

## **JOHN BURTON'S CONTRIBUTION TO CONFLICT RESOLUTION THEORY AND PRACTICE: A PERSONAL VIEW**

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### **Introduction: Some Autobiographical Background**

Nearly 30 years ago, while a doctoral student at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, Scotland, I had the good fortune to fall in with Professor John W. Burton and his Centre for the Analysis of Conflict (CAC) at University College London (UCL). This began an apprenticeship in the development and application of knowledge relevant to understanding and dealing with deep-rooted conflicts across the wide spectrum of human relationships.

In those days, the early 1970s, attention was focussed on the East-West conflict and its spectre of thermonuclear annihilation; the endlessly intrac Middle East conflict and the Northern Irish "Troubles" the brutal Apartheid system in South Africa; the inexplicable Greek-Cypriot/Turkish-Cypriot conflict, and the like. Professor Burton and his CAC colleagues -- an interdisciplinary group of anthropologists, historians, political scientists, psychologists, international lawyers, and others -- were beginning to develop techniques for facilitating dialogue between parties to such conflicts.

By the time serendipity and good fortune brought me "up to London" from Glasgow to work with Professor Burton, he had already developed and tested his "controlled communication" problem solving workshops in the context of a conflict in Southeast Asia and had published his first book on the process, *Conflict and Communication; The Use of Controlled Communication in International Relations* (Burton, 1969). He had also begun to pioneer the development of an alternative vision to the dominant Realpolitik ("realist") paradigm, beginning with the publication of his *Systems, States, Diplomacy and Rules* (Burton, 1968), which evolved into his *World Society* (1972) paradigm, pre-publication proofs of which I used in my first year teaching with his students in 1971. A few years later, the concept of "world society" generated a "trans-Atlantic ... cross-cultural dialogue" among members of the International Studies Association (ISA), beginning with a rich debate between Burton and his CAC colleagues, John Groom, Christopher Mitchell and Anthony de Reuck. This led to the publication (by the ISA) of their challenge to the American [realist/state-centric] approach to the study of international relations: *The Study of World Society; A London Perspective* (Burton, et al., 1974; Vasquez, 1983).

Although I remained with Burton at UCL for only three years, I was "hooked" on the theory-practice-theory nexus that he and his associates were developing. By the time his initial theoretical work on the link between frustrated basic human needs (BHNs) and violent conflict appeared in his *Deviance, Terrorism and War* (1979), Burton, the consummate original thinker, had presented the world of human knowledge:

in *World Society*, a comprehensive alternative to bleak, simplistic, self-fulfilling/self-perpetuating (but always compelling) Realpolitik;  
 in *Conflict and Communication*, a method for dealing with conflicts within that alternative worldview, through problem solving workshops; and  
 in *Deviance, Terrorism and War* and in later works, a theory, of Basic Human Needs, accounting for the deep-rooted nature of protracted, intractable conflicts.

In the mid 1980's, I had the pleasure of further developing this last idea with Professor Burton during his time at George Mason University's Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution (ICAR)(Burton and Sandole, 1986, 1987).

Most recently, following his efforts to institutionalise further the field of conflict and conflict resolution (Burton, 1987; 1990ab; Burton and Dukes, 1990ab), his *Violence Explained* (1997) makes explicit what had always been implicit in his systems approach to conflict and conflict resolution at all levels: that to deal with deep-rooted, intractable conflicts at any level, one requires a comprehensive, holistic framework to "capture the complexity of conflict" (Sandole, 1999):

The breaking down of knowledge in the name of science is probably a significant reason for humanity's persistent failure to control its destiny ... [People] tend to perceive situations in a limited context, to seek limited remedies for problems and generally to reduce seemingly complex variables to simple proposition ... Diagnosis has become a matter of chance, depending on the interest areas of those making it. A psychologist makes one, a sociologist another, politicians yet others according to their specific knowledge and interests. Limited ideologies and belief systems influence all. This lack of a holistic view obviously leads to superficial, false and often damaging policy decisions (Burton, 1997, p. 130).

It is this theme of comprehensive frameworks that I wish to highlight in this second *Festschrift* for Professor Burton. (For the first, see Banks, 1984).

### **The Four-Worlds Model**

In the mid-1980s, Ingrid Sandole-Staroste and I edited the first major work to emerge from the (then) recently established Center for Conflict Resolution (CCR) -- which eventually became ICAR -- at George Mason University (Sandole and Sandole-Staroste, 1987). My

concluding chapter of that volume featured something that I called the "Four-Worlds' Model of the Perceptual-Behavioural Process" (Sandole, 1987). In that model, I postulated that each sentient actor, whether at the individual, group, societal or other level, receives stimuli from two external "worlds" -- the natural world (World 1) and the human-made world (World 3). When the stimuli trigger the "discharge potentials" of actors' various senses, they become information. Information then becomes progressively encoded and further processed, initially in one of the internal "worlds," the biological/ physiological world (World 4) for eventual deposition into, and decoding by the mental world (World 2) as some kind of "definition of the situation" or perception of the original stimulus (See Popper (1972) for Worlds 1-3: I have modified his World 3 and have added World 4).

Burton's work on World Society and corresponding "cobweb" model of international relations challenged the dominant *Realpolitik* paradigm and its corresponding "billiard ball" model. Thus, I was encouraged to conceive of the human-made world (World 3) in terms of mosaics of multiple actors at multiple levels, different elements of which are traditionally claimed by the "sovereign" disciplines as their particular domains of discourse: a fractured state of affairs which renders the individual disciplines more a part of the problem than of the solution.

Burton's work on basic human needs theory allowed me to see the interface between the biological/physiological and mental worlds (Worlds 4 and 2) as being comparable to insights found in Kenneth Boulding's (1956) classic work on perception; for example, the interdependent relationships between cognitive (belief), evaluative (value), and affective (emotional) images.

In other words, BHNs for identity, recognition and security (Burton, 1997) can influence our beliefs, the values we place on them, and the emotional impact of the frustration of those highly valued beliefs.

Developing this further, the ontological basis of BHNs resides in the biological/physiological world (World 4), influences the development of beliefs and values in the mental world (World 2), and is significantly influenced by actors' embeddedness within the *cultural* aspects of the human world (World 3). In turn, this world also affect the beliefs and values in the mental world (Avruch and Black, 1987, 1993; Avruch, et al., 1991; Avruch, 1998).

Burton's simple but compelling hypothesis on the link between BHNs -- no matter how subjectively experienced and culturally impacted -- and violent conflict is: the better the fit between BHNs and the means for fulfilling them in the natural and human-made worlds,

the less likely are violent attempt to fulfil BHNs. On the other hand, the worse the fit, the more likely that the actor concerned will employ violent means to fulfil her or his BHNs:

The reason why past compliance systems led to alienation and anti-social behaviours is now emerging. It is becoming clear that there are human limits to capacities to conform to elite-sponsored institutions and norms: the person is not wholly malleable. On the contrary, the needs that are frustrated by institutions will be pursued in one way or another. These needs would seem to be even more fundamental than food and shelter. Individuals are prepared to go to extreme lengths to defy systems in order to pursue their deeply felt needs, even death by suicide bombing or by hunger strikes (Burton, 1997, p. 19; emphasis in original).

### **Burton's Fellow Travellers**

At about the same time that Burton was making some of his major contributions to the developing field of conflict and conflict resolution, a pioneer in the related field of peace studies, Johan Galtung, had conceptualised that the more intense the cause of gaps between potential and actual fulfilment of somatic and mental needs, the greater the violence inflicted upon the actors concerned (see Galtung, 1969). Galtung then went on to distinguish indirect, structural *violence* from the more direct, physical manifestations of the term:

a structurally based discrepancy between actual and potential states of somatic and mental well-being, [structural violence] need not be perceived by its "victims" or involve physical violence. What it does constitute, however, is a system of differential, unequal access to the means for closing the gap between the actual and the potential, where those at the "bottom" of some hierarchically structured relational system cannot -- by virtue of involuntary membership in certain ethnic, class, religious, gender, and/or other groups -- obtain fair access to the social, economic political, educational, legal, and/or other systems and corresponding resources typically enjoyed, and presided over, by the mainstream. Structural violence is what exists in situations of institutionalised racism within, and imperialism across, societies (Sandole, 1993, p. 11-12; 1999, p. 117).

In situations of structural violence, therefore, the violence is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances:

Resources are unevenly distributed, as when income distributions are heavily skewed, literacy/education unevenly distributed, medical services existent in some districts and for some groups only, and so on. Above all the *power to decide over the*

*distribution of resources* is unevenly distributed (Galtung, 1969, p. 171; emphasis in the original).

Galtung's contributions in this regard are compatible with the work of Ted Robert Gurr (1970) on relative deprivation: the felt gap between value expectations [resources to which one feels entitled] and value capabilities [resources one feels capable of achieving and holding on to]. The greater the perception of structural violence, the greater the relative deprivation experienced by the actors concerned and the greater the likelihood of political violence.

When a gang member says that she or he has entered and remains a member of a gang subculture because gang membership provides love, respect and security -- thereby implying the failure of the family, school, religion and community in general to fulfil those needs -- then we have at least anecdotal confirmation of the propositions inherent in Burton, Galtung, and Gurr:

Emotionally needy boys who are rejected by teachers and parents are prime targets for antisocial older youth and adults. These negative role models recruit vulnerable boys, and they exchange self-affirmation for loyalty to the antisocial cause. Many violent and troubled boys have stories of how they were befriended by older boys who accepted them in return for their involvement in criminal activities. When I asked Stephen about his motivation for joining a gang, he said, "They were like a family, but a hell of a lot better than the family I had" (Garbarino, 1999, p. 168).

Burton and others employing his, or modified versions of his problem solving approach to facilitated dialogue and conflict resolution (Azar, 1986, 1990; Kelman, 1986, 1991; Mitchell & Banks, 1996; Fisher, 1997), enter the "space" of conflicting parties to help them do what they seem unable to do alone, not for lack of intelligence but through an overabundance of emotional commitment to progressively narrower means for achieving narrowing goals. The aim is basically to improve the fit between BHNs and the means for fulfilling them for all concerned.

A third party in this regard has to do more than simply convene meetings and facilitate dialogue, presumably to change parties' perceptions of each other and of their conflict. They also have to facilitate changes in political, economic, social and other structures in the human-made world, allowing the relatively more disenfranchised parties greater access to what structural violence had previously denied them - resources in the human-made and natural worlds for fulfilling their BHNs. Conflict resolution for Burton is much more than "getting people to the table" although that may be no small feat in some circumstances. It is also a political philosophy and political system (Burton, 1989, 1993)

concerned with *conflict prevention* (Burton, 1990a; Burton and Dukes, 1990b). This involves transforming "structurally violent" structures which otherwise impact people's lives to the extent that the latter are quite prepared to explode their way into our consciousness, if not also literally into our lives. For example, note the terrorist attack on the USS Cole on 12 October 2000.

### **A Unified Field Theory?**

The micro (biological/physiological and mental worlds') and macro (natural and human-made worlds') interface implicit in Burton's work could be used as a point of departure for analysing and responding to conflicts of any kind at any level. Hence, the generic nature and implications of Burton's fruitful work which has come to impact my own. In recent years this includes my ambitious attempt to develop the 4-worlds' model into an embryonic unified field theory of violent conflict and war (Sandole, 1999, Ch. 8). In this work, I postulate that the four worlds and interaction within and between them, "capture the complexity" of conflicts. They do this by providing a basis for integrating the fragmented disciplines and, correspondingly, potential causes and conditions of conflicts at all levels, particularly violent conflicts. Consider, for example:

The complex relationship between social environment, status, self-esteem, serotonin, and violence.... Serotonin, a neuro-transmitter "which plays a role in restraining aggressive impulses" (Goleman, 1995, p. C10), can be affected by one's self-worth (esteem), which can itself be influenced by one's status and social environment. Hence, a brutal social environment, reflective of physical as well as structural violence, with limited, if any, opportunities for personal growth and "social elevation" (world 3), can correlate with low status (worlds 3 and 2), low self-esteem (world 4), low serotonin levels (world 4), "attendant states of mind" (world 2), and an increase in the probability of violent behaviour (including internalised violence in the form of depression and suicide). A social environment rich with resources available to an individual, on the other hand, can correlate with positive status, and "the sort of feedback that raises self-esteem and serotonin" and a low probability of "impulsive risk-taking" and violent behaviour (Wright, 1995, p. 75). (Sandole, 1999, pp. 181-182.)

### **The Three Pillar Framework**

Another way to look at Burton's work and his influence, is the 3 pillar framework (Sandole, 1998), which makes clearer the possible role of potential third parties. Pillar 1, located in the middle of the figure below, deals with the primary subject matter addressed here, conflict: latent conflict (pre-MCP), manifest conflict process (MCP) or aggressive manifest conflict process (AMCP) (Sandole, 1998, pp. 1-3; Sandole, 1999, pp. 16-17). This primary

pillar includes parties, issues, objectives, means, conflict-handling orientations, and conflict environments, as well as the historical, cultural, political, social, religious, institutional and other "spaces" within which conflicts unfold.

Pillar 2 deals with conflict causes and conditions. Reflecting the conceptual contributions of Kenneth Waltz (1959) and Robert North (1990), it comprises individual, societal, international, and global-ecological sources of influence on any conflict under Pillar 1.

Pillar 3 deals with conflict intervention, and includes, initially, third party objectives: violent conflict prevention, management, settlement, resolution, and transformation (leading to Burton's prevention). Subsequently, it also includes third party means for achieving any of those objectives, such as competitive and/or cooperative processes; negative peace and/or positive peace orientations; and Track-1 and/or Track-2 actors and processes.

The idea here is that if conflicts expressed at any level (pillar 1) are complex in terms of their etiology (pillar 2), then efforts to deal with them (pillar 3) must "capture that complexity" as well.

Locating Burton's ideas discussed above within the 3-pillar framework, we have something like Figure I.

### **A Tentative Conclusion to an Ongoing Intellectual Odyssey**

Burton has argued that if an actor cannot fulfil her or his Basic Human Needs one way, she or he will attempt to do so in other ways. If they cannot do so within the existing, "status-quo" system, they may create parallel, "revolutionary" systems for doing so. For example, note the creation and maintenance of gang subcultures or the parallel structures set up by Kosovar Albanians after the abrogation of Kosovo's autonomy in 1989. Hence, we may be reminded of the longer term, dysfunctional consequences for all concerned if majorities (ingroups) attempt to disenfranchise, undermine, eliminate or otherwise constrain minorities (outgroups) from "being all that they can be". Current examples include Turkey's war with its Kurdish population, Russia's war with its Chechen population and Israel's war with its Palestinian population.

Trying to constrain actors from celebrating who they are, from being recognized with respect and dignity, and from being secure from cruel, barbaric treatment meted out to them solely because of their involuntary membership in certain racial, ethnic, religious and/or other groups, may turn out to be a catastrophic disaster for all concerned in the long run. This may turn out to be the case, no matter how apparently expeditious, functional, "cheap" or otherwise justifiable the constraints may be in the short run. During Algeria's war for independence from France, Frantz Fanon (1963, Ch. 5), among other things a

psychiatrist, noticed this in his work with those who experienced violence on both the delivery and receiving ends, including those who tortured as well as those who were tortured. Indeed, what did Serbs and the world expect when Slobodan Milosevic abrogated Kosovo's autonomy in 1989, throwing out of work tens of thousands of Kosovar Albanians and forcing them to either emigrate or set up parallel structures for education, health care, and the like? What did the world expect of Palestinians in the Israeli-occupied areas, after 52 years of consistent frustration of their needs for identity, recognition, and security? Burton could have told us, and generically he has for some years now:

From a theoretical point of view there is the simple proposition that if certain human needs are not satisfied, there will be conflict. The conflict will be of such a character that no suppressive means will contain it. Attempts to suppress it will lead, on the contrary, to exponential increases in conflict. One could go on to predict a total catastrophe (Burton, 1990a, p. 231).

**Figure 1:**  
**A Comprehensive Mapping of Conflict and Conflict Resolution:**  
**A Three Pillar Approach**

<b>Pillar 2</b>	<b>Pillar 1</b>	<b>Pillar 3</b>
<p><i>Conflict Causes and Conditions</i></p> <p>Individual [BHNs] Societal International Global/Ecological</p>	<p><i>Conflict</i> (Latent [Pre-MCP] MCP/AMCP)</p> <p>Parties Issues Objectives Means Conflict-handling Orientations Conflict Environments <b>[World Society (Cobweb Model)]</b></p>	<p><i>Conflict Intervention</i> <u>3rd Party Objectives</u> Conflict Prevention Conflict Management Conflict Settlement Conflict Resolution</p> <p>Conflict Transformation <b>[Conflict Provention]</b></p> <p><u>3rd-Party Approaches</u> Competitive vs. Cooperative Processes Negative vs. Positive Peace Orientations Track-1 vs. Track-2 Actors and Processes [Problemsolving Facilitated Conflict Resolution Workshops]</p>

Given recent events, Burton appears to have been right! There is a scene in the very compelling motion picture, *American History X*, when the former school teacher/counsellor of actor Edward Norton's neo-Nazi skinhead character asks Norton, "Has anything you've ever done [as a skinhead] made a difference in your life?" This is a question that can be put to anyone who has forcefully tried to prevent people from fulfilling their Basic Human Needs for identity, recognition, and security. They may come up with the same response that Norton's character comes up with: an emotional breakdown. This is much like the U.S. flier in the documentary film about the Vietnam War, *Hearts and Minds*. When asked if he had any children, to which he replied, "yes," he was then asked "Do you think you bombed any children in your carpet-bombing missions?"

The major problem with adhering to a progressively narrowing Realpolitik worldview is that it creates its own reality and, therefore, tends to be negatively self-fulfilling (Sandole, 1987, 1999; Vasquez, 1993). As such, it rarely allows those embedded in its insidious Eigendynamik to extricate themselves from the realist "box," to pause to ask themselves questions such as; "Were Milosevic and the Serbian people better off because of the genocidal violence they inflicted on Croats, Bosnian Muslims, and Kosovar Albanians?" Given Milosevic's apparent downfall through "people power" in September/October 2000, apparently not!

Rather than strive to maximize the distance (in Galtung's terms, the violence) between Basic Human Needs and the means and resources for fulfilling them, which Realpolitik encourages actors to do before others do it to them, we should encourage conflicting and third parties to strive to maximize the fit between BHNs and resources. Otherwise, we all lose in the eventual result, which might well be a possible consequence of the murderous escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict during the autumn of 2000, or, in a worst case, through an Indian-Pakistani nuclear exchange over Kashmir.

This is Burton's contribution, his message, and his impact. This is the message of conflict resolution as a political philosophy and as a political system: to pursue conflict prevention and maximize the fit between Basic Human Needs and the means and resources for fulfilling them, or to bear the consequences! A sobering, sombre realization. Hence, my location of BHNs at the core of what I call -- as an alternative to the dominant Realpolitik paradigm -- non-Marxist radical thought (NMRT) (Sandole, 1993; Sandole 1999, Ch. 6).

### **Epilogue**

During the Twelfth Annual Scientific Meeting of the International Society of Political Psychology (ISPP) in Tel Aviv, during 18-22 June 1989, the Egyptian Ambassador to Israel asked, in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, "Why not make a long story short "?

Indeed! But the problem here is, no matter how simple, straight-forward, "rational" and compelling this kind of message might be, most of us on the planet have not yet "gotten it."

Presumably, many people are into deep "time collapse", reliving the past in the present and future on the basis of various "chosen traumas" (Volkan, 1997). For example, there is the significance of 28 June 1389 for Serbs regarding the fall of Kosovo to the Ottoman Turks; 29 May 1453 for Greeks regarding the fall of Constantinople (Istanbul) to the Ottoman Turks; 12 July 1690 for the Irish regarding the defeat of [Catholic] King James by [Protestant] King William at the Battle of the Boyne; 24 April 1915 for Armenians regarding genocidal massacres by Ottoman Turks; and 1939-1945 for Jews regarding Nazi Germany's attempted "final solution" of the extermination of European Jewry.

Although capturing the interface between our biological/ physiological and mental worlds, "chosen traumas" seem to be lodged at the affective level, and hence, are among the most "deep-rooted" aspects of intractable, identity-based conflicts.

So, the quest continues for appropriate theory to underlie appropriate practice. This does not mean completely dethroning *Realpolitik*, as we just might need its "negative peace" orientation and tools to stop a genocidal slaughter (but probably not by bombing the capital city of a sovereign state from 30,000 feet to "avoid taking casualties"). Instead, we need to complement elements of *Realpolitik* with elements of *Idealpolitik*, Marxism, and NMRT to "capture the complexity of conflicts." Otherwise, we may continue to respond to complex conflicts in a simple, often technologically-neat-and-"smart" manner. Good intentions to the contrary, this may cause the response to become part of the problem instead of the solution (Sandole, 1999, Ch. 8).

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