BASIC HUMAN NEEDS:
THE NEXT STEPS IN THEORY DEVELOPMENT

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Since the publication of his seminal book, *Deviance, Terrorism and War: The Process of Solving Unsolved Social and Political Problems* (1979), John Burton has been closely identified with the theory of basic human needs, an approach to understanding protracted social conflict that he continues to espouse and to refine (see, e.g., Burton, 1990a, 1997). Burton did not invent the theory, which posits the existence of certain universal needs that must be satisfied if people are to prevent or resolve destructive conflicts, but he gave it its most impassioned and uncompromising expression.

In *Deviance, Terrorism and War* Burton acknowledged his debt to Paul Sites, whose *Control: The Basis of Social Order* (1973) defined eight essential needs whose satisfaction was required in order to produce "normal" (non-deviant, non-violent) individual behaviour. According to Sites, these included the primary needs for consistency of response, stimulation, security, and recognition, and derivative needs for justice, meaning, rationality, and control. Sites, in turn, recognized the importance of Abraham Maslow's conception of human development as the sequential satisfaction of basic needs, which Maslow (1954) had grouped under five headings: physiological, safety, belongingness/love, esteem, and self-actualisation. The idea that humans qua humans have needs whose satisfaction is the effective antidote to alienation is considerably older than this, of course, as Karl Marx's youthful reflections on Hegel suggest:

The whole of history is a preparation for 'man' to become the object of sense perception and for needs to be the needs of 'man as man'.

It can be seen how [under socialism] the wealthy man and the plenitude of human need take the place of economic wealth and poverty. The wealthy man is the man who needs a complete manifestation of human life and a man in whom his own realization exists as an inner necessity, as a need ("Towards a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction," in McLellan, 1977, p. 94).

For Burton, the concept of basic human needs offered a possible method of grounding the field of conflict analysis and resolution (which he and a few other pioneers had essentially improvised during the 1960s) in a defensible theory of the person. Together with other peace researchers (see Lederer and Galtung, 1980; Coate and Rosati, 1988; and the writers

represented in Burton, 1990b), he set out to reframe the concept in order to provide the new field with a convincing alternative to the prevailing paradigms of postwar social science: mechanistic utilitarianism, behaviourism, cultural relativism, and Hobbesian "Realism." In Burton's view, the needs most salient to an understanding of destructive social conflicts were those for identity, recognition, security, and personal development. Over time, however, he tended to emphasize the failure of existing state systems to satisfy the need for identity as the primary source of modern ethno-nationalist struggles.

The great promise of human needs theory, in Burton's view, was that it would provide a relatively objective basis, transcending local political and cultural differences, for understanding the sources of conflict, designing conflict resolution processes, and founding conflict analysis and resolution as an autonomous discipline. The importance of this ambitious project is now generally recognized by conflict theorists, whether they agree with Burton or not (see Fisher, 1997; Avruch, 1998; Jeong, 2000). This essay will suggest some ways in which the project has succeeded, some ways in which it has fallen short, and some possible avenues for further theory development.

The Need for Needs Theory

From the end of World War II until the late 1970s, general theories of conflict came in two varieties, neither of which, in John Burton's view, was adequate to explain either the persistence of "irrational" social struggles or the real opportunities for their resolution. We can call these apparently opposed (but actually complementary) schools of thought *conservative personalism* and *liberal situationalism*.

Conservative personalist theories picture humans as creatures driven to engage in violent conflict by sinful rebelliousness, innate aggressive instincts, or a lust for power (e.g., Freud, 1989b; Lorenz, 1997). From this perspective, the situational environment merely provides a context and trigger for conflictual thoughts and activities that are primarily internally generated. By definition, human impulses to sin, aggress, or dominate cannot be stamped out; they require control or "balancing" by countervailing force. If this be true, of course, non-violent, self-enforcing conflict resolution (what Johan Galtung (1996) terms "peace by peaceful means") must be considered a utopian fantasy.

Liberal situationalist theories, on the other hand, seemed at first to provide conflict resolvers with grounds for optimism. By emphasizing the potency of social determinants rather than the intractability of individual instincts, they suggested that conflict behaviours might be altered by altering the external situation. Strict behaviourism (for an extreme example, see Skinner, 1965), relegated instincts and other internal mechanisms to a metaphorical "black box," postulating that, given a certain environment or situation, people

would behave in predictable ways. Frustration-aggression theorists like Dollard (1980) reduced the aggressive instinct to a mere potential for destructive action, with primary attention focused on situations that activate this potential by frustrating goal-oriented activity. Social learning theory presented humans as cognising creatures whose ideas and attitudes were largely determined by social conditioning (Bandura, 1976). And much post-Freudian psychoanalytical theory moved analogously from the primacy of instinct to family- or culture-based situational determinism (Mitchell and Black, 1996).

Burton's crucial perception was that the apparent personalist/situationalist dichotomy masked an underlying similarity. Taken at their word, the personalists held that the individual was unchangeably aggressive and the situationalists that he/she was infinitely malleable. But these "inwardly driven" and "outwardly determined" models of behaviour actually functioned as the polar extremes of a continuum on which most analysts and policymakers occupied some midpoint. Thus, while the personalists opened the door to limited "social engineering" by suggesting that aggressive instincts could be externally controlled or counterbalanced, the situationalists found themselves unable or unwilling to reconstruct social environments (as Skinner had fantasized doing in Walden Two, 1976) to the extent necessary to eliminate anti-social behaviours.

When faced with a case of destructive violence, therefore, both schools of thought tended to respond as if objectionable behaviour could be modified by applying the right combination of threats and rewards. Both philosophies, that is, were essentially utilitarian, with the conservatives emphasizing the control of behaviour via the administration of pain ("deterrence") and the liberals control via the administration of pleasure ("positive reinforcement").

Both perspectives, as John Burton, Johan Galtung, and others pointed out, were essentially elitist; that is, they assumed that governing elites could pacify their unruly subjects by discovering the point at which curves of pain and pleasure would intersect to produce "consensual" behaviour. And both, in practice, tended to emphasize the stick more than the carrot, on the ground that force must be used as the "persuader" of last resort. Where conservative and liberal utilitarians most clearly joined forces was on the terrain of "Political Realism" - the perspective that sees political actors both as aggressive power-seekers and as rational calculators of individual and group interests.

In foreign affairs, Realists emphasize the relentless pursuit of power by competing nations and blocs, war as a continuation of politics by other means, and power-based negotiations as the only practical alternative to inter-group violence (Morgenthau, 1985). In domestic affairs, they emphasize the needs for normative consensus, interest-based commercial and political bargaining, and the violent suppression of crime (Coser, 1964; Wilson, 1998).

The problem, according to John Burton and other needs theorists, was that the methods dictated by Realist thinking had proved ineffective to prevent or terminate serious transnational and domestic social conflicts.

Realism, in short, was simply not realistic. The types of social conflict most characteristic of world society since 1950 - ethno-nationalist wars and civil wars, violent struggles between races, social classes and religious groups, Great Power "police actions," terrorism, gang warfare, and crime - seemed largely immune to coercive or manipulative counteraction. In fact, people's involvement in these sorts of struggles appeared to escalate in response to attempts to deter their behaviour forcibly - a mysterious, frightening response that tempted their would-be controllers to declare these intractably disobedient actors evil, irrational, or even non-human. Faced with the near-genocidal implications of this cycle of violence, Burton and others saw the need for a theory that would challenge both brands of Realism at the level of their most basic assumptions. Basic human needs theory - a radically optimistic personalism - was their answer.

Needs Theory: Virtues and Limitations

From the perspective of conflict analysis and resolution, basic human needs theory offers theorists and practitioners certain important advantages. Three virtues of the theory seem particularly notable:

First, it permits conflict resolvers to make a valid distinction between struggles that can be dealt with by employing the conventional trinity of force, law, and/or power-based negotiation, and those whose resolution requires other measures. "Needs and values are not for trading," Burton asserts (1990a, p. 39), distinguishing needs-based conflicts, and the processes of conflict resolution properly so called, from interest-based disputes and the processes characteristic of strategic studies, conventional diplomacy, and "alternative dispute resolution." Another Burtonian apothegm, "Deterrence cannot deter (1990a, p.34) calls attention to the inefficacy of coercive methods to modify behaviour when individuals or groups are impelled to act on the basis of imperative needs.

Second, equipped with a needs-based map of the field, conflict analysts and resolvers can understand the contradictions inherent in general notions like "negotiation" and "dispute resolution," and the necessity to design resolution processes corresponding to a conflict's underlying generic sources. Where the conflict is generated by unsolved problems of political identity, for example, the process required will be analytical, exposing the differences between the conflicting parties' perceived interests and their underlying needs, and offering them a wide range of possible solutions to the reframed identity problem. There is thus a historical, if not logical, connection between human needs theory and the

process known as the analytical or interactive problem-solving workshop (see Fisher, 1997; Mitchell and Banks, 1996).

Third, a needs-based approach to social conflict undermines conventional notions of conflict causation, in particular the idea that destructive social conflicts are produced instrumentally by a few manipulative leaders or expressively by the sheer existence of cultural or ideological differences. (See, e.g., Rubenstein and Crocker (1994) criticizing Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" theory). Using unsatisfied needs as an independent variable, the theory helps to explain why ruling class manipulation or cultural differences sometimes generate conflict and sometimes fail to do so.

Moreover, the theory provides a basis for linking conflict analysis with conflict resolution. Conflict resolution (as opposed to temporary "dispute settlement") requires a process that helps conflicting parties identify salient unsatisfied needs and consider methods of accommodating social arrangements to the ineluctable demands of "necessitous" individuals and groups. In some cases at least, this may mean assisting the parties to conceptualise and implement significant "structural" changes (see Rubenstein in Jeong, 2000, pp. 173-195).

Certain limitations of the theory, as currently formulated, can also be identified. To begin with, the attempt to establish an objective basis for socially and politically salient needs in human biology or in unalterable "human nature" has been criticized as indefensibly "essentialist," de-contextualised, and a-historical (see, e.g., Avruch, 1998). In many ways, these criticisms seem apt.

John Burton has attempted to counter them by asserting boldly that, while basic human needs themselves are universal, transcending differences in class, gender, and culture, their satisfiers are culturally determined. But such a radical separation between needs and satisfiers runs afoul of the fact that concepts like identity and security are not independently existing "universals" rather, they are ideas abstracted from a multiplicity of concrete satisfiers. If the satisfiers are culture-bound, therefore, so, too, are the needs.

Does this mean that there are no universal (i.e., genuinely "human") needs? Not necessarily. Biologizing (or "ontologizing") needs forecloses the inquiry that should be made into the extent to which certain needs are becoming universal as a global culture comes painfully and convulsively into existence. It also forecloses other necessary inquiries: for example, into the relationship between childhood and adult behaviour. Is the adult's quest for political identity, say, a natural extension of the child's needs to bond with and differentiate itself from its parents (see Clark, in Burton, 1990b, pp. 34-59)? Or is it a regression symptomatic of incomplete or interrupted child development? Similarly, does

the alleged need for "sacred meaning" postulated by Mary Clark spring from human nature, perhaps as a further development of the child's need for "consistency of response" (see Sites in Burton, 1990b, pp. 7-33)? Or, as Freud suggests in The Future of an Illusion (1989), is it merely evidence of some individuals' failure to "grow up"?

A related problem concerns the definition of the salient needs themselves. While John Burton reduces the basic human needs to three or four, focusing especially on identity and recognition, Johan Galtung, grouping them a la Maslow, contends that an adequate account of needs as sources of destructive conflict must also include the drive to satisfy basic needs for "welfare," "freedom," and "meaning" (Galtung, in Burton, 1990b, pp. 301-335). From Burton's perspective, the characterization of "welfare" and "freedom" needs as basic is misleading, since people will jeopardize or surrender both for the sake of defending their identities. Moreover, extending the list of basic needs tends to blur the distinction between "wants" and "needs" to the point that every intense desire may be conceived of as a basic need. At the point that the wants/needs distinction washes away entirely, of course, so does the utility of the theory.

Again, the difficulty does not seem insuperable, provided that one is willing to conceive of needs as relatively rather than absolutely "basic." We speak of "needs" rather than "wants" when we are convinced that a failure to obtain what is desired will produce results that are personally or socially destructive. (What is "destructive," of course, is not determined by biology; the term embodies an element of political and moral judgment.)

And we speak of needs as being "basic" when people in large enough numbers desire something intensely enough for a long enough period of time to sacrifice other desired ends for it. On this basis, Galtung may be justified in describing the need for freedom as basic, particularly when he specifies it in terms of concrete satisfiers like physical mobility. The needs that, if unsatisfied, generate destructive conflict may therefore change over the course of human history or even over the course of an individual's personal history. This fact does not prevent us from identifying and describing them or suggesting conflict resolution solutions aimed at satisfying them.

Needs Theory: Possibilities of Further Development

Christopher Mitchell has rightly pointed out (in Burton, 1990b, pp. 166-171) that we have no theory of satisfiers equivalent to the theory of basic human needs. One cause of this lack may be that in absolutizing basic human needs, John Burton and his fellow thinkers absolutely relativised their satisfiers. If the need for identity, say, is everywhere and always the same, but what will satisfy it is determined entirely by local histories and changing

social circumstances, it becomes difficult, perhaps impossible, to predict before the fact what will "work" to terminate an identity-based conflict.

The collapse in 2000-2001 of the Oslo-initiated Middle East "peace process" is an illuminating example of this problem. For years, Palestinian and Israeli negotiators attempted in good faith to discover adequate satisfiers for their people's identity and security needs. But, working from an essentially secular perspective, neither side took into account the explosiveness of essentially religious issues like the status of Jerusalem and the Jewish settlements on the West Bank. The fact that these issues did prove so difficult to resolve demonstrated that, at the mass level, the national identities in question were conceived in religious as well as secular terms, and that measures not satisfying this conception of identity were bound to fail.

The example suggests that by situating the identity need in the context of a group's history, i.e., by defining it more clearly in terms of its potential satisfiers, the problem of assessing the relevance and adequacy of alternative satisfiers may be demystified.

The same Middle East situation exemplifies the fact that, disregarding John Burton's determined advocacy of conflict "provention (1990a)," needs theory is generally applied after violent social conflict has erupted, under circumstances that make an adequate analysis of the salient needs and satisfiers very difficult. Perhaps Ted R. Gurr's predictive study of minorities at risk (2000) will show needs theorists a possible way to enhance the usefulness of their theory. One can conceive of a regional or even global survey seeking to determine, in the case of specific ethnic or national groups, how identity and security needs are conceived, what levels of satisfaction prevail, and which satisfiers (i.e., what forms of socio-political change) seem best suited to increase the level of satisfaction. If such a survey were successful in calling attention to potentially violent conflict situations and the steps needed to defuse them, needs theory would have clearly proved its usefulness.

A second line of research and theory development might aim at exploring the needs and satisfiers applicable to conflicts that are not purely or primarily ethno-nationalist, but that involve other forms of group definition. It is understood that many general conflict and conflict resolution theories bear the marks of their origin in the study of particular types of conflict. Basic human needs theory was implicitly designed to throw light on the sources and methods of resolving identity-group conflicts of the sort that plagued world society during the postwar period of decolonisation, and that are far from obsolete even now. Nevertheless, especially since the late 1970s, other forms of social conflict have forced themselves on our attention. This suggests a series of questions requiring better answers: Which needs/satisfiers are relevant to understanding the modern upsurge of religious

conflict around the world? What drives the revival of class struggle in nations of the semi-periphery? Which conflict resolution processes are likely to be most effective in these diverse cases?

Third, in order to move from the relatively abstract level on which needs theory functions at present to more concrete and useful understandings of the role of basic needs in conflict, we need a better understanding of their psychological origins and the processes through which needs become conscious motivators of collective action.

John Burton and Johan Galtung departed quite deliberately from Abraham Maslow's post-Freudian psychology, with its hierarchy of developmental needs seemingly rooted in unacknowledged Western and bourgeois cultural values. But there is some indication that, in extracting basic needs from the mental structures postulated by Freud and his successors, the baby was thrown out with the bath water. In effect, the needs theorists put emotional and cognitive dynamics into a "black box," much as their behaviourist predecessors had done.

There is much to be gained, in my view, by opening up the black box and asking, for example, whether imperative needs are expressions of a libidinal drive, as Freud (1989b) thought, whether they emerge in the course of human development, as Erikson (1963) and others believed, or whether their nature and role is best explained by cognitive theory, discourse analysis, or some other perspective on mind and personality. Since the relationship between personal and social structures is dialectical rather than one of simple opposition, such an inquiry is likely to complicate somewhat the "moral man/immoral society" construct that makes needs theory so appealing to advocates of social change. In the long run, however, it is likely to provide fuller and more accurate answers to the major question posed by John Burton and his colleagues: How can the basic needs that, unsatisfied, generate destructive social conflict be identified, described, and satisfied?

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