A theory of social change and development: resistance and power and their inter-linkage with conflict and peace

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Paper for the panel: 2.1 Epistemologies of War and Peace
Bi-Annual Peace Conference in Gothenburg 14th-15th June 2012, School of Global Studies, Sweden.

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Abstract
The paper will discuss the so far insufficiently theorized link between concepts of resistance and power on the one hand, and conflict and peace theory on the other. This theoretical explorative paper aims to relate the concept of resistance to the classical ABC conflict triangle, and broaden the understanding of how power asymmetries can be linked to the model, as well as how the quality of resistance matter for social change and development.
A theory of social change and development: resistance and power and their inter-linkage with conflict and peace

How can social change and development occur due to conflicts and the quality of resistance in asymmetric conflicts? This paper will discuss the issue by focusing on the so far insufficiently theorized link between concepts of resistance and power on the one hand, and conflict and peace on the other. This theoretical explorative paper aims to relate the concept of resistance to the classical conflict theory, the so-called ABC conflict triangle (Galtung 1967), and broaden the understanding of how power asymmetries can be linked to the model. Further, to deepen the understanding when and how conflict escalation takes place (impact on attitudes and behaviour), the resistance concept gives precisely the added value by linking different forms of resistance to the B corner in the conflict triangle. Previous critique has been raised vis-à-vis the ABC model for downplaying power asymmetric relations, i.e. work with power asymmetric pre-assumptions, in conflict analysis. No attempt has been made to bring the resistance and power concept into the theoretical understanding in conflict theory and conflict escalation theorizing. Also, the reverse process is true, that the theoretical understanding of conflict and conflict escalation, can contribute to better determine when resistance goes from every day resistance to increased organized resistance, and finally impacts in such a way that social change and development (or conflict management) follows.

Conflict as development and escalation

The theory of conflict is as old as peace research itself. We know from conflict theory that conflicts can cause violence, and conflict can be direct and structural (Galtung 1969). We have research that shows that conflict is something omnipresent in all human interaction (Glasl 1992). Conflict is most of the time handled in constructive ways. When at least two actors are finding themselves in a real or perceived incompatibility of a specific resource mostly they find ways to solve the contradiction (Wallensteen 2007:15). However, sometimes the conflict escalates into a violent phase and can create physical and material damages. Most of the peace conflict research has placed focus on these violent and highly escalated conflicts. However, it needs to be underlined that conflicts will always be present in societies and among and between humans. As Mary Parker Follet wrote, instead of condemning conflict
we should set it to work for us. Why not? What does the mechanical engineer do with friction? Of course his chief job is to eliminate friction, but it is true that he also capitalizes friction. The transmission of power by belts depends on friction between the belt and the pulley. The friction between the driving wheel of the locomotive and the track is necessary to haul the train. All polishing is done by friction. The music of the violin we get by friction. We left the savage state when we discovered fire by friction. We talk of friction of mind on mind as a good thing... We have to know when to try to eliminate friction and when to capitalize it, when to see what work we can make it do.

(Follet quoted in Avruch & Black et al 1991, p. 21, my italics)

In one sense, the concept of conflict is closely linked to development, since development refers to processes of self-fulfilment of human beings. Sen’s (1999) understanding of development refers to freedom, and ties together both the means and the ends of development. Hence, focus is on actors who seek to develop themselves. Barnett has gone as far as constructing a theory of ‘peace as freedom’ implying a synthesis of both peace and development (Barnett 2008:76). Hence, peace as freedom implies that ‘peace is more or less present based on the degree to which each important freedom and opportunity is present and the degree to which they are collectively present’ (Barnett 2008:86). Peace is then understood differently from Galtung’s dual understanding of a situation of either peace or violence. In Galtung’s (1969) understanding there are always degrees of structural violence present in all societies and human relations, which then place the explanation of absence of peace on merely structural explanations, and questions are asked and linked to the imperfect structure with its particular inherent problems. Agency is left out from the explanations for the absence of peace. In contrast, in Barnett’s understanding ‘the decisions of actors to engage in violent acts’ is included and ‘[t]he peace as freedom view considers both agents and structures’ (Barnett 2008:86). However, there is a lack in Barnett’s understanding of why actors then decide to act violently or peacefully in conflict situations.

The so-called ABC triangle in conflict theory (Galtung 1967, 1996) is used to explain how conflict escalates and how the different components of conflict are interlinked. The C corner of the triangle represents the core issue (the contradiction) that causes a contradiction and an escalation due to the adversaries’ real or perceived scarcity of a particular resource they both want to have. This real or perceived incompatibility between the adversaries leads to conflict escalation. The change leading to escalation is explained in relation to changed (worsened) attitudes, i.e. cognitive and emotive changes of the self and the other between the adversaries (the A-corner of the conflict triangle), and that in turn lead to changes in the behaviour from non-violent to destructive ones (the B-corner of the conflict
triangle). Hence, a causal direction is implied with the theory, starting from C to A and then B (see figure below).

Figure 1: Causal direction in conflict escalation

Further, it is only possible to handle the contradiction, the issues of the conflict (C-corner), when first a de-escalation has been made by a behavioural change that takes place (B-corner), followed by a shift of the attitudes (A-corner), and only then the adversaries are open for handling the core issue in a peaceful manner. Clearly, the ABC-theory is focusing mainly on the actor, and leaves out structural explanations.

The conflict theory helps to explain why contradiction situations between actors escalate and why violence can occur, and what components conflict is constituted of (issues, attitudes and behaviours) in relation to the adversaries of a conflict. However, we do know less about the power relations between the adversaries, as well as why and how resistance is played out in contexts and structure of asymmetric power relations in a conflict. Further, since conflict does not occur in a vacuum, the context in which the conflict occurs also impact on the conflict dynamics. We could identify two extreme context types, context of cruelty (Waller 2002) and a context of positive peace (Galtung 1969) forming two different conflict logics. The context places the agencies in more or less degrees of constraints/options to act peacefully in a conflict situation. The context of cruelty has societal structures that categorize, polarize and dichotomize between different groups, and the social constructs of ‘us’ and ‘them’ are creating mechanism of exclusion, that marginalize and demonize those groups that do not fit with the pre-defined archetype of the preferred society and/or citizen. In a context of peace structures different non-oppressive freedoms are allowed, and humanize, and constantly create arenas were the ‘others’ can interact and exchange and share ideas. They are seen as resources and thereby the common ‘us’ is constantly changing and inclusive and integrative, i.e. structural integration exist (cf. Galtung 1968).
The idea is then to find ways to strengthen ongoing deconstruction of mechanisms of exclusion (stereotypes, dehumanisation, enemy images) in the context of cruelty. Within the context certain types of social arenas must be created where people can meet and confront oppression (without violence). Hence, when the degree of social interaction among conflicting groups in society are intensified, this can create equal status parity between the parties, and non-violently interactions. This process can, when it works most effectively, create an increased propensity for the transformation of violent conflicts, through the use of non-violent methods for handling the conflict issues. The challenge is to create a social arena that fosters a capacity among the participants to see the ‘other’ as a fellow human being (‘a human being like me’), who is also suffering from the conflict situation. When and how does the ‘other’ become part of a ‘we’, and how does this change occur? Conflict and accommodation are the extreme poles of a spectrum (or a continuum) of possibilities for a meeting between the ‘other’ and the ‘self’. In this meeting, the essence of confrontation forms the various identifications mirrored in the dyadic relationship. In general, confrontation includes a whole range of possible common characteristics.

When physical violence forms part of the content of the confrontation, the chances of finding a short-term solution are slim. However, notwithstanding any ongoing broader conflict, specific confrontations do not always involve violence. In all societies, confrontation may be located on a continuum, from the most violent physical clash to the most amiable meeting. The logic behind confrontation dynamics concerns the causes of the formation of these varying ‘confrontation types’ with the ‘other’. It appears that the character of societal ‘social arenas’, in which confrontation is taking place, is crucial for the options for a changed perception of the ‘other’ (Bauman 1989).

The social arena is a particular place, in a specific context, which either opens up for ‘in-group identification’ with the ‘other’, or limits the options to ‘see’ the ‘other’. ‘Social arena’ can be defined as a relatively autonomous space in which specific social structural rules – various relatively sophisticated methods of inclusion and exclusion – form the possibilities for action. The point of departure in this study is based on overarching assumptions about the characteristics of the social arena: the social arena’s character can be placed on a continuum from confrontation to avoidance; and the social arena’s conflict nature can be placed on a continuum from physically violent to non-violent. These characteristics throw up four possible outcomes of the relations between peoples, which are represented in figure 2, below.
Figure 2: Resistance strategies in different social arenas within the contexts of cruelty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>confrontation</th>
<th>avoidance</th>
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<tr>
<td>violence</td>
<td>1. open war/genocide</td>
<td>2. oppressive structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non-violence</td>
<td>3. potential for change</td>
<td>4. status quo</td>
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The two ideal types of contexts should not be seen as aspects of either or, in a dual relationship, but rather as difference in extent of both aspects, and hence could be placed on a continuum in which the extent of violence and peace define the context. However, whatever context type the actor is placed within, the actor still has a choice of conflict management strategies. Agency must therefore be in focus of the analysis.

**Resistance and power**

Hence, the method of conflict management utilized of the advisories seems to be important for conflict escalation. However, since we are primarily interested in explaining the dynamics of asymmetric conflicts we rather speak of resistance strategies used in order to change the (oppressive) power relations. Hence, the *quality of resistance* is placed in focus of the discussion. The concepts of *resistance* and *power* emphasise aspects that are directly linked to conflict. However, most resistance researcher are concerned in understanding how resistance is linked with power. The concept of “resistance” is intertwined with the more relational concept of power (Foucault 1980, Bourdieu 1995), and is understood as the undermining of power relations (Vinthagen 2005; Lilja & Vinthagen 2009). Many important works on resistance can be found that focus on these inter-links (for instance in Amoore 2005, Hoy 2004, Duncombe 2002). However, most of them are theoretical, and are heading to explain how and why resistance exist in relation to power, rather then theorizing under *what circumstances* resistance can lead to change in power relations, and how it has an impact on the desired outcome in the social change.
In an overview of the literature on resistance, Hollander & Einwhoner (2004) show that there is only agreement on two things, namely that resistance is an activity, and that it is oppositional. For the rest, the literature differs on the exact meaning of the concept, and the empirical scope of it varies tremendously. Studies of resistance are normally unsystematic and compartmentalized as sub-themes within different disciplines (Lilja & Vinthagen 2009). Resistance is seen as a practice applied by a subaltern, and could be defined as ‘a subordinated agency’s response to power, a practice that can challenge and undermine power’ (Lilja & Vinthagen 2009:51). In this sense, power is used and seen as a relational concept between actors, and it follows much of what Foucault underlined

‘where there is power, there is resistance, and yet or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power’. (Foucault 1978:95)

In other words, resistance is an activity (in conflict resolution terminology we speak about methods of conflict management) that takes place in a relational situation in which power is situated and determine the type of these relations (extent of symmetry/asymmetry).

Figure 2. Link between resistance, power and conflict

Typically, the focus in resistance research is usually to determine these power relations, and by detecting the extent of real and perceived oppression by the subaltern one can explain why resistance activities occur. However, there is a gap in finding a reasonable explanation to when everyday resistance, described by Scott as the weapon of the weak (Scott 1987), escalates into formal and organized resistance. In other words, when a mobilization towards collective actions in order to bring social change occurs needs to be explained.

Even more important is to explain when more organized resistance activities lead to social change and development. With this approach the focus is on how agents of

\[\text{1} \text{ The author made the translation into English from the Swedish original text.}\]
Resistance are part of social change. Resistance seems to be situated, in a context, a historic tradition, a certain place and/or social space forged by those who agitate for change. Here an analysis of the structure of the context, i.e. the extent of cruelty and peace, needs to be addressed in order to understand the choices of actions the resistance agencies have and use. Hence, the extent of oppressive/power symmetric relations form the context, and the resistance response that comes forward. However, can we see any pattern in which the quality of resistance of the particular actors matter for the social change and the outcome struggled for? Further, in what way is the dialectical interplay between structure and the agency outlined?

Social change and development
Although many different case studies, and theoretical studies (Scott 1987), as well as practitioners experiences (Sharp 2004) from different forms of resistance exist, few comparative studies on a global scale of the quality of resistance exist. Hence, the lack in a general valid explanation for if and why certain forms of resistance matter for social changes is rather surprising. The most comprehensive and convincing study on outcomes of civil and violent resistance for regime change and democracy came as late as 2011 (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011). More empirical comparative studies are needed, however their study indicates that civil non-violent resistance causes regime change and implementation of democracy to an excessive extent compared with violent resistance forms. However, we do not intend to make an inventory of empirical different experiences, but rather to theoretically explore under what circumstances and conditions social change and development occurs based on some of the empirical studies done so far (and prepare the ground for forthcoming empirical tests of the theoretical claims).

This is made in order to understand how and under what circumstances these resistance practices and strategies utilized in each particular cultural and social context foster policy implications towards social change. These particular contexts are at the same time part of the global context and globalization influences also need to be addressed. How then can the ABC-model help to explain how different modes of resistance will lead to social change and development?

Conflict and resistance form social change
Theoretically, we claim that there is a need to qualify the phases of the causal direction from C to A to B in a conflict escalation phase. When a contradiction occurs, such as in for instance
the Arab world, with long-time authoritarian regimes that use oppressive tools to silences regime critique, and that misuse the wealth and resources of the country, a change of attitudes have taken place for a long time. However, most likely, due to the oppressive context (of cruelty) most people used every day resistance strategies, partly unaware, or afraid to discuss, with most other citizens of the country about the hard living conditions. This is important to address and inquire, since we then can identify the type of context the people are living under, but it also can guide us to understand what the potential of a mobilizing phase towards collective resistance actions is. Hence, the C to A in a conflict escalation phase, for instance during an asymmetric authoritarian regime, can take place under a long time period, as well as vary, depending on the extent of cruelty of the context (i.e. extent of regime repression, as well as fear fir regime oppression). Also, the extent of collective awareness that other citizens feel the same about the contradiction (defined as clash of citizens freedom needs and the regimes freedom restriction policies) will give the potential for future mobilization. The extent of the sense of a collective imagined contradiction with the regime will give increased potential for transforming the everyday resistance to collective resistance activities (more or less formalized and organized).

The shift then relates to the A to B corner were the behaviour will change. However, there are different options for the citizens to act. In the classical sense of the ABC model an escalation phase leads to destructive behaviour. However, in an asymmetric conflict situation, it is rather the quality of resistance in this phase that will matter for what type of escalation that will occur. In other words, the citizens can choose to define that the oppressive regime has no legitimacy for their (violent) behaviour, and then move towards mobilization of armed resistance against the rulers. With this strategy it follows the ABC logic of escalation. However, if people mobilize by including most parts of society (men, women, ethnic groups, young, old etc) in a mobilization phase in peaceful non-violent resistance way against the oppressive regime a different logic will follow (B to C). Hence, we can hypothesize that the quality of resistance, different forms of violent or non-violent activities, will matter for the outcome of social change and development. Guiding questions in such an inquiry in the example refereed to above are: What (new) articulations (forms, sites, strategies, technologies and agents) of resistance are fostered by resistance actors, and how do these forms impact on the desired outcome, i.e. social change and development?

Also, when the behaviour from the regime becomes violent and brutal, the quality of resistance of the citizen resisters will matter for the outcome. In the ABC model, escalation towards the B corner implies destructive behaviour from both (or all) adversaries.
However, despite the brutal violence used by the regime, the citizens can choose to use civil resistance in order to de-legitimize the regime, and despite that their attitudes (A-corner) and are negative vis-à-vis the regime. This would imply that citizen’s are able to move directly from B to C. In contrast, armed resistance against the regime would follow the ABC logic in an escalation phase, and only when B to A to C is achieved a de-escalation and conflict management can occur. Hence, despite that citizen and people fear regime brutality it seems that when the extent of mobilization and organization is reached, and civil resistance forms (non-violent) are taking shape, the potential for social change and development increase. The underlying argument for why change occurs is that the asymmetric (oppressive) power relations that existed before the mobilization phase occurred are showing collectively that the regime’s actions are de-legitimated. The masses sense of being the provider of the social just argument in the conflict increases with increased participation in civil resistance, but also gives an increase in the potential of defection among regime supporters. With a high level of peace structures the fear among the regime supporters to step down from power decreases, and the willingness to find a political reform to the issue (the contradiction) increases.

**Conclusion**

A theory of why social change and development seemingly is dependent on the quality of resistance. Hence, empirical research is required to systematically find out in what way social change and development actually follows in cases were civil peaceful resistance strategies have been and are used? Theoretically, if civil peaceful resistance strategies can change asymmetric power relations it should also impact on the development potential, and the structures of peace. Peaceful civil resistance actions also should be compared with armed resistance strategies and their capacity to foster social change and development. It is hypothesised that armed resistance may occasionally foster social change, however, usually followed by new or increased structures of cruelty, and at the expense of development potentials. In conclusion, if we place focus on peaceful resistance strategies in power asymmetric conflicts we will see that the conflict (the C-corner) rather can become the engine that fosters social change and development (seen as peace as freedom).

**Bibliography**


