

## **SOCIAL CHANGE, CONFLICT AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

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### **Summary**

New theories and practices of conflict resolution create a foundation for social change that is neither revolutionary nor reformist. Recognizing that significant and even radical social change will produce conflicts, this new model legitimates them, and provides fora in which those conflicts can be productively resolved.

### **1. Introduction**

Social change is a term with many meanings. For the purpose of this article, this author defines the term “social change” to mean “alterations of social structures.” The author understands social structures to include institutions (organizations, rituals, forms, and conventions), rules (laws, policies, procedures and customs), social roles (defined social functions), and the relationships which define the interaction of individuals and groups. Change, even small change, in one of these elements can induce large changes in the larger social system. The author states as an axiom that any change benefits some members of society more than others. Further, the author asserts that in many cultures, stability is preferred to change and change is considered generally dangerous, unpredictable and harmful. Therefore, fear of change can be as traumatic as change itself. Both cause conflicts. This article examines the role conflict resolution can play in creating new and less traumatic models for social change.

### **2. Myths**

For most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, advocates of social change were

burdened with two archetypal myths.

The first is the myth of change by means of *armed struggle and violent revolution*. In this ideology, true radical social change can never happen peacefully, because those (privileged elites) benefiting from the existing social order never voluntarily agree to change. Formulated by Marx, crystallized by Lenin, and romanticized by later revolutionaries such as Mao Tse Tung and Fidel Castro, endless struggle was honed to high art. In this myth, those unwilling to shed innocent blood were uncommitted to *real* social change. The unspoken corollary is that those who face the existential questions of life and death know more about justice and truth than anybody else. Significant change in social structures requires radical change in human psyches. New people would have to be created with a new consciousness born in struggle and conflict. Only those people with the new vision could make the new social order. Conflict resolution means the total surrender of the old social order.

The second myth was the equally powerful myth of *inevitable gradual reform*. Reformists committed to orderly non-violent social change toiled to make incremental changes within the system. In this myth, social systems are created to benefit those within them, and while they may be imperfect in design, and sometimes corruptly operated, they tend to be self-regulating. Gradual incremental change, according to this myth, is the only steady way to improve social interaction. Steady improvement may never make perfection, but it will get social systems closer to perfection than any other means. The unspoken corollary is that no one has the franchise on knowing truth or justice. Both truth and justice are social constructions that change over time to meet the needs of changing societies. Violent struggle is unproductive, wasteful social friction. Conflict resolution means establishing a truce between different, equally legitimate conceptions of social order to facilitate coexistence or perhaps even collaboration between them.

The dominance of these two myths was so powerful that only the most imaginative activists escaped their pull. Perhaps the greatest hardship was that advocates were often asked to choose one or the other.

“Do you favor accommodation with evil, or will you risk all (for the cause)?”

Or, from the opposite point of view:

“Do you want to make some change, or are you going to risk everything and get nothing?”

### **3. Newer Models for Change**

Advocates for social change who sought a third way, rejecting both violence and incremental reform, had few role models until the end of the century. Oh yes, critics would say, there had been the non-violent liberation campaign of Gandhi in India, and the civil rights struggle of Martin Luther King Jr. in the United States. Each achieved some significant changes, but each simultaneously ratified the existing social structure. Each rearranged the pieces while ultimately accepting the system and the values that had created oppression and misery for millions in the first place.

In the late twentieth century, intentional change-models began to emerge which directly

challenged the two myths. Non-violent social change movements in the Philippines, Poland and South Africa achieved radical change without enormous bloodshed. Indeed, in The Philippines and South Africa, non-violence accomplished what violent struggle failed to achieve: Old regimes were overthrown; new regimes dramatically and quickly expanded educational, political and economic opportunities for previously disadvantaged individuals and groups. Equally radical, although less dramatic changes took place mostly non-violently in the states of the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and Central America. Conflict resolution in these models meant making fundamental changes in the social systems that accepted and reconciled the real differences embedded in complex issues.

#### **4. The Role of Trauma**

How did these (relatively) non-violent revolutions happen? In each case, contact analysis and resolution theory and practice played a part. Advocates for significant social change recognized that the changes they proposed would be *benestrophic*. That is, the changes would benefit many people and groups, but would cause traumatic dislocation and loss for almost everyone, especially for those who would see the greatest loss and least gain in the short term. Advocates recognized that the trauma and fear of trauma would cause conflicts at both the individual and group levels.

Violent revolutionaries accepted that trauma is an inevitable and largely beneficial effect of change. For these, violence was seen as the quickest and most effective way to manifest the change. To overcome resistance to violent change, some militants promised paradise in the future as the incentive to bear short-term pain. Others intentionally used violence as an organizing tool, a reward that gave an oppressed group revenge and retribution against their perceived oppressors.

Reformists, particularly those entrapped by myths of perpetual and inevitable progress, largely denied that their actions hurt anybody. Presumably, anyone who complained was just a whiner who couldn't see the larger benefit.

The new social change advocates acknowledged that the changes they proposed *would* cause some problems along with the benefits. They acknowledged and legitimated the complaints of those who would have to give up familiar privileges and benefits in the new system. They recognized that if they didn't create a way to integrate and even win support from a majority of those dis-benefited, those powerful forces might prevent or pervert the change altogether.

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## Biographical Sketch

**Frank Blechman** is a member of the clinical faculty of the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution of George Mason University in Fairfax Virginia. He came to the Institute in 1987 as a practitioner with an affiliated group called "The Conflict Clinic, Inc." which imagined itself somewhat comparable to a teaching hospital at a medical school. The Conflict Clinic was a pioneering practice program developing and promoting techniques for resolution of public policy issues. Mr. Blechman joined the teaching faculty in 1992, and since then has taught laboratory (clinical) courses at the inter-personal, communal, organizational, and international levels. He coordinates the Institute's innovative field practicum program. Currently, he also coordinates the Institute's Master of Science Degree (in conflict analysis and resolution) program and coordinates the Institute's curriculum committee that oversees both the MS and PhD degrees.

Mr. Blechman was born in Virginia and educated in the public system. He received a B.A. degree (1969) in Government and Foreign Affairs from the University of Virginia with a specialty in Middle East studies. He was recognized as an Echols Scholar. He is both a veteran of the United States Navy and a conscientious objector who served as an anti-poverty worker in Appalachia. For fifteen years between his career in the Navy and his arrival at GMU, he was a journalist and activist working on political and issue campaigns from the local to the international level. As an organizer, he learned the arts and limits of "divide and conquer" politics. His desire to achieve higher levels of social consensus than is possible with conventional divisive politics, led him to the field conflict resolution. Since then, he has written about the

interaction of power-based, rules-based and relationship-based systems of conflict analysis and resolution. Most of his practice involves consensus-building in regional and national policy. He is a member of the editorial review panel for *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, the journal of the Association for Conflict Resolution.

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