



L-Università ta' Malta
Centre for the Study &
Practice of Conflict Resolution

Contemporary
Issues in
**CONFLICT
RESOLUTION**

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The Centre for the Study and Practice of Conflict Resolution

The Centre for the Study and Practice of Conflict Resolution is a Centre established within the University of Malta in 2017 with a view to engage in conflict resolution research and practice.

The establishment of the Centre builds upon a long-standing relationship between the University of Malta and George Mason University, USA in the field of conflict resolution. The Centre focuses on the intersection between research and practice within conflict resolution.

The main areas of interest for the Centre include conflict resolution practices, the relationship between conflict and human rights, as well as issues related to environmental conflict, justice and conflict and educational perspectives on conflict resolution. The Centre offers the M.A. in Conflict Resolution and Mediterranean Security together with the School of Conflict Analysis and Resolution (S-CAR). It engages in research on themes related to conflict resolution and organises public lectures, seminars and training workshops.

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Introduction: Reflections on Cosmopolitan Conflict Resolution

Omar Grech

This collection of essays brings together papers presented at a seminar on Contemporary Issues in Conflict Resolution hosted by the Centre for the Study and Practice of Conflict Resolution at the University of Malta in May 2018. The newly-established Centre seeks to promote research and practice in the field of conflict resolution both from Malta as well as in Malta. The Centre's research agenda is driven by a desire to produce and publish studies which provide insights and ideas that will inform the practice of conflict resolution. In fact, this collection is based on practice-oriented research. Briefly, this means that the essays in this collection seek to improve and update the practice of conflict analysis and resolution in four distinct areas: education, human rights, environment and cyber-warfare. In this context, the essays in this collection seek to probe some of the core ideas as well as the practice of conflict analysis and resolution in these four distinct areas. These essays suggest that conflict resolution theory and practice could benefit significantly from greater engagement with these topics in addition to bringing its own particular experience and frameworks to bear on them.

Two key aspects of the conflict resolution field were highlighted throughout the seminar: its diversity and dynamism. The diversity of the discipline has long been recognised and is reiterated in Susan Hirsch's introduction to her paper. As an academic discipline, conflict resolution draws from political science, law, anthropology, security studies, sociology and education amongst others. Because it is a discipline which addresses an inescapable component of the human condition (i.e. conflict), it needs to respond to the constant changes in that human condition; be they technological change, environmental degradation or other developments. The critical question is how best to achieve this adaptability?

If conflict resolution is to flourish as a discipline it must be dynamic in its approaches (and tools) to respond swiftly to new forms of conflict as well as new contexts where conflict may be sited. This adaptability has been identified as the key feature of 'cosmopolitan conflict resolution', the term used by Ramsbotham et al to define the current stage of development of the discipline of conflict resolution. This collection takes as its centre of gravity this definition of cosmopolitan conflict resolution:

To sum this up: human capacity for conflict resolution must learn to be as fast moving, adaptive and resourceful as the hybrid and mutating forces of violence that it seeks to overcome¹.

The four papers included in this collection sit squarely in this context. Cosmopolitan conflict resolution's "hallmark is to draw on the rich heritage of the field in order to rise to these new challenges". This is precisely what these essays do while also "linking conflict resolution to the clusters of other pools of expertise and enterprise"² which, it can be argued, add value to the conflict resolution endeavour.

This linking to other fields of expertise in order to meet the contemporary challenges of conflict resolution is especially evident in Monika Wohlfeld and Jack Jasper's essay on cyberconflict. They argue that developments in cyberspace are transforming relationships between actors and leading to different types of conflict and that the conflict resolution field has not engaged enough with these new phenomena. The authors suggest that increased cooperation with technical experts as well as an adjustment of current models of conflict resolution (or the creation of new models) is required. Essentially, their plea is for the "need to engage with technical experts and innovators, as well as policy formulators to improve understanding of cyberconflict and instil conflict resolution values wherever possible".

The evolving relationship between human rights and conflict resolution is part of the "rich heritage of the field" of conflict resolution referred to earlier. Since the early 2000s the relationship has been the subject of increasing attention and academic scrutiny.³ In his contribution Brice Dickson revisits the relationship between human rights and conflict resolution and provides some pragmatic advice to both human rights advocates and conflict practitioners: take politics out of human rights in conflict resolution. He argues that "within large scale conflict situations ...it is particularly tempting for different political factions to exploit human rights language in order to boost their own particular claims." In Dickson's view, the human rights community (academics and theorists particularly) should make every effort to ensure that the concept of human rights is not "unduly distorted as a result of inappropriate politicisation of the traditional vocabulary of human rights" in conflict situations. This effort is required generally within the human rights community, but even more acutely in conflict situations. The focus here is on "an achievable approach" benefiting the progressive realisation of both human rights and peace.

Colm Regan's argument, as with Wohlfeld and Jasper, also urges cooperation with different disciplines and professions with a specific focus on the vital challenges posed by the environmental perspective to conflict resolution. Arguing that climate change and

its associated environmental crises are both overarching and urgent, he maintains that engaging with environmental conflict is an imperative for the conflict resolution sector while contemporaneously urging cooperation with educationalists and progressive policy-shapers on a large scale. The need for systemic transformation to meet the challenges posed by environmental concerns cannot be met by conflict resolution practitioners alone and yet it must emerge as a core focus in any future re-configuration of the whole discipline. Regan argues that environmental conflict is not incidental to conflict resolution but fundamental to it and identifies research, advocacy and intervention as three areas in which conflict resolution practitioners have much expertise and experience to offer, particularly as regards public awareness, debate and judgement. Such an approach would require enhanced engagement with educational theorists and practitioners.

The theme of education (and educationalists) takes centre stage in Susan Hirsch's contribution. Hirsch reflects on the difficulties inherent in training conflict resolution practitioners within tertiary education. Her reflection draws, specifically, on a 2010 report by graduates in the field of conflict resolution who contended that "graduate level academic institutions are not adequately preparing students for career in international peace and conflict management". Given the variety of theoretical underpinnings and skills-sets that conflict resolution draws upon, the complexity of delivering effective conflict resolution education is self-evident. Hirsch argues that experiential learning may be an effective tool in delivering such complex education, since it provides students with contexts within which the intricacy of conflict resolution is explored, and the most appropriate conflict resolution tools may be best assessed by the students themselves. She concludes by emphasising the importance of placing experiential learning at the centre of conflict curricula but also of connecting such learning to move traditional pedagogies. Hirsch's essay underlines the crucial role of educational approaches in bringing together theory and practice in forming (or helping to form) practitioners who have the adaptability that the field so urgently requires.

In sum, this collection provides reflection, insight and points for further discussion and debate in four areas of conflict resolution: the rise of cyber warfare and the challenges this presents to conflict resolution; how human rights should be understood and contextualised in conflict situations; the environmental challenges which conflict resolution must respond to; and finally, how can we better meet the needs of students of conflict resolution to help form better practitioners of conflict resolution? The common threads running through the four essays are threefold: (i) the need for an ongoing conversation between conflict resolution theorists and practitioners with experts and practitioners in other fields; (ii) the benefits to conflict resolution theory and practice that

such conversations and alliances could nurture and vice-versa; and (iii) the necessity to constantly adapt conflict resolution models, processes and practices to the evermore cosmopolitan world and its natural environment in which we have to live and work. This collection hopefully serves to contribute, in a small yet relevant and timely manner to these directions.

Notes

¹ Oliver Ramsbotham, Tom Woodhouse, Hugh Miall, *Contemporary Conflict Resolution*, 4th edition, Polity Press, 2016 p. 5

² Ibid

³ See for example Julie A Mertus and Jeffrey W Helsing, *Human Rights and Conflict*, United States Institute for Peace, 2006; Michelle Parlevliet, Guy Lamb, and Victoria Maloka (eds.), *Defenders of Human Rights, Managers of Conflict, Builders of Peace? National human rights institutions, conflict management and peacebuilding in Africa*, Centre for Conflict Resolution, Cape Town, 2005; Brice Dickson, *The European Convention on Human Rights and the Conflict in Northern Ireland*, Oxford University Press, 2010