Book Review:

"Social Change and Conflict Transformation."

David Bloomfield, Martina Fischer & Beatrix Schmelzle (eds.). **Berghof Handbook Dialogue Series Issue No. 5, 2006**. Berlin: Berghoff Research Centre for Constructive Conflict Management.

REVIEWED by Rick Wallace[1]

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BOOK REVIEW Rick Wallace
Journal of Peace, Conflict and Development Issue 12, May 2008
Available from www.peacestudiesjournal.org.uk

The Berghof Research Centre's publication (2006) on "Social Change and Conflict Transformation" genuinely deserves its name of a 'dialogue series'; in this case, a debate between social constuctionist and positivist paradigms that raises over-due questions in the field of conflict resolution regarding power, knowledge and reflexivity.

Beginning with a lead article by Chris Mitchell to anchor the debate, the ensuing discussion is a burning fuse that exemplifies that theory and practice cannot be separated. This is not simply a debate about praxis. No, the evolving argument is that our analytical frameworks are too often built on implicit and unacknowledged ontological and epistemological assumptions. Theories of social change and practices of conflict transformation are themselves situated knowledges, socially and politically.

The Handbook is especially brilliant for including Vivienne Jabri's more theoretical critique of the de-politicised nature of power contestation with Chris Mitchell's later response to her and the other writers. Mitchell's response is an agreement to disagree, continue dialogue and yet remain firmly entrenched in a positivist paradigm. Oh woe.

Chris Mitchell, a long-time academic practitioner in the field of conflict resolution, points to the literature for its lack of attention to developing precise but generalisable connections between theories of conflict dynamics, (social) change and practical guidelines for interventions. He is looking for guidelines and maps that will be useful in every circumstance.

To this point, Ed Garcia and Chris Spies elaborate on the centrality of social change in terms of ethics, 3rd party facilitation, peace constituencies and the role of listening. However, it is the pieces by Ilana Shapiro, Daniela Korppen and particularly Vivienne Jabri that raise fundamental issues about methodological and epistemological assumptions pervasive in the field.

Shapiro talks of extending Mitchell's framework of mapping out theories of change and suggests a praxis of theory and practice; an emphasis on inductive, empirical field research that develops theories of change firmly rooted in experience from the field. A dialectical partnership between scholars and practitioners, Shapiro outlines, can work to disentangling the currently under-examined theories, create relevant research agendas, and build grounded theory by evaluating the practical efficacy of those ideas with practitioners.

At the same time, there is a critique of some key assumptions in Chris Mitchell's work. First, grand meta-narratives or unifying theories of change that account for change at multiple levels may be may neither be advisable or possible, particularly given the complexities involved. Rather, one could ask, is it a question of a multiplicity of theories and explanations. Second, Mitchell's approach on theories of change is critiqued for its emphasis on deductive thinking and classification. In its place, Shapiro advocates a collaborative praxis that creates an inductively grounded set of typologies. Third, Shapiro is suggesting making explicit the assumptions within these theories of change as a way of more deeply understanding their framing

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of the issues, their internal logic and subsequent intervention methods. In essence, Ilana Shapiro begins a critique of a pervasive paradigm in the field of conflict resolution; positivism.

Daniela Korppen's piece delves a level deeper on some of the implicit deductive assumptions in Mitchell's paradigm. In brief, she picks up the positivist tendency in Chris Mitchell's work towards meta-narratives of understanding and a generalised approach on 'neutral' third party technology of intervention (See further Foucault) to solve and "fix" conflicts. The implicit consequences of his line of thinking, she argues, serves to de-contextualise conflict dynamics creating a further fissure between effective practice and relevant theories conflict transformation. Further, it creates an interventionist approach that underestimates the complexity of the dynamics, de-politicizes the relationship between knowledge and power (Foucault) and remains critically unreflexive about its own interpretative scheme.

In short, theories of social change needs to refer to both the issues of epistemological and ontological assumptions of power within any analysis, while recognizing the existent multiplicity of local analyses, capacities and practices within any setting that can mobilised and integrated in processed of systemic conflict transformation.

Though Vivienne Jabri's article precedes Daniela Korppen's, it is almost best to read it subsequently. Second, ensure you have read a bit of Michel Foucault beforehand. Jabri does a rigorous deconstruction of Mitchell's positivist paradigm and its ontological assumptions (and avoidances) around human knowledge, agency and relations of power. Moreover, she manages to connect this to the larger social science debates and beliefs around causality, control and the socially constructed nature of our paradigms.

Utilizing Habermas and Foucault, Jabri's overall argument is "knowledge about conflict may be judged, not in terms of the criteria of science, but in terms of the interests that constitute particular frameworks of knowledge and in terms that reveal the complicities of different modes of understanding in relations of power" (Jabri in this Dialogue, pg.74). Her critique of Mitchell's positivism is that it avoids recognizing the inequity and particularity of structural forces and "global matrixes" that dominate choice and constrain agency for some, while enabling and legitimizing others.

Modes of interpretation are not neutral, she writes, but are discursive practices always situated in 'relations of power' and socio-political contexts. The result, she contends, is that conflict analysis, and its language, is always positioned politically and cannot, as Mitchell is want to do, be scrubbed clean of its particularity and be claimed as neutral and objective. Her analysis reflects a pivotal stance that each theory (of change) and set of practices (of conflict resolution) are intimately tied to power.

The Berghof Dialogue Handbook manages to capture a key moment where paradigms collide over claims and possibilities of truth and with it, the fundamentals of any theoretical framework and practices for social change and conflict transformation. This debate between positivist and social constructionist (or critical theorists) has

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enormous implications for the field of conflict resolution and its capacity to understand and enable change.