Berghof
Research Center
Forschungszentrum
for Constructive
für konstruktive
Conflict Management
Konfliktbearbeitung

Systemic Conflict Transformation:
Reflections on Utility

Dan Smith

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A response by Dan Smith

1. Scholarship and Practice

Norbert Ropers' essay on Systemic Conflict Transformation contains a valuable dual perspective, aiming both at academic rigour and practical relevance. It reflects his own trajectory through both reflection and practice. While the practitioner's perspective seeks to know what works and to improve what does not work as well as it could, the academic perspective seeks reliable general theory to guide understanding and ultimately practice. Combining the scholarly and practical standpoint in a single essay narrows the distance between explanation and practice, and that is extremely important.

On the one hand, too much scholarly research on peace and conflict themes pays too little attention to the practical realities of violent conflict and peacebuilding. Too many scholars have no experience either of the field of combat or of the processes of peace – and while it is not impossible that purely abstract and deskbound reflections far from the sites of contestation and compromise can help improve peacebuilding practice, it seems fair to say that theory's contribution to practice will be clearer and quicker if the gap between them is relatively small. On the other hand, too many practitioners have too little patience for or interest in general theoretical explanations that might usefully challenge – or at least lead to a valuable reflection on – their own assumptions about how peace comes about.

So the first appeal of "Systemic Conflict Transformation: Reflections on the Conflict and Peace Process in Sri Lanka" (Ropers 2008) is that it offers this dual perspective of scholar and practitioner. The combination balances the habit of dispassionate reflection with the practitioner's passionate engagement. Each is a useful counterweight to the other. The commitment of the practitioner is essential, but can cloud the analytical mind and blinker the perspective. Improving practice means, in part, identifying the generalisations that can be read out from specific experiences in different contexts. To do that, the practitioner has to stand back a little. The scholarly part of the compound of theory and practice helps raise the practitioner's gaze from the gritty immediacy and perhaps there is then a better opportunity to grasp issues of broader relevance. Meanwhile, the practice side of the duality both emphasises the importance of practical relevance in research design and helps reduce that difficult distance between abstract theories in the library and how things actually play out in complex and often chaotic real situations.

At the same time, this combination of qualities carries its own risks. Practice might be shaped by over-elaborate concepts, for example, and research might be distorted by a sense of the practical requirements, the urgency of getting a useful answer. Overall, the criteria by which such work demands to be judged are higher than either work that is purely of practical interest – a 'lessons learned' study, for example – or work that is purely of theoretical interest.

Ropers' essay proposes the use of a systemic approach to conflict transformation to link theory with practice. The proposition draws on experience of doing exactly that in Sri Lanka from 2002 to 2007. At the start of that period, a ceasefire was agreed between the combatants in Sri Lanka with what may have seemed at the time like surprising ease. During it, the ceasefire and its gains were eroded as the parties seemed unable to take advantage of the opportunity they appeared to have created. The aftermath of the tsunami did not encourage progress towards a peace agreement in the way it seems to have done in Aceh. The tide of violence steadily increased and by the end of the period, the ceasefire was all but defunct. This was, then, a period in which the issues addressed by Ropers' presentation of systemic conflict transformation were of fundamental significance in a country's well being and historical evolution.

The approach in the essay seems in the end to raise at least as many questions as it answers, which is often the way with an effort to link a general theoretical approach to the intricacies of a specific situation, such as that in Sri Lanka. The scholar will not find this a problematic or critical conclusion; the practitioner might do – or alternatively might pick what seems to work and move on.

2. Strengths of Systemic Analysis

Chaos Theory warns us that the world does not always function in a way that is amenable to easy analysis. While we might like to think in terms of relatively straightforward chains of cause and effect, the way the world works is full of cases where small factors, knocking into each other so to speak, in ways that are hard to predict and often even tough to observe, have consequences upon consequences that we cannot always trace. It is the first advantage of systemic thinking that it offers us a way to address chaos.

It may be worth offering a brief explanation of why Chaos Theory is of interest. The digression seems worthwhile because the way that the word chaos is normally used means something quite close to "senselessness". It could be regarded as being counter-productive to apply it to conflict since many people see violent conflict and throw up their hands in horror at the senseless nature of the whole thing. That reaction is understandable but unhelpful. It is very often the first task of conflict resolution and peacebuilding to show that it is possible to make sense of the situation, to understand it, to discern interest, motive and purposeful actions – because only then is it possible to identify potential interest in a different course of action, motives for peaceful settlement, and the prospect of purposes and actions changing. The difficulty is that this sometimes produces a relentless optimism, which may be as likely to overlook genuine obstacles in a peace process as relentless pessimism is to ignore real opportunities.

Trying to find a way of moving past these dilemmas, I have become interested in Chaos Theory.[1] Applying an approach that seeks out unlikely connections between widely divergent phenomena offers useful perspectives on economics, even if its tone and content are very different from standard academic or marketed economic analysis (see Levitt/Dubner 2006). It has struck me that if more people understood the basic insights of Chaos Theory, there might have been a widespread recognition of the risks of global warming and climate change much earlier than has been the case, because of the emphasis that both Chaos Theory and climate science place on tracing distant consequences. An example from the field of climate change that could be a case study for Chaos Theory is the case of the declining population of lemurs of Madagascar. Lemurs are mating

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1 A useful and very accessible general introduction is Smith, L. 2007.

and reproducing on a cycle guided by light and the length of days, but climate change means that their food is growing on a different time-scale, so there is too little food available for the young (Walker/King 2008, 39/40). In a different context, I asserted (but did not support with argument) that assessing the impact of peacebuilding might be more fruitful if we looked at Chaos Theory, because of thinking about indirect effects, knock-on consequences and the very large number of variables that determine the prospects for war or peace in a given context, rather than by continuing to hunt for a simple cause-and-effect explanation (Smith, D. 2004, 15 and 51/52).

While having no pretensions of deep theoretical insight into this field I was struck and pleasantly surprised by parallels between Ropers' presentation of Systemic Conflict Transformation and some features of Chaos Theory. These useful parallels are particularly noteworthy in the proposition that a focus on systemic analysis means paying attention to "network structures".

This is the second strength of Ropers's use of a systemic approach. The notion of incorporating "feedback loops" into the basic analysis is crucial – not only to analyse the context but to analyse the actions that are to be undertaken, and in fact to realise that the peacebuilding actor (and even the analyst) is a part of the situation being analysed, so must be included in the analysis. It is self-evident that this could lead to third parties being more reflective – whether they are governments, inter-governmental organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or individuals.

Equally, the incorporation of time into the analysis, while it seems obvious, is notoriously difficult – how many times does the conflict analyst write that s/he has only offered 'a snapshot of a fast changing situation'? Emphasising the importance of time and likewise distance as factors that make a uni-directional chain of cause and effect an inappropriate assumption is important. To revert to Chaos Theory, it is time and distance as well as the multiplicity of actors and variables that generate the uncertainty about actions and effects that Chaos Theory sets out to explain.

I am not sure, however, that, as Ropers states, this complexity reflects the lack of linear logic between causes and effects in a social system. I think it simply reflects the fact that many things take time – among them, education, awareness-raising and learning. As a result, while education left to itself might over time lead to exactly the fine results we hope for in linear manner, education is never left to itself. As one goes through educational experiences, other influences come into play, some of which strengthen and some might weaken the prospects of education achieving its desired outcomes. Each of these has its own linear effect. As a result the learning process does not happen in the smooth getting-more-knowledge fashion that traditional views and policies about education seem to assume.

Likewise, as experience has shown in many different environments, the multiplicity of linear effects working at different speeds and in different locations mean that a peace process taken as a whole is not necessarily linear. In fact, the opposite generalisation would be more tenable: in general, a peace process is necessarily non-linear. As it unfolds over time, other influences are at work. So the process is at least iterative and potentially a spiral - circling and re-circling through territory that is modified by each repetitive visit.

This mode of thinking may make it easier to understand why and how peace agreements break down and how it is possible to work to strengthen them. The systemic approach brings into sharp relief the problem of self-reproducing conflict dynamics – or of self-weakening peace dynamics – through its attention to feedback loops over time.

A third strength of the systemic approach is its concentration on people and their learning processes. Noting my reservation expressed above that I make no great claim to knowledge of Chaos Theory, it seems to me that the attempt to apply this natural science construct to social science must

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also encourage a clear focus on the role of people, both as individuals and in groups. The archetypal (albeit misleading) presentation of Chaos Theory in terms of the movement of a butterfly's wings in Tokyo causing tornadoes in California is, translated into the social realm, an attempt to grasp that small groups and ordinary people can have far-reaching impact. Peace processes that neglect the people are running serious risks of failure. That is, in fact, the fundamental insight on which peacebuilding is based.

3. General Applicability – The Acid Test

Ropers puts forward seven archetypes of fragile peace processes. As he comments in a footnote, it is questionable whether it is particularly useful to classify them as archetypes, because of the term's baggage. But the key issue is whether what is identified through them makes an appearance in many different contexts and whether a given list of archetypes stacks up and becomes a useful diagnostic tool. In other words, two questions:

- While the seven categories may have appeared in one setting, are they common?
- If the seven categories are common, are there others that are equally common?

The second is the more demanding test. The problem it raises is that if a list of archetypes gets very long, it may lose utility. The advantage of such a theory-driven checklist lies in its ease of use; if making it more reliable makes it more complex, it becomes less interesting and less useful. The practical appeal of theoretical frameworks is in similar fashion likely to increase in proportion to their simplicity.

Mulling this question over, the Crocodile River game came to mind and did so with a feeling of inevitability. This is a much used game in teaching conflict resolution and facilitation, which asks participants to form two negotiating teams, make value judgements about a story in which right and wrong are hard to discern, and negotiate an all-encompassing agreement putting the story's characters into rank order from most honourable to least. When using this game as a teaching method in former Yugoslavia, my experience was that disagreements *on* each side were always as much of a blockage to agreement as the divisions *between* the two sides, and sometimes the internal issues were considerably more significant.

In many peace processes, disunity within ostensibly unified conflict parties lies behind hitches in negotiations and obstacles that emerge in the post-agreement continuing peace process. In Sri Lanka, for example, the different positions within the government, whose president and prime minister came from different and opposed political parties, and the differences among the LTTE that led eventually to the breakaway by what came to be called the Karuna faction, are important parts of a reliable explanation of why the initial progress to ceasefire could not be transformed into actual conflict settlement.

The first archetype listed by Ropers – 'ethnic outbidding' – reflects on intra-party issues, but does so with focus on a specific political mode. The text moves on from describing the archetype to concluding that "any sustainable peaceful settlement needs parallel efforts to accommodate intra-party resistances in one way or another" (Ropers 2008, 21). That could well be a viable general conclusion, but with wider general application than in cases where 'ethnic outbidding' occurs. However, it is also worth looking again at the phenomenon. True, it has a long history in Sri Lanka and has a lot to do with the evolution of the conflict in the 1950s and 1960s, but it is questionable that the political rivalries in Colombo – i.e., not between the parties but among Singhalese parties – in the period 2002-5 were determined by ethnic outbidding or expressed in those terms.

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While the risk of mutual disappointment – the second archetype – seems more reliable as a guide to pitfalls in peace processes, the third archetype of 'avoiding core issues' is open to the objection that it might be adopted as a conscious strategy. Rightly or wrongly, this was part of the strategy for the Oslo process between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization PLO – agree on the substance that is possible to agree on now and define a set of negotiating principles for getting to final settlement on the rest. Given the apparent impossibility in the early 1990s and now of agreeing on a settlement – even though everybody seems to know what settlement they would agree on if they could only agree (two states) – opting to avoid core issues was not an unintelligent choice. It did not work out the way its advocates intended and hoped, but it was perhaps at least worth trying. Either way, characterising the strategy as simply a recurrent pattern or resistance seems to miss out on analysing the dilemmas and issues in any attempt to bring a negotiated peace to that conflict.

Rather than follow this track of inquiry through all seven of the proposed archetypes and their conclusions, it may be more useful to attempt to sum up the underlying reservation. The notion of archetype is presented, in the introduction to the section, as a diagnostic tool. As each archetype is presented, it is treated as not just a diagnostic but also a prescriptive tool. It could be argued that the core purpose of diagnosis through archetype, whose usefulness may well be confirmed by further investigation, is more likely to be preserved if it is made the *sole* purpose.

4. Identifying the Value Added

Notwithstanding these reservations, there is considerable value added in Ropers' espousal of the SCT approach. However, he does leave some open questions behind on exactly this issue. At one stage (Ropers 2008, 17) he argues that the added value lies in "the detailed contextualisation and visualisation of linkages" between the variables. It is possible that he would respond to my next point by saying it is no more than a question of wording. But it seems to me that the added value does *not* lie in identifying the linkages but in identifying the unfolding processes. The emphasis should be on the feedback loops, time delay, issues of distance, network analysis and focus on human beings and their learning processes, all of which are referred to earlier but seem not to be picked up at this point in the argument.

When Ropers offers a systematic list of the systemic approach's added value, he suggests three further points: self-reflection by the third party, convincing conceptualisation of the self-reproduction of protracted conflict, and the focus on solutions alongside problems because identifying solutions is difficult and some seeming solutions create new problems. These claims all seem well grounded and supported by the evidence and analysis within the essay. Even so, this reader found some reasons for scepticism starting to rear their heads. Fortunately, by looking at them, a perhaps surprising additional point of value added can be identified. In what follows, then, first come some sceptical thoughts and then, in *Section 5*, the extra value.

I take the question of utility as the starting point again, because of my practitioner's perspective. We should always be asking tough questions about utility. These questions have to go beyond asking whether a theory is applicable to a particular case and ask whether it is the best approach to a particular problem. The question is not whether it works, but whether it works better than any other approach. And this in turn means becoming very precise and specific about what can be achieved by using it, and thus being open about what cannot be achieved, because only that way can we be clear about its advantages compared to other ways of approaching the problem.

Ropers asserts that the systemic approach "offers a practical tool to understand and explain non-linear developments" (Ropers 2008, 6). But is that really so? It seems to me that what it really does is to remind the third party actor and analyst that these non-linear developments are important. That is a different, useful but more restricted role. The reason for this, put briefly, is that the systemic approach is a theoretical rather than an analytical framework. It provides good questions and a way to approach them, rather than a checklist for answers. If so, the framework should not be over-taxed or its benefits exaggerated. Theory does not do the work for you but may, if it is good theory, tell you where to do the work and what tools you need.

This can be explored by looking at the six key questions Ropers proposes have to be addressed in a systemic conflict analysis (Ropers 2008, 8-11). These are standard questions for conflict analysis. It is not clear that there is something specifically systemic about them. They are the questions that should be asked if, without taking a systemic approach, one is simply attempting to be holistic. Indeed, Ropers' arguments and examples do sometimes seem to blur the distinction between being systematic and taking a systemic approach. If there is a systemic essence to the mode of conflict analysis proposed in Ropers' essay, it is not to be found in the questions but in how they are approached – not just what answers are produced, but *how* the answers are produced.

It is instructive to think about the types of analysis and range of skills required to answer the six questions. The first three are about parties, issues and historical dimensions. These can all be addressed using standard political science qualitative research methods. The fourth question is about structural and contextual factors that require a broader basis in social science, potentially including economics, anthropology and social psychology. The fifth question concerns the parties' interpretations of the conflict, which require exploration through sensitive textual exegesis, presumably informed by the methodologies relating to the previous four questions. And the sixth question is about framing conflict resolution options; this requires broad conflict knowledge plus those precious qualities of imagination and realism. In fact, a key quality here is intuition – the capacity to process experience-based information quickly and understand its applicability in a given context.

Thus, the types of analysis required are different. The breadth is demanding, either for an individual or for a team. Standard academic approaches cannot work because of their tendency to value one discipline or sub-discipline or methodological preference above others. Their narrowness cannot capture the feedback loops, time factors and progress through spirals that characterise systemic thinking as Ropers presents it.

There is also variation in the level of skill required to answer each question. The first three questions require good intelligent analysis, drawing on the methods of qualitative political science, but the combination of different approaches required to answer the fourth and fifth questions presuppose a more demanding skill set, while the realism, imagination and intuition that are required to frame options for conflict resolution make a precious (because rare) combination.

As further work is done both on the theoretical shape and the practical application of systemic thinking, some attention might be given to the differences between the different components of the approach, as revealed by these six questions. But I would suggest that an even more valuable avenue to follow is to think about training and competence development, the management of knowledge and the support of practitioners.

5. Added Value and Challenge: A better User

Norbert Ropers' essay lays down a challenge. As I have revealed, I am sceptical here and there about his argument and the way it is developed. But at the end, there is a formidable challenge that is well backed by evidence and reasoning. Answering these six questions is not easy. As indicated above, standard academic approaches will not answer the questions adequately; they will get us part of the way on some of them, but will not deliver us to the analytical destination we are aiming at.

Indeed, the conclusion I take out of Ropers' essay is not in the end to do with theory and analysis and their relationship to practice. It seems to me that the key value added by the systemic approach lies in a clearer understanding of the skills and qualities required both to analyse and to act as a third party in conflict situations. In other words, the theoretical framework of systemic thinking actually focuses in the end onto the importance of the human factor both in theory (see above) and in practice. Perhaps the goal is not a better (and therefore systemic) approach, nor even a better use of the systemic approach, but, rather, a better user.

The essay itself is a step towards this goal. But how do practitioners learn to become better users? How can practitioners' competence develop – and how can people start to become competent practitioners? In practice, many NGOs in this field stress the importance of academic knowledge as a starting point, leavened by experience – first learn by learning, then learn by doing. As master degree courses open up in the field of peace, conflict and development, this is proving to be a valid path for getting engaged in peacebuilding work. If we are honest, however, it is a valid path in part because there is no other path available.

The best training pedagogies now are all highly inter-active, stressing the arrival at understanding rather than the transfer of knowledge. It would be worthwhile to include the six-question framework and a beginner's guide to the systemic approach (or, indeed, to Chaos Theory) into a new approach to training practitioners. In this approach, training would not be a course done for a period after which comes experience. Instead, because training is achieved through arriving at understanding, it has to be understood as a process that continues. In fact, the process is probably less to do with training practitioners and more to do with giving practitioners the opportunity to learn.

For this, it will be useful to have a better storehouse of learning than we now have. Ropers' essay is a step in the right direction on this as well (as are other contributions over time to the Berghof Handbook among other publications). Practitioners themselves are the source of a lot of this knowledge but it is mostly not organised and not available, because it is sitting in people's heads. They are talking to their close colleagues but the benefit to the field as a whole is slow and diffuse. Some more opportunities for practitioners to learn from each other's experience, to deepen their understanding by comparing notes, would go some way towards meeting the challenge Ropers' essay puts in front of us.

6. References

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See also...

This article has been published as part of the Berghof Handbook Dialogue No. 6 *A Systemic Approach to Conflict Transformation. Exploring Strengths and Limitations* (2008).
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