada, unresolved rifts around regional identity and autonomy have periodically erupted into national conflict, most recently seen in the debate over Catalan independence versus Spanish unity in the 2019 election.

The Dangerous Logic of Polarization

1. Polarization rewards extreme positions and weakens centrist moderates

Polarizing leaders and parties need enemies to establish a dividing line between "Us" and "Them." They stoke fear of these enemies to keep winning elections. The enemies can be external (immigrants in Hungary, foreign imperialists in Venezuela) or internal (Kurdish terrorists in Turkey, the media in the U.S., and anyone who does not agree with the leader). The extremists on either side of the divide then label moderates willing to compromise as "traitors colluding with the enemy" or "sell-outs." In this way, the center disappears and radical positions dominate, resulting in political gridlock or even violent conflict.

2. Polarization affects individual perceptions and is hard to reverse once in place

Once a polarized way of thinking seeps in and voters feel deeply divided psychologically and spatially, it is very hard to reverse. Research⁴ on motivated reasoning helps us

understand this problem. Emotions and unconscious desires and fears⁵ influence the way we interpret information, especially if we feel threatened. Voters are motivated to eliminate cognitive dissonance by rejecting facts that challenge their worldviews or self-concepts. Polarizing leaders learn that exploiting supporters' fears and anxieties will win elections –and encourage that motivated reasoning.

As a result, when the Venezuelan government spins conspiracy theories to explain the nation's dire problems, its hard-core supporters apparently believe them without question. Similarly, Trump's birther movement resisted factual information about President Obama's birthplace.

“ Once a polarized way of thinking seeps in and voters feel deeply divided psychologically and spatially, it is very hard to reverse ”

3. Tit-for-tat tactics deepen polarization and often backfire.

An obstructionist strategy deepens polarization and can endanger democracy. Treating politics as a tit-for-tat game may result in being pushed off the field of play. For instance, in Venezuela, the political opposition refused to negotiate⁶ with President Chávez, and instead tried for three years to oust him from the presidency through both constitutional and unconstitutional methods. When that failed, they boycotted a legislative election –and forfeited control of the Congress entirely to Chávez's party, giving it the power to make Supreme Court and Electoral Council appointments for the next decade.

Backing away from polarization

It is possible to sidestep polarization or even depolarize without either allowing undemocratic behavior or running away from a fight over principles and issues. To avoid deepening the state of division and distrust that seems to pervade our societies, both political leaders and citizens must play a part. Simply withdrawing from politics is

not effective.

Citizens can protect themselves and their democracy by being aware of the political and psychological workings of polarization and the early warning signs of democratic erosion. They can refuse to participate in the trap of demonizing politics, while insisting on voting massively against those who use polarizing methods. Political leaders should be conscious that their words and actions can advance, prevent or reverse severe polarization.

For those who prioritize winning for their team above all, the realization that they will eventually be the losers of their re-engineered rules should be sobering. For those who have a broader perspective focused on the collective interests and welfare of the society, understanding the logic of polarization that blocks cooperative problem-solving could instill the courage to cross the divide rather than reciprocate pernicious polarizing strategies.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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*Parts of this article appeared previously in:

The Washington Post:

“Before going nuclear, Republicans and Democrats might consider these four lessons from polarized democracies”

The conversation: “Extreme political polarization weakens democracy – can the US avoid that fate?”

1. See the article “Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities”, by Jennifer McCoy, Tahmina Rahman and Murat Somer, March 20, 2018.

2. See the article “Toward a Theory of Pernicious Polarization and How It Harms Democracies: Comparative Evidence and Possible Remedies”. Forthcoming in a Special

Issue of the Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences, guest editors Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer, January 2019.

3. See the article “Transformations through Polarizations and Global Threats to Democracy”. Forthcoming in a Special Issue of the Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences, guest editors Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer, January 2019.

4. See “The roles of information deficits and identity threat in the prevalence of misperceptions”, by Brendan Nyhan, Dartmouth College and Jason Reifler. December 21, 2017.

5. See the article “Why you think you’re right, even when you’re wrong”, by Julia Galef, March 2017.

6. Jennifer McCoy, Francisco Diez International Mediation in Venezuela, USIP Press, 2011.

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Radical disagreement and self-determination disputes

Christine Bell

Professor of Constitutional Law, University of Edinburgh

Self-determination disputes often involve a portion of the country where an ethno-national minority seeks secession of the territory in which they are concentrated, from the central state. Secession is usually fiercely resisted by the central state and by supporters of the 'unity' of the country. Beneath self-determination claims lies a feeling that the central state does not serve the interests of all its parts and peoples equally in good faith on one hand; and on the other, a concern that minority groups are not really loyal to the state and seek its complete destruction and disintegration. In other words, beneath self-determination disputes lies radical disagreement over the legitimacy of the state, its nature, who it belongs to, its commitment to equality, and whether the state is capable of reforming to include all groups equally.

Disagreement is typically most radical within the would-be secessionist region, because people living there have more at stake than elsewhere in the country. No region is homogenous, and so while some of the population will strongly seek secession as a way of protecting their rights, those who risk becoming a minority in any new state (who may be in a majority in the existing state as a whole), may fear that any new state will deny their rights. The disagreement is sometimes presented as one group saying to another 'why should I be a minority in your state, when you can be a minority in mine'?

Self-determination disputes are difficult to resolve because there is no way to reconcile a desire for secession with a desire to preserve the state's unity. This is why the disagreement is 'radical': there is no way to 'square the circle'. Or is there? If we look beneath each party's position relating to statehood, can the underlying interests motivating those positions be accommodated?

“ Self-determination disputes are difficult to resolve because there is no way to reconcile a desire for secession with a desire to preserve the state’s unity ”

Theoretically, it would seem that someone should not mind being a minority in another person’s state, if their identity and political aspirations are irrelevant to how they are treated? Indeed, if we look back in time, many self-determination disputes begin more about equality than secession. In Northern Ireland, although aspirations for United Ireland had been present from the 1920 partition, the phase of the conflict that began in the late 1960s and ended with the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement was preceded by civil rights campaigns against high levels of multiple forms of discrimination against the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland. It was only as these protests were shut down violently or progress was slow, that the more structural violence settled in framed around whether Northern Ireland would remain with the UK, or move to be part of a United Ireland. Similarly, in Sri Lanka, the LTTE conflict over secession only built slowly as Singalese nationalist politicians stripped out the Tamil minority rights protections of the post-independence political settlement, and put in place a majority-oriented constitution based on a Singhalese national vision.

How then do people resolve these self-determination claims in the most contested and conflict-riven situations? Four inter-related elements are often key.

Increased decentralisation. To resolve violent conflict, states often have to reconcile their concept of ‘unity’ with a large level of de-centralisation, and deliver a strong form of self-government to the country. In Scotland, the rise of Scottish Nationalism was met repeatedly with devolution of power; in Spain, autonomy was a key response to the Basque conflict, but then had a broader appeal. In Sri Lanka, agreement has never been fully reached, but all serious proposals to address the conflict with the Tamils have involved devolution of power to the North and the East. In Bougainville, Papua New Guinea, a secessionist dispute was addressed by creating a strong form of autonomy.

There are countless more examples. Decentralisation attempts to square the secessionist-unity circle by delivering the self-government while preserving the formal unity and sovereignty of the state. Unionists often argue that decentralisation is part of the problem, rather than the solution. However, often it is only decentralisation which can provide sufficient political accommodation to stabilise the state as unitary.

“ Creating a plurinational state requires creative language which recognises that the claim of national minorities is not just to equality within the state, but to a different state and concept of the ‘national’ entirely ”

A new pluri-national vision. States often have to go further and meet the symbolic claim to statehood of ethno-national minorities with a promise of a more ‘plurinational’ vision of the state which does not accommodate only one national identity, but several. Re-creating the state as pluri-national involves re-working the political settlement at its heart to be more inclusive of national minorities. It involves having political and legal institutions which are committed to honouring this vision of the state. Creating a plurinational state requires creative language which recognises that the claim of national minorities is not just to equality within the state, but to a different state and concept of the ‘national’ entirely. In Scotland, following the 2014 referendum, the devolution framework was revised to affirm the ‘sovereignty’ of the Scottish Parliament; while the Spanish post transition constitution talked in Section 2, of the unity of the country, but also of the recognition of regions and nationalities. In Northern Ireland, where there had been violent conflict, the Belfast Agreement affirmed aspiration to United Ireland and Union within the UK as ‘equally legitimate’, and created a form of bi-nationalism in rights to be Irish or British or both.

Radical group and individual equality. To settle self-determination disputes states often provide a more radical equality and take claims of discrimination and domination

more seriously. So instead of just 'equality within the law', often measures are introduced which provide for stronger affirmation of group rights to political participation and to equal protection of cultural or religious rights. Equality rights become tied up with the idea of pluri-nationalism, in that group rights such as to religion, culture or even self-determination are often provided for. Robust rights, and commitments to equal distribution of socio-economic resources, and regional development are often also included as important.

Unsettlement. More controversially perhaps, states often deal with radical disagreement by leaving an 'open texture' to any settlement. They find ways to leave the whole business of symbolically defining the state and 'the national', as somewhat unsettled. If people are told that the nature of the state is not settled for all time, but can be periodically revisited, the stakes are considerably lowered for any one moment in time. So providing for referendums on secession in the future, as in Northern Ireland or Bougainville, Papua New Guinea; or leaving open the possibility for increased devolution of powers over time; or periodic review of the arrangements; can be very important to enabling everyone to live with the compromise in the moment. Again, however this requires those who believe in the state's current formation to move to understand that the instability created by leaving the issue open creates a better form of 'flexible' stability. The central state is made stronger by acknowledging that it cannot always take its own existence for granted, but is always dependent on the consent of the diverse groups and political opinions of the people within it. It requires people to understand the state not as a political settlement for all time, but as a set of processes in which people can continue to work out their disagreements peacefully.

“ Once a claim to equality within the state has been pushed to a claim for fully-blown secession, it can be very difficult to diffuse it with a promise of better equality ”

These are not of course the only outcomes to self-determination disputes – other outcomes such as preserving the status quo of an existing state through a level of coercion and denial of other aspirations is possible, although often leads to some level of violent conflict. Conversely, some sub-state regions do achieve statehood –although not often, and usually not without high violence along the way. But even these two extreme outcomes do not necessarily resolve the conflict –they are forms of winner-takes-all solutions that tend to perpetuate new cycles of resentment and conflict.

For negotiated solutions the difficult question is –how do the parties to a self-determination dispute get to this type of compromise? Quite often the zone of compromise is quite easy to see. The more difficult question is how to get everyone to agree, particularly if ‘winning’ still seems a viable option. How do parties agree to compromise? Slowly and with much difficulty. History from many contexts teaches that it is harder to put the self-determination genie in the bottle than it is to not let it out in the first place. It can be much harder for the parties to compromise after years of violence fought over ‘statehood’. Once a claim to equality within the state has been pushed to a claim for fully-blown secession, it can be very difficult to diffuse it with a promise of better equality, even where that might have stopped the claim escalating in the first place.

There are no easy answers beyond working hard to achieve a creative, new, more inclusive political settlement, paying attention not just to substance, but to the importance of the symbolism of who the state ‘belongs’ to. Each side must try to create a language that enables new trust in state institutions, which can ground the building of horizontal civic trust between divided peoples. The state’s legal institutions must recognise that neither side should be allowed to ‘default’ into their exclusivist vision of the state because this would unravel the commitments to a pluri-national vision of the state, as a project of never-ending building of agreement to some common project of political community.

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research interests lie in the interface between constitutional and international law, gender and conflict, and legal theory, with a particular interest in peace processes and their agreements.

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Inside mediators: dialogue from the heart of conflict

Avila Kilmurray

Consultant of the NGO The Social Change Initiative

Conflict, whether violent or not, shrinks the space for open and honest conversations. In Northern Ireland there was a song entitled 'Whatever you say, say nothing', a sentiment that summed up local fears. In contested societies it is all about who has the last word or can make the quickest (and often most cutting) reply, rather than listening to what someone from 'the other' side is saying. Everything is reduced to 'winners' and 'losers'; 'them' and 'us'. Yet in Northern Ireland (or the North of Ireland or even 'the occupied 6 counties': we can't even agree the name) violent conflict wrecked havoc and shattered lives, only to end 30 years later around the negotiation table. The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement offers a framework for peaceful progression, although the peace process itself remains fragile.

The process of arriving at inclusive negotiations was hard won. There was international prodding, encouragement and celebration of steps taken, but at the end of the day it took internal steps to build relationships and to sound out the options available. This was rarely achieved through the work of external mediators, but more through the role of local interlocutors – individuals often termed 'insider-outsiders': people who had credibility within their own community/constituency, but who recognised that stuck political stand-off needed the oxygen of external critique and ideas. As one such 'insider-outsider' argued 'Old problems need new questions asked of them'.

The 'insider-outsider' activist is ideally steeped in the positions and nuances of 'their own side', but maintains a number of trusted external contacts that bridge to others who hold different views and perspectives. They can then engage in a process that allows the flow of different viewpoints for consideration over a period of time,

translating the information shared into terms that are understandable to the groups involved. Critical questions can be framed and posed in challenge to established group narratives. These challenges need to take account of what is achievable at any particular time or context. This interlocuter approach is more effective than bringing people of opposing political viewpoints together in what often turns out to be defensive and antagonistic confrontation. Instead, the 'insider-outsider' individual is well-placed to take the temperature of reactions to critical questions and propositions, using this to assess the pace of possible dialogue.

“ A skilled interlocutor can help avoid increased antagonism as a result of misunderstanding and misinterpretation ”

Clarifying positions

The other important role that local interlocuters can play is that of helping a political constituency to articulate its political position in clearer terms so that it can better communicate it to others. In times of conflict there is a danger that aligned activists, on either side of the divide, deem those who are critical of their position as being either mad or bad, instead of engaging with opposing views. A skilled interlocuter, who has credibility, patience and maintains a low public profile, can probe the unclear or weak points of arguments in order to help clarification for both internal and external audiences. S/he can pose the questions that worry those on 'the other side' of the argument. This can help avoid increased antagonism as a result of misunderstanding and/or misinterpretation (deliberate or otherwise). While many allegiances in a politically contested society tend to be rooted in emotion, other issues can benefit by a harder edged focus on economic and social realities. What is the nature of the society that we are trying to achieve? What will be the economic implications of constitutional change? What will be the impact on different sections of society –farmers; businesspeople; factory workers; pensioners, etc?

Examining the range of hopes and concerns held by ‘the anxious middle’ segment of the local population can also help in clarifying options, opportunities and challenges. There will always be that segment of the population that is strongly supportive of a particular position; then there is a second segment that hold equally strong oppositional views; but numerous public attitude studies suggest that there is up to 60% of the population that are unsure of their position, or that swing in opinion depending on prevailing circumstances. What are the questions and concerns of this ‘anxious middle’, and how can these be engaged with rather than lectured or harassed? This is something that local civil society leaders are in a good position to explore and discuss with those who hold more entrenched political allegiances.

“ Where political division silences people it is important to seek out ways of giving back voice to those that are marginalised through conflict ”

One community-based approach adopted in Northern Ireland involved working with a number of ‘single identity’ communities – either Nationalist/Republican or Loyalist/Unionist in composition. Then, after good working relationships had been established, bringing together the various communities in a joint conference where they listened to, and questioned, a panel of external experts. The opposing communities did not directly question or confront each other, but they heard the questions posed by representatives of ‘the other’ community to the external experts thereby getting insight into their concerns and perspectives, in addition to hearing the experts’ replies. Over time, the community representatives grew the confidence to engage directly on sensitive issues.

Creating space for new suggestions and ideas

Where political division silences people it is important to seek out ways of giving back voice to those that are marginalised through conflict. This can be at the level of community engagement around shared common concerns (economic and social

issues) rather than more divisive political questions. Women's groups are often the first to build such relationships. However, more largescale and ambitious initiatives are also possible. When Northern Ireland was experiencing a period of acute political stalemate, the civil society directed Opsahl Commission was established. Funded by independent philanthropy, an international panel (under the chairperson of Norwegian Professor Opsahl) was brought together to invite submissions from any group, organisation or individual across the North that wanted to have a say in the future of the region. Representations (both written and in person) were received from people who were victims/survivors of violence; political parties; church representatives; paramilitary organisations; sporting groups; business; trade unions and the community and voluntary sectors, amongst others. Commission hearings were held in villages and towns, with a report bringing together the various views for consideration. This process allowed equal weight to all views and facilitated an exchange of information.

A more recent model of consultation, implemented well in the Republic of Ireland, is the Citizen Assembly approach where a group of randomly selected citizens engage in facilitated discussion on a difficult political issue. A range of participative democracy strategies have now been road tested in various parts of the world and can be adapted to create space for discussion and dialogue in divided societies. The main objective is to re-introduce an element of complexity into what are often zero-sum game situations. The 'winner' and 'loser' syndrome invariably ratchets up tension.

“ It is never too early to design and identify strategies and approaches to promote greater understanding from the heart of conflict ”

Creating space for discussion is an even greater challenge when seeking to engage with interested parties that are outside the immediacy of the disputed political region. Views and opinions in both Britain and the Republic of Ireland were important for decisions to be taken within, and about, Northern Ireland. The independent civil society initiative, the British-Irish Association, organised meetings over many years, as did other

organisations. The reality is, that although often uncomfortable, views in the hinterland country(ies) cannot be ignored. As Nelson Mandela often repeated – ‘If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy, then he becomes your partner’. This is certainly not easy, particularly when there is a power imbalance during the heat of conflict, but an important insight to keep in mind over the long-term.

Are there potential areas of compromise?

The word ‘compromise’ itself can set teeth on edge in a situation of deep political division, but the reality remains that society is heterogeneous in nature and different perspectives need to be factored into any agreed settlement as to how people can live together. There are a range of smart options that facilitate compromise. The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, for example, provides for dual citizenship and national identity. People can have a British or an Irish passport, or both (a political agreement that is currently being destabilised by a potential Brexit). Provision was made for a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, complemented by a Charter of Rights for the island of Ireland, all within the framing of the European Convention on Human Rights. North-South (within the island of Ireland) and East-West (between the islands of Ireland and Britain) institutions and arrangements were put in place. In short, every effort was made to provide for mix and match identity, possibilities of cross-border(s) cooperation and the blunting of divisions. Strong devolved structures (sadly currently inoperative) offered a political structure for relations within, and between, communities in Northern Ireland. While the peace agreement implementation process has been dogged with difficulties, the reality remains that when opposing parties came together there was a shared recognition of the need for both compromise and creative thinking.

A final thought –it is never too early to design and identify strategies and approaches to promote greater understanding from the heart of conflict. These will rarely offer short-term fixes, but may help to create a process to avoid the violence which filled the political vacuum that bedevilled Northern Ireland (the North of Ireland) over so many decades.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Avila Kilmurray currently works with The Social Change Initiative, an international NGO

working to strengthen civil society activism and advocacy in the areas of human rights, peacebuilding and refugee/migrant rights. She has worked in Northern Ireland since 1975. She was a member of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition negotiation team for the Good Friday Agreement, and as Director of the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (1994-2014) managed EU PEACE funding for the re-integration of political ex-prisoners and victims/survivors of violence. Avila is a Board member of the International Fund for Ireland and a number of independent philanthropies.

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The creation of dialogical environments

Iñigo Retolaza

Facilitator of dialogue and the transformation of conflicts. MemoriaLab Initiative

In the same way that the (re)production of a conflict is a collective process where different parts of the social system interact in a confrontational and exclusionary way, so is the resolution over time or the transformation of the conflict. This paradox (*to solve the conflict I need to work collaboratively with the other party to the conflict*), is the initial premise for the reestablishment of an environment of basic coexistence. Only when the conflict has transformed us will we be able to transform the conflict.

In this scenario, one of the first steps for the reestablishment of coexistence is based on generating a dynamic where the parties can: i) make collective sense of what happened; ii) heal and transcend the wounds of the past; iii) jointly draw up a shared vision of the future. Now, how can we generate the conditions so that all this can be done?

The practice of dialogue among multiple actors in conflict is based on three fundamental aspects. One is *relational* (the political aspect), another is *rational* (the cognitive aspect) and the third *emotional* (the traumatic aspect). These three aspects reinforce each other constantly, since a relational dynamic based on respect and mutual recognition of the damage done helps the people involved to trust each other and to show their vulnerability while processing their experiences of the past, and to share their aspirations for the future.

**“ Only when the conflict has transformed us will
we be able to transform the conflict ”**

A series of minimum conditions must be met for there to be dialogue:

- **A change in our operating system.** Working from a perspective of dialogue-coexistence involves passing from the principle of *non-contradiction* (either this or that, separation, debate) to that of *complementarity* (this and also that, interdependence, dialogue). All the fragmented truths that exist in the system have their place and relevance, since they help us to see a part of the reality that initially we are not able to see for ourselves. Hence the importance of diversity, inclusion and complementarity in processes of dialogue.
- **Motivation.** The actors in the conflict must have an initial motivation for dialogue, that might be *intrinsic* (an awareness and a genuine intention to change the dynamics of how the parties relate) or *extrinsic* (pressures or incentives that come from third parties). Here the challenge is to combine these two impulses. But above all, the key task is to help the parties to take steps towards dialogue on the basis of an internal conviction that this is the way forward towards coexistence.
- **A solid container.** A process of dialogue requires a basic infrastructure: human, economic and logistical resources; political will and backing; time; institutional architecture, etc. We need to create a container that is solid enough to survive all the stresses that may arise during the process.
- **Diverse and inclusive group.** An inclusive and plural make up in the group helps it to be representative of the system that has to be transformed. It has to be diverse, to be able to integrate all the voices, all the memories and all the experiences.
- **Internal conditions.** It is fundamental to take into account and care for the psychological-emotional aspects of the people in dialogue. The success of the intervention will depend on the internal conditions of these people, and of those that promote these initiatives. Many actors involved in processes of conflict, where one set of abilities are needed, then enter into processes of dialogue, where the abilities required are different. And the internal conditions of the person who intervenes in a context of conflict are not the same as in a context of dialogue. In order to achieve this transition, it is necessary to process the traumas and emotional blockages that accumulated during the conflict.

– **Generation of exemplary behaviour and initiatives.** Often these types of groups, in this type of context, create space for the emergence of initiatives and leaders that promote coexistence, capable of practising in an exemplary way the behaviours that we need to consolidate in our society.

“ A process of dialogue requires political will, motivation, infrastructure, personal work, diversity, inclusion and complementarity ”

The Memorialab initiative.¹ Dialogue, memory and social healing for a new coexistence in the Basque Country

What form does all this take in those long running conflicts based on identity? The proposal that we are working on as Memorialab integrates the practice of dialogue with the management of memory and emotionality. This virtuous triangle (dialogue, memory and social healing) is the basis for the restoration of dynamics of coexistence in Euskadi.

Memorialab is an initiative for the social construction of memory through encounters between people who –in one way or another, from different places and with different ages, genders and ideologies– have been affected by the context of politically motivated violence we have gone through over recent decades in the Basque Autonomous Community. In these intergenerational and plural encounters, people share their own experiences about political violence and the alteration of civic coexistence. They do so on the basis of personal experience and mutual respect.

From 2014 to 2018, seven Memorialabs have been carried out (six in the Basque Country and one in Madrid with Colombian people affected by the conflict). An average of 15-18 people participated in the sessions. Dissemination activities of the encounters have been developed, both in the domestic level and internationally, such as seminars, lectures, conferences, workshops, etc.

From the experience of Memorialab we have identified some lessons learned:

- **Intergenerational transmission of conflict and trauma.** Working on memory with a systemic approach allows us to transform and heal the consequences of the intergenerational transmission of unprocessed traumas.
- **Remembering, forgetting and resistance to revisiting the past.** Pain, suffering, contained anger, fear of self-criticism, having lived through social stigmatisation, non recognition of the pain caused, etc. all become resistances to a willingness to remember and revisit the past. These resistances to working with memory, while they are personal, also have a social, political and institutional side. Sometimes we have seen how some individuals who are responsible for these institutions put up resistance to supporting these types of initiatives, partly because they themselves have not finished processing what they have lived through; and unconsciously they resist facing up to this reality. This negatively affects the work on transformation that they can do from these institutions.
- **The power of silence. A two-sided coin.** To the forced silence that reproduces the status quo, we must counterpose the silence of healing, something that creates an intimate space for inner work at a personal and a group level. Memorialab generates a serene atmosphere, where the participants find the right conditions to internally process the consequences of the conflict.
- **Social healing and emotionality.** Memorialab does not aim to be a therapeutic exercise, but it does generate a safe container where people, even in their vulnerability, can find a space to share, feel and heal; to transcend their own suffering and to connect, to a greater or lesser degree, with other suffering and experiences.
- **Living all the roles of the conflict.** The conscious awareness of having exercised different roles over time (ie, victim and perpetrator in different periods and contexts) promotes self-critical reflection, reconciliation with oneself, humanisation and overcoming the consequences of conflict. Consciously knowing, recognising and occupying these roles (victim, perpetrator, witness, beneficiary, etc.) allows us to transcend them, opening the way to a more transformative conversation about how we Basque people can relate to each other today.

This experience has allowed us to identify different challenges and obstacles that must be overcome: the need to overcome fear and shame to speak publicly about the past, breaking the degenerative silence; achieving a greater participation of public institutions and their representatives in the promotion of free civic dialogue, that is not controlled, but open to citizens and the way they want to do things; the promotion of (new) leaderships based on coexistence, dialogue and respect for diversity, the systematisation and dissemination of ongoing experiences, both local and from afar, in order to accelerate the social and institutional learning that is needed; and the need to develop capacities for methodological improvement and for the strengthening of civil society organisations working on dialogue, memory and social healing.

The challenge is great, but so is the prize... and it is in our hands to achieve it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Iñigo Retolaza has a long international experience in facilitating processes of personal support, organizational learning and social change between multiple actors immersed in contexts of conflict and high sociocultural diversity. In the Basque Country, Iñigo Retolaza has facilitated multi-actor dialogue spaces on education, migrations, coexistence or diversity, and encounters between citizens aimed at processing the consequences of the Basque conflict (social construction of memory and social healing).

1 Memorialab is a citizen initiative devised and implemented collectively by three long-term Basque organizations in the field of human rights, conflict transformation and culture of peace: Gernika Gogoratuz, Bakeola, Museum of Peace-Gernika. The meetings are energized by Iñigo Retolaza, facilitator with international experience in multi-stakeholder dialogue processes in conflict contexts. For further information see Retolaza I., et al., 2019, *Memorialab. Encuentros ciudadanos para la construcción social de la memoria*, FGG/BAKEOLA/MUSEO DE LA PAZ: Gernika; Retolaza I., 2018, *Memorialab. Encuentros ciudadanos para la construcción social de la memoria. Una nota de aprendizaje*, not published.

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Accompanying local political processes for the reconstruction of dialogue and coexistence. The Basque case

Roberto Folgueira, Miren Harizmendi and Rocío Salazar

Members of BAKEOLA, Coexistence, Conflict and Human Rights (EDE Foundation)

Basque society has suffered violence and terrorism for decades. In this respect, there have been serious violations of basic human rights, while fear, silence, indifference and discord have prevailed, leading to social polarisation between the different ideological viewpoints. The declaration of the definitive cessation of violence by ETA in 2011 was a turning point that has been a significant influence on the conditions and the social and political situation that the Basque Country is currently living under.

In this new scenario, the different social agents and the population in general have begun to put into practice processes that have as a natural objective the reconstruction of coexistence and of relationships that had been damaged for decades. Looking for a way to play a positive role in this situation, in 2008 the Bakeola Centre for Coexistence, Conflict and Human Rights launched an initiative in the political sphere aimed at fostering dialogue between the different political forces – of conflicting sensibilities – that had municipal representation. This initiative began to broaden out in 2013 and as of now it has been carried out in eight municipalities of the provinces of Gipuzkoa and Bizkaia.

The political parties, as a key part of social organisation and of the handling of issues of public interest at all levels, have been and are important players in this process. In this context, we consider that they have the responsibility to take initiatives on two fundamental issues. These are: the recognition and reparation of the victims; and the memory of what occurred in the previous period, affected by human rights violations.

Bakeola's work here forms part of a broader framework promoted by the Basque institutions¹ for the promotion of a democratic culture that respects human rights, victims and memory, strengthening political debate and the positive management of conflicts. With the aim of achieving greater effectiveness and advancing on specific issues, the sessions are carried out with representatives of the Boards of spokespersons of the municipal groups.

“ We aim to generate spaces that encourage open dialogue that integrates all the voices, establishing respectful relationships in which political differences do not lead to a rupture nor give rise to divisions and mistrust rooted in prejudices ”

In the vast majority of municipalities where we operate, the Boards of spokespersons include at least three or four political forces. The majority of these politicians have a personal background affected by the context of political violence. Many of them have experienced the consequences of this violence close up, some of them have even been direct victims of it. When the process starts, each representative usually takes up positions hostile towards the rest, reproducing the partisan and polarised dynamics of the political game. However, what we aim to do with these processes is to generate spaces that encourage open dialogue that integrates all the voices and puts people at the centre, establishing respectful relationships in which political differences do not lead to a rupture nor give rise to divisions and mistrust rooted in prejudices.

At the beginning of the sessions we try to lay down preconditions that must be accepted by all, with special emphasis on willingness to participate, openness, trust and confidentiality. These are taken on without problems. Another element that is equally important is the adoption of ethical principles based on respect for all human rights, without exclusions. Although these principles are also accepted by all the

participants, they nonetheless generate greater difficulties over the course of the sessions since sometimes they can be interpreted in different ways by the different political forces².

On another note, in relation to the preconditions, it is also agreed that each participant can express themselves in the language of their choice, Basque or Spanish, without that generating conflict. To carry out the sessions we combine different strategies and methodologies that aim to promote empathic abilities, and in which the ideological and political aspects are relegated to the background. In this way, it is possible to shift the dynamic from the political arena to a personal terrain, making it possible to recognise the pain of others, the damage caused during the years of conflict, and favouring the humanisation of the other.

“ We try to lay down preconditions that must be accepted by all: willingness to participate, openness, trust and confidentiality ”

Apparently minor details in the planning of the sessions can have great importance. The fact of holding the meetings in places other than those where these people normally come together, abandoning the town hall to meet each other in another space that can be shared, as the citizens that they are; or the dynamics created by sitting in a circle, without papers or tables in the middle... all these factors contribute greatly to making it possible to converse on a different basis and to establishing confidence.

The principal obstacles

The difficulty to incorporate the narrative of the other is the principal obstacle that we come across in these processes. But this is not the only one. Opinions and personal experiences can sometimes complicate the adequate management of emotions, generating uncomfortable situations, and sometimes a lack of respect, that can result in a communication breakdown. There are cases of relativising or underestimating other people's suffering, sometimes even justifying violent actions and also giving

more importance to some victims than to others.

In these meetings some participants can be inclined to keep their distance, as a result of the role they play as representatives of a political party. Sometimes such representatives do not express personal opinions because their presence in the process is due to their role as a politician, not as a private citizen and as a person. Furthermore, the electoral calendar also affects this type of process. They become paralysed when there are municipal elections, with an added difficulty arising due to the possibility of the participants changing.

The complex social and political situation that underlies these processes is by no means easy to handle nor is it easy to achieve tangible short-term progress. The meetings require quiet and peaceful spaces, sometimes sheltered from current issues and other interests related to their parties and the media. And above all, they need continuity over time, enabling personal trust to be consolidated among the representatives³. In short, it is about advancing in a process of humanisation, deconstructing the image of the political adversary as an enemy and taking on commitments that go beyond the political sphere and have a recognisable effect on social relations in the municipality.

“ The difficulty to incorporate the narrative of the other is the principal obstacle that we come across in these processes ”

In some towns and cities, the process has been extended to include other contexts and social agents, setting up citizens' boards in which to work on these dynamics of bringing positions closer together so as to favour coexistence and democratic debate. It is noteworthy that, on many occasions, ordinary citizens seem to advance faster than the political institutions and can handle the reconstruction of coexistence in a much more natural way, without being affected by party political interests.

In both the political and the public sphere, it is sometimes possible to move towards political agreements with basic minimum principles, concrete plans of action, events for the recognition of victims, joint statements on special anniversaries, etc. The role of Bakeola in these processes of the reconstruction of the social fabric and relations is to accompany the group, and in the end the group has to achieve the progress for itself, recognising and supporting each other without restricting the freedom which the people involved need to express themselves.

In short, we try to emphasise the great value of the human factor. The achievements of this type of processes and dynamics are many and varied, depending in each case on the people who participate in them. All in all, the greatest achievement consists in going beyond fixed political positions so as to achieve normalised relations based on coexistence, respect and democratic culture.

ABOUT BAKEOLA

Bakeola is a center specialized in the analysis of conflicts, which works with social and educational agents from an integral perspective. It promotes processes aimed at improving coexistence, human rights, community development and social construction in order to achieve a culture of peace.

1. The Basque Government and the Provincial Councils of Álava and Gipuzkoa have grant programs oriented on improving coexistence and the promotion of human rights in the municipalities of Euskadi.
2. The acceptance or not of certain ethical principles depends as much or more on the person who participates and on the municipality they are from, as on the political force that they represent. It can happen that the same political party can defend different positions on the same issues.
3. Processes of this type can last for years, taking up more than one legislature, and the results obtained vary in each municipality. The size of the municipality and the relationships established within it, the violence suffered, the plurality of political forces that have representation, or the participants themselves, among others, are variables that determine the duration and achievements obtained.

Photography: BAKEOLA, Convivencia, Conflicto y Derechos Humanos

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IN DEPTH

Social networks: fuel to conflict and tool for transformation

Helena Puig

Co-founder and co-director of Build Up

In 1966, Foucault alerted us to the difficulty of perceiving the structures of power that condition the narratives through which we construct reality¹. Today, social networks are a critical element of the “hidden network” through which we construct our reality –and if we are to understand conflict, we must see both how they fuel polarization and what we can do to use them for transformation. Every year, the number of hours people spend engaging with content on social networks grows –as does its relevance, with a growing percentage in many countries getting most of their news and political opinions via social network posts and sharing. At Build Up, the organization I direct, we have been on a journey over the past two years to understand polarization in social networks and experiment with using them for conflict transformation at scale.

Social networks shape the conflict context

When we first started engaging in the use of technologies for conflict transformation, we approached technology as “just a tool” that could be used for good or evil. When it came to social networks, we knew they were being very effectively used for recruitment to armed groups, notably by ISIS, for example to find Muslim women in Spain willing to marry ISIS combatants. But we also knew of creative, powerful peace messaging campaigns with mass appeal such as the work of the Peace Factory in Israel and Palestine. Social networks are just a tool, and what matters is how we as peacebuilders chose to use them.

Over the past two or three years, the negative impact of social networks on conflict seems to have vastly overwhelmed any positive influence they might have on connecting people. Social networks have been conduits to amplify hatred against marginalized groups across the world, from Myanmar, to Lebanon, to the USA. With posts reporting fake news often garnering the highest levels of engagement, and algorithms set to maximise engagement, misinformation spreads fast on many networks. This algorithmic emphasis on engagement is also partly the reason why political discussions on social networks are notoriously angry –even after some social networks, like [Facebook](#), altered their algorithms.

“ The negative impact of social networks on conflict seems to have vastly overwhelm any positive influence they might have ”

We began to observe that whatever peacebuilders do to promote narratives and initiatives that bridge divides on social networks simply does not have the same impact as the work of actors promoting division, polarization and violence on the same networks. So we set about understanding this new conflict context: exactly how do social networks proliferate polarization and division? There is a growing body of academic research that examines these dynamics, often using small-scale experiments that can be difficult to translate into recommendations for practitioners. Through a combination of secondary research and our own reflection and analysis, we’ve honed in on three inter-dependent mechanisms that are key to understanding how social networks are fundamentally altering the human experience in ways that increase propensity to conflict: by changing the incentives we have to engage with some content / people and not others, by affecting how we construct discourse, and by altering how we build our identities.

Leaning in to conflict on social networks

With this review of the evidence came a realization: as peacebuilders, we had to take what we knew about offline interventions to bridge divides and find ways to meet people where they are at. We might wish that social networks cease to command the attention of billions of people for billions of hours per day, but that's unlikely to happen any time soon. At Build Up, we're leaning in to the challenge of social networks by trying to counter-act the ways in which technology is tooling us.

Our flagship program is The Commons², an initiative that identifies people engaged in political conversations on Twitter and Facebook, analyses what kinds of behaviors may denote a person is exposed to polarizing narratives or dynamics, and targets people with these characteristics with automated messages that invite them into a conversation about bridging divides. If they respond, one of our trained dialogue facilitators has a conversation with them on the platform (Twitter and Facebook), and eventually invites them to a group video call for a mediated conversation with people who have other opinions.

“ People want to be heard about the experience of not being heard by the other side –this is the key to generating empathy, avoiding parallel narratives, and starting to build a bridge of understanding ”

People need to understand what is happening to them and their community

The core assumption that underlies the methodology of The Commons is that polarization is happening to us. This initiative works with people who are caught in a polarizing dynamic on social networks that they are either unaware of or wish they were not a part of. It is not about (directly) combating hatespeech, countering violent extremism, or preventing the spread of misinformation³

Our main objective at The Commons is to make people aware of polarization, and to use that awareness as a lever to influence their behavior offline. We believe that awareness of polarization is key to the construction of discourse online (and offline), and to the formation of our identities. We are leaning on a growing body of research in social psychology to understand what kind of messages and conversations will foster an awareness of polarization. In a nutshell, we think that what works is to be multi-partial, focus on hearing personal experiences, and generally “complicate the narrative”. We also track every single automated message we send out and every conversation our facilitators have, which gives us the ability to monitor response rates and (to a certain extent) measure impact over time. This means we are constantly learning and iterating on our use of language, targeting metrics, and approaches to dialogue. The main thing we have learned to date is that what people most want is to be heard about the experience of not being heard by the other side – this is the key to generating empathy, avoiding parallel narratives, and starting to build a bridge of understanding.

**“ It is imperative that peacebuilders intervene in
social networks to counteract polarizing
dynamics ”**

We need to build more commons

From the experience of The Commons so far, I am convinced that it is imperative that peacebuilders intervene in social networks to counteract polarizing dynamics. We opened the report on The Commons pilot with a wonderful poem by Khaled Mattawa that reads in part: “The rule is everyone is a gypsy now / Everyone is searching for his tribe.” Too many of our current social conflicts –including in Catalunya and Spain– are being fueled in part by interactions on social networks.

Build Up has done some exploratory work on polarization in social networks in the UK and Lebanon. We are tentatively finding that the core principles of The Commons approach are valid across contexts. There is certainly more to be done to explore other

social networks, especially WhatsApp, which may have different polarizing dynamics. Still, we believe the methodology we have developed could be adapted and replicated in other situations where social networks are fueling conflict to turn the potential they offer in reach, scale and influence towards conflict transformation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Helena Puig is co-founder and co-director of Build Up, a social enterprise dedicated to support the emergence of alternative infrastructures for civic engagement and peacebuilding. She has a vast experience in peacebuilding, focusing on technology-enabled programs to promote peace. She has worked on projects in Sudan, South Sudan, Libya, Cyprus, Zimbabwe, Nepal, Somalia and Iraq.

1. Foucault wrote: “Order is, at one and the same time, that which is given in things as their inner law, the hidden network that determines the way they confront one another, and also that which has no existence except in the grid created by a glance, an examination, a language” (*The Order of Things*, 1966).
2. We are currently running an initiative at a much larger scale, and aim to share results and the iterated methodology by the end of 2019.
3. There are excellent initiatives addressing these other three important aspects of conflict on social networks, such as the PeaceTech Lab’s work on combating online hatespeech, moonshot CVE’s Redirect Method, and MIDO’s work to tackle misinformation and fake news in Myanmar.

Photography by Jason Howie.

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RECOMANEM

Materials and resources recommended by the ICIP

Bibliography on dialogue and polarization available in the ICIP Library

The bibliography related to the promotion of dialogue in polarised societies is incredibly extensive, going from conflict prevention mechanisms to manuals on mediation. In the [ICIP Library](#) we have an outstanding stock, of which we offer you a selection of important works.

Book

***Shared Society or Benign Apartheid? Understanding Peace-Building in Divided Societies*, by John Nagle and Mary-Alice C. Clancy (2010)**

This book is based on the definition of “divided society”; a society in which there is an “antagonistic segmentation, based on terminal identities with a high political prominence.” Thus, according to the authors, social identities tend to create political affiliations that do not aspire to *catch all* but *catch us*. The purpose of the volume is to offer tools to transform divided societies into shared societies. In addition, the book not only offers a general overview of the discussions about this challenge, but also analyses why some initiatives achieve positive results while others can be counterproductive.

Based on the Northern Ireland’s experience, the three central chapters stand out for their innovative nature. In the first chapter, the authors present the importance of turning the public space into a common space. The following chapter highlights the importance of civil society and the importance of building social movements that transcend traditional divisions of society. And thirdly, some rituals and shared symbols

are analysed, especially the St. Patrick's Day celebration.

In spite of starting from a specific territorial context, the book offers reflections that allow addressing similar challenges in different contexts.

Book

***Polarisation: Understanding the Dynamics of Us versus Them*, by Bart Brandsma (2017)**

The term polarization is on its way to become one of the most fashionable terms in political analysis. So far political polarization defined the confrontation between two radically opposed positions, without necessarily implying that there was a problem. However, analysis of current contexts alert of polarization dynamics that reveal difficulties for democratic systems to channel conflicts constructively. It is this type of dynamics that Bart Brandsma describes in this book.

Throughout the publication, the author analyses in detail the key factors that fuel this phenomenon. In this sense, Brandsma argues that polarization is a mental construction, which requires "fuel", and that it has more to do with feelings than with serene and logical reasoning: it is a visceral dynamic. The book is quite didactic and it also offers a series of tools to depolarize, and thus restore the situations to less harmful dynamics.

The publication, however, does not avoid controversy when dealing with theories and practices of peacebuilding. The author insists on the differentiation between polarization and conflict and, therefore, states that the depolarization tools are different from those proposed by the world of conflict transformation.

The book is the result of the author's long personal experience as a mediator, as a trainer, and also as a philosopher.

Book

***Community Action in a Contested Society: The Story of Northern Ireland Paperback*, by Avila Kilmurray (2016)**

Much has been written about the history of the peace process in Northern Ireland, but there is a segment of this event that has not received sufficient attention: the role that

civil society and small local activist organizations had in the process, peacefully confronting a context of polarization and violence. This is what Avila Kilmurray does in *Community Action in a Contested Society: The Story of Northern Ireland*, author who knows first-hand the events that took place during *The Troubles* (North-Irish conflict) and who actively participated in the difficult peace process.

The book introduces the reader into the peace process in Northern Ireland from a bottom-up perspective. To achieve this, Avila Kilmurray offers an almost chronological story (including a chronological tree with the most relevant events of the conflict), accompanying the reader, whether familiar or not, through the different community initiatives highlighting the importance that they had in the general context.

To convey this social vision of local communities, Avila Kilmurray bases her work on interviews with almost a hundred local activists, as well as eighteen representatives of governmental institutions. The interviewees are divided equally between Catholics / Nationalists / Republicans and Protestants / Unionists / Loyalists, thus seeking to show both perspectives, visions and narratives of such a polarized conflict.

Despite focusing on the events in Northern Ireland, many of the characteristics of the conflict are easy to identify in other contexts around the world: the problem of closing space for either complexity or critique, the power of perception and rumour, the prevalence of physical threat, the conflict between community perceptions and official narratives, etc.

Guide

***Guía para el Diálogo y la Resolución de los Conflictos Cotidianos*, by Yolanda Muñoz, M. Eugenia Ramos and GEUZ, University Centre for the Transformation of Conflict (2006)**

This guide for dialogue and the resolution of day to day conflict is a didactic product aimed at a very diverse audience. With the support of graphic vignettes, it offers some simple keys to understand the dynamics of conflicts and their transformation through dialogue.

The first part of the guide identifies conflict as a contrast of interests, needs, objectives and values between people and/or groups, a contrast that does not necessarily have to be negative. In the second part, the guide explores the concept of dialogue as a mechanism for mutual understanding. The third section includes specific resources and tools to promote dialogue. Finally, a bibliography is offered to deepen the topics covered.

The guide has been published by the Provincial Council of Guipúzcoa

Book

***Conflict Society and Peacebuilding. Comparative Perspectives*, Raffaele Marchetti and Nathalie Tocci, editors (2016)**

This book analyses the role of civil society in contexts of conflict and peacebuilding. The first section of the volume contains theoretical reflections on the origins, composition and relevance of civil society as an agent of conflict and peace.

This theoretical and conceptual introduction gives rise to the presentation of specific examples from around the world, such as the laboratories of peace in Colombia, women's organizations and their work for peace in Kashmir, human rights organizations in Iraq, the role of civil society on the Kurdish issue in Turkey, the initiatives of the associations of victims and disappeared persons in Bosnia, and the impact of human rights organizations on South African society.

Documentary

***Paradogma: Why true liberty needs heretics*, by Marijn Poels (2018)**

In 2017, Dutch director Marijn Poels presented his documentary *The Uncertainty Has Settled*, piece that wanted to showcase the two sides of a highly polarized debate such as the one surrounding Climate Change. This documentary rapidly generated controversy, being described as sceptical propaganda towards Climate Change and having exhibition problems in certain German cinemas. The argument behind the protests was that promoting a debate and dialogue on such a "crucial" issue (an issue accepted by the majority of the population), such as Climate Change, neither was constructive nor convenient for society. Marijn Poels, who did not want to position

himself on either side of the discussion, instead wanted to offer a platform for each side to present their arguments, was deeply shocked by the accusations and the level of intolerance which him and his project received. “Even asking questions makes you a suspect,” he declared. *The Uncertainty Has Settled* wanted to generate questions and promote dialogue, but this dialogue quickly had been stopped.

In the aftermath of these events, Marijn Poels decided to make a new film in order to explore to the limit the concepts of freedom of expression, freedom of opinion, dialogue, and to show how sticking or not to what is accepted as politically correct can limit western society and generate a sensation of growing polarization. Hence the idea behind *Paradogma: Why true freedom needs heretics* (2018), a documentary that seeks to deepen into what are the themes and attitudes that constrain dialogue, as well as emphasizing the need to encourage it, to listen to opinions opposed to ours in order to understand each other. With this goal in mind, during the 90 minutes of *Paradogma*, we submerge ourselves in several issues, such as, for example, the role of journalism in promoting certain conceptions and ideologies, the claim for individual critical thinking, the imperative to promote democracy without constraining or “removing” “problematic” views, etc. Therefore, *Paradogma* seeks to provoke a reaction to the viewer, to make him/she think about why certain opinions are considered “good” and others “bad”, as well as in the danger of despising, or even denying, the existence of opinions that can be in contrast with our own.

This provocative nature makes Marijn Poels interview certain polemic individuals of contemporaneity, some of which divert the conversation to unorthodox topics, even with some conspiratorial touches. But here resides the uniqueness of *Paradogma*, a work where Marijn Poels offers a platform where those opinions considered marginal can also be expressed. It is about avoiding the tendency to ignore and to block opinions that do not coincide with our own, a practice that only increases the feeling of frustration and marginalization of certain sectors of society. The essence of *Paradogma*, then, is to “force” the viewer, first to listen, and then to reflect, in order to foster dialogue and avoid an increase or escalation of polarization and violence. Marijn Poels believes that this cannot be done, without connecting with the individuals and understanding where the opinions they express come from, through an emotional, human and empathetic perspective, which does not necessarily mean that our opinions coincide.

Guide

***Discrepància benvinguda! Guia pedagògica per al diàleg controvertit a l'aula*, by Marina Caireta and Cécile Barbeito (2018)**

This guide (*Welcome discrepancy! A pedagogical guide to controversial dialogue in the classroom*), published in Catalan by the School of Culture of Peace (Escola de Cultura de Pau) and the City Council of Barcelona, offers teachers tools to encourage them to promote controversial dialogues in the classrooms, as the educational space is the ideal place for young people to develop critical thinking and comprehension skills on current issues. The publication aims to reflect on the risks and opportunities when educating on controversial topics, with different tools, methodologies and activities, to tackle issues such as the reception of refugees, identity debates or terrorism.

The guide is inspired by the experience of European countries, particularly Anglo-Saxon countries, who have a long history on promoting dialogue in the classrooms and in education for peace. The publication is based on current issues around the world and adapts them to the Catalan context, offering 26 activities. The guide is an interesting tool for promoting dialogue between young people.

Project

More in Common

More in Common is an international initiative established in 2017 which works to strengthen societies in the face of the growing dangers of polarisation and social division. With its head office in the United Kingdom and branches in the United States, Germany and France, its activity is focused on research and analysis, on the development of positive narratives of “us”, to celebrate what unites a society rather than what divides it, and on organising campaigns and events that connect people on a large scale.

The organisation's most important project is Hidden Tribes, started in 2018 with the aim of identifying the causes of polarisation and tribalism in the United States and developing strategies to reverse them. The project combines research with work with different actors in civil society to restore mutual trust and formulate responses to the increasing social fragmentation.

More in Common also focuses part of its work on how advanced democracies manage the arrival of refugees in Europe and has developed studies on attitudes to immigration, identity and refugees in several countries. The analyses of Germany, France and Italy have already been published, and the results for the Netherlands and Greece are expected to become available during 2019.

Organization

Better Angels

The 2016 presidential elections in the United States were characterized by a high level of polarization, a political and social division that has only increased since the arrival of Donald J. Trump in the White House. According to the [Pew Research Center](#), polarization levels in the country have reached the highest rates since 1994, year when they began to measure the phenomenon.

Alarmed by this trend, in 2016, a few days after the elections, there was a meeting in Ohio between a small group of Trump supporters and another group of Hillary Clinton voters. That meeting would become the precursor for the creation of [Better Angels](#). Better Angels is an American organization that emerged with the objective of reducing the levels of political and social polarization in the United States, a division characterized by the parliamentary arc constituted by two “groups”, the Republican Party and the Democratic Party.

To achieve its objective, Better Angels organizes meetings between an equal number of *reds* (people who identify themselves as Republicans) and *blues* (who identify themselves as Democrats), with a total of between 10 and 14 participants and with a qualified mediator guiding each meeting. These sessions seek to foster a space for dialogue with the aim of finding points in common among each other, breaking stereotypes and encouraging understanding between individuals of both political positions. It is not a question of changing the participant’s opinions and beliefs on the topics being discussed, instead they seek to provide them with tools to reinforce the understanding between the two groups, and to find points in common in order to perceive the “others” as equals. Therefore, it is through a personal approach that Better Angels works to reverse this trend of isolation and lack of communication between both

groups.

The organization also offers training workshops on communication skills, indispensable to promote dialogue between people who do not agree politically, and organizes debates where individuals can express their opinions in a safe space opened to listening. The organization is mainly nourished by individual donations but also receives income, in equal parts, from foundations linked to the two major political parties in the country.

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INTERVIEW

Interview with Paul Ríos, Tom Woodhouse, María Jimena Duncán and Mariano Aguirre

Roser Fortuny and Eugènia Riera

ICIP

Four experts in the field of conflict resolution and peacebuilding and dialogue spaces provide us with their vision of the political and social conflict that is currently taking place in Catalonia. From the analytical and practical perspective: Paul Ríos (Basque Country), María Jimena Duzán (Colombia), Tom Woodhouse (United Kingdom) and Mariano Aguirre (Spain-Argentina) help us identify the features of the Catalan conflict that can be found in other contexts and, at the same time, possible outcomes to the current impasse.

1. What is it that most surprises you about the Catalan conflict?

Paul Ríos, peace and human rights activist. Founder and former coordinator of Lokarri

I find it striking that, despite everything that has happened over recent years, things have not come to a severe degree of violence, because looking at events from the outside, the “normal” thing to expect would have been some kind of escalation towards a violent confrontation. It may be because Catalan society has in its DNA a certain rejection of the use of violence and a sort of conviction that this is not the way to resolve what is going on, seeing that there are better alternatives. There must be a cultural factor within Catalan society that holds back those tendencies that often lead to extreme acts of violence.

Tom Woodhouse, Emeritus Professor of Conflict Resolution, Bradford University

I suppose what strikes me most is how quickly events can polarise and divide people. I am a frequent visitor to Barcelona, a city I love, and I have close and valued friends in the city from all over the world. Barcelona and Catalonia have always seemed to me to be cosmopolitan and outward looking places in sentiment, values and behaviour. In recent years these qualities may be seen to be in retreat, as society has undoubtedly become more politically and socially polarised following the referendum on independence.

María Jimena Duzán, journalist and former consul of Colombia in Barcelona

What surprises me is that it is a cultural conflict. In the years that I lived here I could see that it was coming. The legacy of Pujol was the creation of a Catalan culture that was centred only on what was Catalan, and that affected me. I came from a country as complicated as Colombia and I thought it was surprising that this didn't generate a conflict, because it seemed to me that what they were doing was creating a new generation of young people who in their cultural cosmovision put everything Catalan above all else. There is a very powerful feeling that developed in that world and is now asking for independence.

Mariano Aguirre, Senior Advisor on Peacebuilding, Office of the Resident Coordinator of the United Nations in Colombia

During the Franco regime, Barcelona represented what is now called cosmopolitanism: an open, multicultural society, opposed to the strict conservatism of the regime in Madrid. That image of Barcelona might have concealed the conservative culture of the rural sector of Catalonia, as well as the closed patriotism of the elite and sectors of urban society. Nevertheless, during the transition and once democracy had become established, Catalonia fulfilled the role of an open society, a bridge between the rest of Spain and Europe, a recipient of immigrants from other parts of Spain (and later, from other continents), connected to the Mediterranean and North Africa. With these influences, it is surprising, although not inexplicable, that some of the politicians and a part of Catalan society adhered to a closed conception of nationalism.

2. Which aspects can be linked to global tendencies and which ones are specific to the Catalan case?

Paul Ríos

We live in a globalised world where there is a certain tendency towards uniformity and that leads to identity becoming a very important issue. People feel the need to try to recover or preserve their identity and sense of community, that something that identifies you as a member of a group, in order to face up to a certain disorientation that people suffer. They have sold us the idea that the important thing is to work for a universal culture, but this covers up a lie. This universal culture actually means accepting a single or predominant culture, which may be the one presented by the powerful states, and putting obstacles in the way of recognising that there are other ways of identifying with a community. This is happening internationally and I think what is happening in Catalonia may be partly a result of this, because there is an identity that is in danger. These conflicts take different forms in different places, in some cases they can be more violent, in others people find ways of isolating themselves from the world, of confronting the State or the dominant culture, etc.

Tom Woodhouse

It is clear that global trends are generating pressures which are threatening to fragment and destabilise communities. The Trump administration continues to challenge the fundamentals of a liberal world order which for all its faults and shortcomings, has secured a relatively peaceful world since 1945. In the national and domestic politics of many countries across Europe – and in the UK, where I live, especially linked with Brexit – , an unpleasant climate of demagogic emotive and irrational public discourse has emerged. So clearly there are global trends at play. But we must be careful not to fall into the trap of fatalism, assuming that these global trends inevitably degrade and damage the social and political fabric. Societies can be remarkably resilient with reservoirs of positive, tolerant and inclusive social cultural and political capital. Catalonia, despite its current problems, has this in abundance.

María Jimena Duzán

At a global level, polarisation is in fashion and it is based on stoking up the worst passions and above all hatred. Politics today is conducted as a show, and the social networks are a key tool. Polarisation is infecting all political spaces and Catalonia is no

exception. Nor is Spain, where there has been a revival of nationalism, with Spanish flags all over the place, something that surprised me. All nationalisms worry me, including Catalan nationalism, but the response has been an exacerbation of Spanish nationalism. One of the things that I had always admired in Spain is the fact that it permitted the creation of the autonomous communities, but that is changing in many ways with this deluge of flags that assault you everywhere. To me this seems to be very complicated and something specific to the Catalan and Spanish conflict, because here there was an agreement following the dictatorship. Some gentlemen sat down –because there were no ladies there– and they said: “We are going to establish autonomous communities” because each one has its cultural, political and social specificities. That is how each community was established with its own characteristics and that was the deal. The Spain of today is the product of that deal, which is very interesting for all the people that come from the outside, but suddenly that deal is no longer enough. There has to be another one.

Mariano Aguirre

Nationalism has been an essential component of the formation of the modern state. Statements about the end of nationalism, both from the left and from liberalism, were wrong because they denied the historical and identity-based components, social ties and historical narratives (real or mythical) that generate links between individuals, families and social groups of different characteristics. These narratives have given rise to nations and states (two spaces that do not always coincide) and to the very concept of citizenship, strongly linked to the state and – closing the circle – to the nation.

Over the course of the last decades, nationalism has experienced two very relevant developments. On the one hand, the tendency to close in on itself, with a melancholic discourse on the past, faced with the complexity of the modern world (a complexity that includes, among other elements, more migrations, challenges to customs in areas such as family, the role of women, environmental management and demands for equality). On the other hand, the proposal to build a post-state and post-national world, in which the constitutional patriotism (open, cosmopolitan) of each state entity is instrumental in generating a cooperative and egalitarian world. Spanish nationalism (embodied by “Madrid”) has been identified with the conservative reactionary proposal. Offended,

radical Catalan nationalism has followed the same trend.

Catalonia is the battlefield of the debate between two different conceptions about “how to be (nationally) in the world.” Spanish nationalism and radical Catalan nationalism are on one side of this debate. The cosmopolitans (still) without a clear political representation are on the other. And there is the additional complexity that Catalonia is not an independent state, but an autonomous community within a state that, at the same time, is part of the European Union.

3. What factors could help overcome the conflict?

Paul Ríos

To tell the truth, and recognising my lack of knowledge, right now I can't see any window of opportunity for the conflict to be resolved. There might be one, but that requires a knowledge of the reality and the dynamics that you can only have from inside Catalonia. Given this, if it is true that there is no clear window of opportunity, the strategy should be to avoid escalation. If things are already complicated enough, what you have to do is not to add more difficulties. You have to look for strategies that will stop things coming to a level of internal social division that almost reaches the point of no return. You can come to a rupture in the visions of the future between people who think differently and a rupture of narratives that prevents people living together in a collaborative and constructive way. That is the risk that you can run, that you end up with two different societies living in the same territory. When that happens, it is very difficult to re-establish the links and spaces of collaboration.

Tom Woodhouse

One key insight which may have relevance for Catalonia is that that there are identifiable stages which societies in conflict experience. If the issues in contention in a conflict are not addressed and managed intelligently, the conflict in question can escalate at best to a frozen conflict, or in severe cases, and at worst, to enmity and violence. Of course there is no inevitability about this progression and all conflicts can be navigated non-violently.

One well known model about how people behave in conflicts at the political level is based on a four stage escalation sequence ? moving from discussion (stage 1) about differences; to polarisation (stage 2) where negative perceptions of the other begin to define the narrative; segregation (stage 3) where the parties move apart, communication breaks down, and attitudes harden. Conflicts which have moved to level 3 (segregation) are prone to escalate then to a frozen conflict where the interests of neither party are satisfied (let's say stage 3.5); or ultimately to the damaging levels of enmity and violence (stage 4).

It is clear to me as an outsider that the Catalan situation, if we are looking for analytic models to help to understand and respond to it, is at stages 1-2 of the escalation model briefly outlines above. While it is highly unlikely and certainly undesirable that the situation in Catalonia might degenerate to the destructive levels of stage 4 in the model, the question emerges, how to make the dynamics at play in stages 1-2 in the model (discussion and polarisation) lead to a constructive transformation.

Transforming the perception of the situation in Catalonia, from a fight to be won to a problem to be solved, places it into a problem-solving paradigm where integrative, nonviolent and peaceful outcomes can be defined. There are concrete ways in which this process can be part of the fashioning of a political resolution. Above all, Catalan politics and society has prospered historically from its commitment to the peaceful resolution of difference.

It would be both timely and productive for those involved in peace and conflict transformation centres and networks across Spain and in Catalonia to explore what it means to be peaceful, and to share knowledge about skills, tools, maps, and frameworks which might be helpful in the current situation. In recent years the peace and conflict research community has started to focus on the question, not so much why conflict? but what creates and sustains peace?.

María Jimena Duzán

When things do not work, you have to reconstruct them. The autonomous communities came as a ceiling on their political expression. If the Catalonia issue is sorted out, and we do not know how, do things end there? Are the other autonomous communities

going to be silent? What will happen to the foundations of the deal [of the transition]?

Mariano Aguirre

We would have to go back and review “the conflict.” For example, do the supporters of independence really want a Catalan state or a different situation within the Spanish state? Is it viable to seek independence when around 50% of the citizens of Catalonia oppose that option? A key issue (and one that is ignored) is people’s lives. In other words, apart from the grand visions (independence versus defense of the unity of the Spanish state), what aspirations do people have for themselves and for future generations? If, among other things, they want the freedom to legitimately exercise their Catalan, Spanish and European identity, have social protection and guarantees of their rights and freedoms, enjoy equal opportunities to reach an acceptable level of economic well-being, and enjoy freedom of movement in Spain and Europe, then where are the common areas of negotiation?

Except for extremist positions, nobody wants war or misery for Catalonia, nor the collapse of Spain. Seeing the experiences of coexistence of different identities in state frameworks such as in Switzerland, Quebec in Canada, and Scotland in the United Kingdom, and after the serious and now promising experience of the Basque Country, is it not possible for advanced and democratic societies such as those in Catalonia and in the rest of Spain to reach agreements negotiated with the aim of obtaining a good, cooperative and decent life for all?

Photography: From top to bottom and from left to right we find an image of Paul Ríos, Tom Woodhouse, María Jimena Duzán and Mariano Aguirre.

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SOBRE L'ICIP

News, activities and publications about the ICIP

ICIP

International Catalan Institute for Peace

The ICIP becomes a new member of EPLO

The ICIP has become a new member of the European Peace Liaison Office (EPLO), an independent civil society platform of European NGOs, networks of NGOs and think tanks which are committed to peacebuilding and the prevention of the violent conflict.

EPLO aims to influence the EU so that it promotes and implements measures which lead to sustainable peace between states and within states and peoples, and which transform and resolve conflicts non-violently. EPLO wants the EU to recognise the crucial connection between peacebuilding, the eradication of poverty, and sustainable development worldwide and the crucial role NGOs have to play in sustainable EU efforts for peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and crisis management.

The request of membership of the ICIP was approved by the EPLO General Assembly on Thursday 28 March. The ICIP is the first Spanish member of the platform.

ICIP and the Truth Commission of Colombia sign a collaboration agreement to facilitate working with victims of the conflict in Europe

The International Catalan Institute for Peace and the Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-Repetition of Colombia signed on Tuesday 8 May the collaboration agreement that grants ICIP the role of Technical Secretariat in Europe of the Truth Commission. The objective of this collaboration is to facilitate the work of the Truth Commission with victims living in Europe, in the framework of the

implementation of the 2016 Peace Agreement.

Based on this agreement, ICIP will offer technical and logistical support to the activities organized by the Truth Commission in Europe, coordinate working groups established in various European countries (nodes), and provide methodological support to the process of taking testimony from the victims of the Colombian conflict in exile, in order to document cases and contribute to the clarification of the truth, justice and non-repetition of the crimes.

To carry out this process, ICIP organized the first training session of a group of people in charge of conducting interviews with victims in exile, which took place in February in Barcelona. The session brought together forty participants from ten countries, with experience working with victims of the Colombian conflict.

Last publications

- For a new strategy to reduce violence in non-war contexts, ICIP Policy Paper by Sergio Maydeu-Olivares, published in English, Catalan and Spanish.
- La seguridad en el siglo XXI, desde lo global a lo local, ICIP Research 6.
- Contra la guerra i la violència, by Lev Tolstoi. Published in Catalan by the ICIP and Angle Editorial in “Clàssics de la pau i la noviolència” collection.
- Orígens i evolució del moviment per la pau a Catalunya (1950-1980), by Xavier Garí. Published in Catalan by the ICIP and Pagès Editors in “Noviolència i lluita per la pau” collection.
- ICIP Activity Report 2018

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