MEMORY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL COHESION IN SOUTH AFRICA: BACK TO THE FUTURE

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South Africa is an almost perfect example of deep-rooted social conflict (Azar, 1990, Burton, 1984). As such, it should come as no surprise that many of the challenges that we currently face, are directly related to our inability to manage conflict creatively. Issues relating to land reform, conflict over monuments, tertiary education, inequality, service delivery and xenophobic violence can all be traced to an incomplete conflict resolution process in the course of the transformation during the years between 1990 and 1996. Different identities, and different values are at the core of much of the conflict that we experience. These conflicts should not be simply seen as isolated, negative incidents. They are an interrelated, and complex consequence of our recent history (Byrne, 2001).

Conflict management in contexts of cultural difference has long been regarded as one of the greatest challenges to the field of conflict management. The very notion of deep-rooted social conflict, or intractable social conflict has been associated with the special challenges posed by conflicts among groups that do not share the same cultural norms and values. Attempts to resolve such conflicts have suffered from the fact that different identity groups seem to operate in different 'universes of discourse'. These forms of conflict have given rise to novel approaches that reject the traditional forms of intervention – such as mediation – to achieve their resolution. For instance, John Burton and his colleagues of the Centre for the Analysis of Conflict proposed that because these deep-rooted social conflicts were based on frustrated human needs, they could not be settled by any means involving a compromise of basic human needs, as any such agreement would not prove durable (Burton, 1984).

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It is widely accepted in contemporary social science, that identities are 'constructed'. They are not unchangeable, and neither are they handed down to us intact. Identities are dynamic, and to a large extent, we 'make our own identity'. Identity consists of many elements, but various definitions of identity include aspects such as a shared sense of a common history. Obviously that may be very difficult to achieve after decades of deep-rooted conflict.

Memories comprise another relationship between culture, conflict management, and social cohesion. According to Miall, (2004): '...memories are part of each party's socially constructed understanding of the situation, shaped by culture and learning, and discourse and belief. The way groups remember and construct their past is often central to the mobilization for conflict, and thus a crucial matter to address in reconciliation and cultural traditions work.'

In South Africa, we have many different memories. Three types of memory are extremely important for us. Firstly, there is a memory of oppression, and it is important to remember oppression, so that we avoid experiencing it in future. We also have a memory of struggle, and for many of us, this is the essence of our memory. It is important to celebrate our victories; they have been hard-earned.

But we also have a memory; a particular meme, of a fleeting moment in our history; a moment, perhaps globally unique in modern times; of a negotiated agreement to peacefully transfer power from a minority to a majority government. This is a meme that is often neglected by South Africans. It is sometimes forgotten, though it is the feature that most ▸▸

significantly sets us aside from other societies. It earned us the appellation of 'The Rainbow Nation'.

When things don't go well, as sometimes they don't, we tend to give up our narrative of transcendence, in favour of narratives of oppression, and struggle. There are many reasons why this should not be the case.

Faced with difficult challenges to our social cohesion, we tend to lose hope; to carry on with 'politics as usual'. South Africans are a resourceful, and ingenious people, however. Taking a leaf from George Santayana, we argue that we need to draw from the lessons of our past.

South Africa made three influential contributions to the field of conflict management. These were:

- the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, one of the most widely studied conflict management interventions in the literature
- our CODESA negotiations, and
- our National Peace Accord, another unique contribution to the field (Bradshaw, 2008).

We have many resources that we should draw upon in confronting the challenges that we currently face. The negotiated transition left us with:

- negotiation forums such as NEDLAC
- world-renowned experts in conflict management and transformation,
- research institutions such as Accord, and the Institute for Reconciliation and Justice,
- internationally recognised university conflict resolution programmes, such as that at NMMU

These resources have the collective expertise to deal with the challenges currently facing the country. Recent developments in the field, including conflict transformation approaches, and the development of conflict management systems, offer improved understanding, and more creative and efficient approaches to the management of conflict (Miall, 2004,

Costantino and Merchant, 1996).

The South African 'miracle' which the world gives us credit for, is something that we don't sufficiently celebrate in our own education system. Not just an historical study, which we do to limited extent, but also, skills-building, the teaching of negotiation, facilitation and mediation. These are all important life skills that would add value to the economy in many different ways, and contribute to social cohesion. Even teaching non-violent protest skills to the young, might be a very good thing.

The conflict management field needs to be consulted, reactivated and resourced. We need to more assertively take our understanding to the rest of our continent – as we do through our leaders who mediate and facilitate on the continent – but also, to build our centres of excellence, at a scholarly level, so that we contribute to international learning and understanding of peace processes, through our own lenses. Together with government policies for greater resource distribution and access as per the National Development Plan, they offer a cost-effective route to greater social cohesion, which research indicates, underpins patterns of improved economic growth and social stability (Bradshaw 2015). That will set in motion a virtuous circle in which improved cohesion in turn contributes towards development. We have a collective memory of solidarity and transcendence in the recent past that we must quarry to construct a more cohesive future.

It is widely accepted within the conflict management field, that social conflict is not necessarily a negative. Coser (1956) has famously highlighted the positive functions of conflict, to stimulate understanding, creativity, and problem-solving. The issues currently facing South Africa could be interpreted as an opportunity for a continued, and intensified effort in conflict management.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Future development policy in South Africa and beyond would seem to benefit by embracing more distinct and integrated aspects of conflict resolution.
- There is also a challenge to academics and practitioners in the conflict resolution and management field/s to broaden their intellectual and practical engagement with social and economic policy making.
- Current manifestations of conflict can and do provide opportunities for more substantive and innovative ways of linking past and present endeavour in regard to national social cohesion.

SOURCE LIST

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