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# Fighting for the Toolbox: Why Building Security and Justice Post-Conflict is so Difficult

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**Abstract:** This Chapter examines why building security and justice after conflict is so difficult and often results in failure. In order to do so, this Chapter analyses the role of discourse and what we mean by conflict, security and development. It is proposed that lack of agreement of the meaning of these concepts, particularly when taken together, causes confusion and undermines the extent to which responses to conflict and efforts to build security and development are effective. It is suggested that lack of agreement of the meaning of these concepts when taken together results from the interests that inform discourse, the type of literature that often informs policy decisions, as well as an awareness that controlling a discourse can help in controlling understanding and outcomes. Controlling a discourse can also, as a result, help generate legitimacy and influence for those who control the discourse. Drawing on Foucault in particular, this article describes how discourse responds to the interests and views of those who have generated or control it, and it can help determine the actions that are deemed appropriate and, thus, the possible outcomes. The Chapter closes by suggesting ways in which to better understand the complexity of conflicts and, thus, better respond to the challenges posed.

The results of attempts to rebuild security and justice sectors post-conflict run from modest incremental improvements, to catastrophic failures, the latter being more common than the former. Why is this so, and why do so many accounts of such programmes disagree not simply about what they have achieved, but even about what it was they were trying to do in the first place?

It's true in most areas of life that if you don't understand what you are doing, it is very hard to get the right answer. It's also true that, if you disagree with others about what the right answer is, then the chances of an overall successful outcome are even smaller. And if you can't even agree with others what the questions mean, then it's probably best to give up before you even start. Much thinking, and quite a lot of practice, in the area of post-conflict

security and justice comes into the third category. Indeed, it may be said that confusion, of both conception and execution, is the normal state of affairs in such post-conflict initiatives. This is why most critical studies of them often recommend 'better co-ordination' between the actors. This is reasonable enough in the banal sense, but, as will be seen, it is largely irrelevant to the deeper problems. Why is this so?

## *It All Depends What You Mean By…*

Writing about the post-conflict security and justice sectors,[1] and about the conflict/security/development nexus as a whole, is a very specific kind of discourse (a term to which I return) and is quite distinct from factual studies of particular episodes in specific countries, or empirical studies of any of the three parts of the nexus. Revealingly, perhaps, it has something in common with studies of macro-economic and international trade theory, which often demonstrate a comparable detachment from reality.

The first thing to notice is that there is little agreement about what these three terms, and numerous technical components of them, actually mean. Now of course there are always disputes over definitions, and that is healthy. But different intellectual areas have different tolerances for debate about what basic concepts mean. At one extreme, the hard sciences have to operate with certain absolute constants (the speed of sound, for example) and certain general understandings (about the functions of the liver for example). At the other extreme, philosophy is often about nothing else than the definition of, say, knowledge or ethics.

But there is a large grey area covering most of the humanities and social sciences, where debates about meaning take place, but only within agreed limits. In the case of conflict, for example, historians and regional experts study the causes, progress and consequences of real wars. At the time of writing, as the hundredth anniversary of the First World War approaches, there is a new crop of books re-opening the apparently inexhaustible question of the origins of that war (Craig, 2012, among many others). Relatively recently, a quite new interpretation of the causes of the Second World War was published (Maiolo, 2010). But such debate takes place within certain defined parameters: a historian who ascribed the First World War to the machinations of the City of London, or who argued that discussion of the Second should be confined to events in Western Europe, would not receive much of a hearing.

In security, likewise, there are certain common understandings. There are definitions of nuclear power status that are generally accepted, and debate about whether, say, North Korea, is already a nuclear power has to do with whether it has functioning warhead, guidance and delivery systems or not, and has been able to integrate them. Similarly, there is a debate about

[1] There is a pointless continuing debate about whether the justice sector should be considered as part of the security sector or something separate. My own view is that it is a separate entity, doing a separate but related job, but that does not affect the argument here.

how long it would take Germany or Japan to become nuclear powers if they wanted to, but no-one would seriously suggest that they are nuclear powers *now*.

And finally, in development, there are accepted indices and measurements that enable countries to be contrasted and discussed according to their relative success. So nobody would seriously argue that Botswana was a more developed country than Singapore because it has a multiparty political system in practice as well as in theory.

Yet when these three subjects are considered together, especially in a post-conflict context, there is no agreement about what the terms mean, what the relationship between them is, and how to understand the significance of what are claimed as the component parts. As a result, most substantial studies of the conflict/security/development nexus or some of its components start with an apology for the fact that there is no settled definition of the subject being discussed. A few examples of this disarray may make this clearer.

Thus, J. Samuel Fitch deplored 'the lack of even a minimal consensus on seemingly basic issues' relating to the sudden disappearance of military governments in Latin America and their replacement by democracies, and what that implied more generally (Fitch, 2001: 60). Similarly, Philip Fluri noted that Security Sector Reform (SSR), which absorbed and largely replaced the previous study of civil-military relations, is 'an ill-defined concept' (Fluri, 2003: 16) (I have noted elsewhere the almost total lack of agreement on the meaning of even basic concepts in discussions about SSR: Chuter, 2006 and 2011). A recent study of the problems of governance and nation-building begins by remarking that the two subjects have in common 'a deceptive simplicity, which conceals wide disagreement about what they actually mean' (Jenkins and Plowden, 2006: 1). The 2008 Report of the UN Secretary General on the role of the United Nations in reforming the security sector was unable to define exactly what it meant by that sector, and noted that a whole range of different elements had been suggested for inclusion (United Nations, 2008). Likewise, as the Centre for Civil Society at the London School of Economics notes, the concept of civil society is 'contested historically and in contemporary debates' and the boundaries between its alleged component parts are 'complex, blurred and negotiated' (Centre for Civil Society, 2013: n.p.). And finally, an important recent study of the rule of law begins by remarking regretfully that it is '*the* pre-eminent legitimating political idea in the world today, without agreement on precisely what it means.' (Tamanaha, 2004: 4, emphasis in original) Others would go further, suggesting that 'there are almost as many conceptions of the rule of law as there are people defending it' (Taiwo, 1999: 151-2).

These examples could be multiplied, but the point is clear enough. All of these concepts form important parts of what is often described as the post-conflict 'toolbox'. But in practice, it turns out that this box is full of tools that have no settled shape, can readily be mistaken for each other, and whose ownership is a matter of fierce dispute. This confusion would be unfortunate if the subject were a purely academic one, such as comparative government, or civil-military relations in post-colonial Africa. But it is more unfortunate still if it affects the way in which programmes in post-conflict states are conceived and implemented, costing as

they do hundreds of millions of dollars per year, and affecting as they do the lives and security of tens of millions of people at a time.

Why are there such differences, and why is there so much dispute? The two questions are closely linked. First, it is important to recall the operational nature of arguments about security, conflict and development. International organisations and donors that are able to control or strongly influence such debates are able to control policy and programmes on the ground. In turn, this gives them influence over the most sensitive and important sectors of recipient states, and sometimes even their sovereignty. Individuals and groups wanting influence and contracts will try to situate their bids in what they understand as the views and priorities of these powerful actors, as well as trying to modify those priorities to suit their own purposes.

## Discourses at War

One of the most powerful political tactics available is the control of the way in which a problem is perceived and described. For example, international financial institutions and domestic political and financial actors have been able, over the last generation, to progressively re-define economic policy-making as an essentially technical, value-free process, from which political and ethical considerations are excluded, and in which all important decisions should be taken by economists and bankers like themselves. This process (which is of course deeply political) has been shown to be incoherent intellectually as well as practically ineffective (Chang, 2007). But it remains the default interpretation, and those who urge different approaches are regarded as 'controversial.' So when somebody talks about the 'free market', we accept the phrase, with its implicit value judgment, as normal, or even self-evident. But if someone were to use the term 'uncontrolled market' instead, we would assume they were trying to make a political point of some kind.

What we are dealing with here is what is called a 'discourse.' The word itself is of long-standing, but here I want to refer briefly to one special use of it, as developed by the French philosopher Michel Foucault in the 1970s. Foucault wrote frequently and at length on the subject, but at its simplest the concept is of a collection of ideas, statements, beliefs and practices, which define what truth is, and which legitimate power and domination (Foucault 1971, 1980 and 2013 among others). Foucault was not the first, of course, to realise that the words we use partly determine the courses of actions that are available to us. Famously, George Orwell developed the concept of Newspeak, an artificial language that tried to preclude the act of rebellion by abolishing the ability to think of it (Orwell, 1949). And another French philosopher, Roland Barthes, popularised the idea that writing, as opposed to the spoken word, was always a form of 'closure', and was thus able to exclude things one did not want to mention (Barthes, 1972). Nonetheless, the concept of an organised discourse is useful, because it helps us understand how nations and organisations compete with each other to define problems as ones that they believe they have the knowledge and capability to address.

Take what is usually described as 'piracy' off the coast of Somalia, for example, though it has, in fact, little to do with piracy as practiced in the Caribbean in the eighteenth century. If in fact it is opportunistic maritime crime, then a discourse of freedom of navigation, defence and deterrence instantly imposes itself, with practical implications including naval and air patrols, and military operations against 'pirate bases'. If it is understood as a symptom of the dislocation of traditional fishing communities by conflict, then the 'pirates' are in fact victims, the 'bases' are just the villages where they live, and the solution is to rebuild the shattered economy and society of the country. And finally, if it is understood as a traditional type of low-level conflict, now extended to foreign ships, then the 'pirates' are both criminals and victims, and the solution lies in developing alternative forms of economic activity.

In practice, it is likely that the problem of 'piracy' contains all of these elements, and more besides. But it is easy to see that different actors will favour different discourses, because they play to their strengths or reflect their concerns. Development agencies and human rights groups, for example, are unlikely to favour a military discourse, because they would have no standing, and thus no influence. Major maritime powers will want to frame the problem as one of criminality, which enables them to respond in ways that facilitate their control of the problem.

This is another way of saying that, whilst, political and military power is important for getting what you want, it does not itself provide you with legitimacy, and so is not a complete solution. The solution is to get people to accept, even unconsciously, that your norms and values are natural and universal, and that they should therefore share them and obey them. This process was christened 'cultural hegemony' by the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci, and stresses the extent to which legitimacy (he often called it 'leadership') is critical in all forms of domination. In practice, governments, political parties, international organisations and even economic actors strive to achieve this hegemony – an acceptance of their values and norms as being universal, at least in contexts where they stand to benefit. (Gramsci, 1971)

If this sounds a little ethereal, consider the adventures of the word 'impunity'. It literally means 'ability not to be punished', although it has often had disapproving moral overtones. Over the last twenty years, however, it has achieved a near hegemonic status as part of a discourse that dictates how we should think and act towards those who are accused (not necessarily with any evidence) of being responsible for crimes and atrocities committed in war or under an authoritarian regime. Such individuals, usually identified by name by the media and human rights groups, should be unflinchingly pursued and punished, whatever the cost. To do any less is to connive at 'impunity', which is not only immoral, but is even alleged by some to be a cause of conflict itself. To use the word 'impunity' is to accept this discourse and these conclusions about a very important post-conflict question. Even to argue, as some do, that there is a 'balance' to be struck between 'justice' and 'expediency' to ensure the stability of the country is to accept this discourse, at least in part.

Yet the revenge-based 'impunity' discourse does not have things all its own way. It co-exists queasily with the discourse around truth and reconciliation (or even, as in the case of Sierra Leone, it directly conflicts with it). Political reality requires that, since both revenge-based

solutions (courts and tribunals) and reconciliation-based solutions have their supporters and funders, some attempt must be made to pretend that the two concepts can live together. But sometimes the clash is more fundamental. The 'impunity' discourse treats perpetrators of violent acts as criminals, needing to be pursued, tried, convicted and punished. Efforts to explain or understand why they acted as they did are signs of moral weakness, and undermine the struggle against impunity.[2] Elsewhere, however, there is the equally powerful discourse of victimhood in conflict, which sees non-combatants in general, and women and children in particular, universally as innocent victims, needing help and support. When these discourses come into conflict (as they did with allegations that child soldiers in Sierra Leone had committed atrocities) no compromise between the discourses is possible, since both aspire to universality and hegemony.

Anyone who has lived through an international political crisis will agree that few decision-makers or opinion formers have the time, or the interest, to delve into the details of the crisis itself. Rather, there is a competition to define which pre-existing model – discourse if you will – the crisis most resembles. This in turn dictates how the crisis is dealt with, and how the post-crisis situation is to be managed. In some cases, as in the 1998-9 Kosovo crisis, the argument about the discourse to be applied to the crisis, bitterly fought by individuals and groups around the world with no first-hand knowledge, probably determined its outcome (Paris, 2002).

In politics, the normal way of reconciling difficulties of this kind is through careful drafting, often splitting the difference between opposing points of view, and producing a synthesis which no one is entirely happy about, but which all will accept. But it will be clear that drafting your way out of a conflict between discourses is not possible, even in principle. As a result, international organisations are obliged to try to cater to all opinions and discourses simultaneously, in the documents they produce, and the usual way in which this is done is simply to add more and more words until everybody is satisfied. A good example (revealingly, it is too long to quote here) is the definition of the rule of law produced by the Secretary General of the United Nations a few years ago. It is so long and so detailed (and indeed no state could actually apply all of it in practice) that every interest group has something to point to, even if the overall effect is incoherent and not very helpful (United Nations, 2004: 4).

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[2] 'So you're saying it's not their fault and they couldn't help it?' objected one student when I spoke to a seminar some years ago about problems in finding and detaining alleged war criminals in parts of Bosnia where memories of atrocities from the Second World War were still very raw, and had, indeed, been a factor in the commission of the atrocities in the first place, as long-delayed revenge. I have said much more about these issues in Chuter, (2003).

## Grey Areas

The second main reason for the confusion has to do with the literature on the subject. Discourses are seldom produced by individuals, although individuals may adopt them, knowingly or not. They are more usually a collective act, intended to defend and advance institutional norms and interests. One of the ways in which this is done is through documents – White Papers, speeches, policy papers, media articles by senior officials, etc. This material has been described as grey literature – grey because it is essentially functional, being written neither to inform, nor to entertain, but to convince and to further political objectives. Much of it has an ambiguous status: not quite official literature, but nonetheless closely following predetermined discourses. Thus 'grey' literature.

Much of the readily available writing on security, conflict and development is of this type. It is produced by governments, by international organisations from the United Nations to the World Bank, by foundations and donors, by international NGOs, and so forth. To say that its purpose is to persuade, and to promote the organisation's position, is not necessarily to say that the content of its publications is deliberately misleading, or that the publications are without interest. But promoting knowledge and understanding is inevitably going to be secondary to promoting the organisation.

Consider, for example, an international human rights NGO, which wants to play a role in the post-conflict reconstruction of the security sector of a country in crisis. Partly, this may be for institutional reasons, partly also, perhaps, out of a genuine feeling that human rights issues are not being given enough prominence. In principle, the task is not an easy one. The staff of the NGO will probably be young human rights lawyers, who will have little knowledge or experience of security issues, and may not be familiar with the country or the region. On the face of it, it is difficult to see why anyone should take any notice of a report that the NGO issues.

As in all similar cases, however, the trick is to redefine the issue – to assimilate the reality on the ground to a discourse that will dictate what the crisis in the country is 'about', and what can be done to solve it. Thus, the report will argue that denial of basic human rights was the real cause of the conflict. Since basic human rights were probably lacking, at least to some degree, this interpretation is impossible to disprove. The argument then continues that the main priority in the country now must be to improve the human rights situation, through new legislation and codes of practice, judicial reform and human rights training for the security forces, in which the NGO concerned will play a leading role. The strong implication, therefore, is that an improved human rights situation will lead to more stability in the country. Donors and international contributors of troops and other resources, who seldom want to stay in a country longer than absolutely necessary, may well be receptive to such ideas, which promise a simple solution and an early exit. Thus, a report by an organisation with no knowledge of security issues may nonetheless be extremely influential in forming policy.

Contrast this with the standard academic model of careful research and reflection, repeated drafts and peer review. There, whilst institutional pressures may be present in some form, the

fundamental purpose of the document which is eventually published is to improve the state of knowledge. But such productions, whilst inherently much superior to the grey literature, nonetheless suffer from two practical limitations.

First, they are usually much more nuanced and complex than a transitory report from, say, a human rights NGO. They are also likely to be much more informed and realistic, and much less likely to offer simple analyses and solutions. When describing any complex situation, moreover, their conclusions are likely to be much more downbeat and realistic. These are academic virtues, but not necessarily political ones. Second, many academic articles, and most academic books, will be unavailable online, except perhaps through a library or by paying a fee, and, at best will be less available and less approachable than papers whose very purpose is to influence policy and promote the interests of the parent organisation. Even those available online will not necessarily be very prominent in search results from Google.

The result is that much of the understanding of security, conflict and development among officials of governments and international organisations, donors and the media, is based overwhelmingly on literature which is seldom intellectually rigorous, and is often written to reflect and reinforce a certain discourse. There are, of course, independent research institutes of different kinds, and there is no reason to doubt that their researchers do try, as far as they can, to be objective and rigorous. But the fact is that some subjects are easier to get research grants for than others, and some approaches commend themselves much more to donors than others. The most powerful discourse in the analysis of conflict today is that of the victim, and a study that focuses on victims (or at least alleged victims) of the latest conflict will be much more likely to be funded than one that describes political and military developments in detail, although that might be of much more value.

Note that here, it is not a question of bias or seeking organisational advantage, necessarily, but more of the definition of what a problem consists of. So we can say that the ‘problems’ of Africa are, for practical purposes, the sum total of the studies recently produced about the continent, and the associated media stories, since political attention and donor interest are largely determined that way. And some things get studied more than others. Only an alert reader, for example, will appreciate that, for all the mass of writing on conflict in Africa, African conflict, as such, is not a major source of suffering on the continent. By far the largest causes of death in Africa every year are malaria and diarrhoea, and a reliable supply of clean drinking water would do more to save lives in the continent than all the human rights initiatives put together. But one would not know that from the grey literature: it is not that the literature deliberately conceals these problems, but rather that the conceptual space which contains the ‘problems’ of any region of the world is always limited, and tends to get taken up by those who are best funded and shout loudest. (Similarly, Islamic jihadism is not a major everyday problem in most parts of the Arab world, even if the grey literature on the region is obsessed by it.)

All this is a way of saying that selectivity exists in every area, and what Michel-Rolph Trouillot has called the ‘Silencing of the Past’ (Trouillot, 1997) resulting from the choices historians make, extends to the present as well. Whereof we do not speak, thereof we

necessarily encourage silence. Indeed, it is not much of an exaggeration to say that in international politics problems in the non-western world do not exist until westerners write about them. It is therefore of great importance who writes what, and how.

So it is necessary to be extremely careful in our use of the literature about security, conflict and development, and even more when the subjects are treated together. It is an unfortunate paradox the much of the material that is most easily to hand is also of mediocre quality, and often serves to reinforce a discourse. The alert reader, however, can improve their use of source material by asking a few basic questions. What do we know about the authors? What first-hand understanding do they have of the problem they are discussing? What is the organisation that published the work? Who financed it? Whose objectives do the conclusions seem to serve? If the authors are writing about a current conflict, what are their sources? Are they local sources? Are they written by regional experts? How secure a grasp do they have of the country's history, and what are their sources? When discussing particular conflicts, do they use well-regarded sources for Sudan (Mamdani, 2009; de Waal and Flint, 2008; Johnson, 2012) or for Sierra Leone (Richards, 1996; Keen, 2005, among others).

In many other intellectual areas of life, this seems much easier, and takes place relatively automatically. Thus, a student essay or an academic article on the minimum wage, which quoted extensively from the documents and speeches of a government that wanted to abolish it, supported by a study from an employer-financed think tank, would understandably raise eyebrows. Yet we accept without a murmur the idea that organisations whose expertise is in human rights or economic development, should be influential when conflict and post-conflict issues are discussed.

Much of our acceptance relates to the nature of the discourse, which in the security, conflict and development area tends to be moralising, normative and often accusatory. Of course all discourses try to manoeuvre their readers into accepting value judgements as truths. In the minimum wage argument above, this is done by the use of words such as 'burden' and 'cost' to describe the initiative, and by stressing ideas like 'competitiveness' and 'freedom'. But the discourse with which we are concerned here is especially powerful because it is intended to make those who do not accept it feel morally guilty and inferior. Anyone who has ever expressed polite scepticism about uncorroborated reports of atrocities, the wisdom of revenge-based post-conflict policies or even the nature and extent of an alleged conflict, will be familiar with the reaction 'I suppose you want them all to die then!' In the last analysis, indeed, the dominant discourse in security, conflict and development relies on moral blackmail for most of its effect. After all, who wants to be thought callous or unfeeling in asking what actual evidence there is for allegations of mass rape in the Congo? (Peterman *et. al*., 2011)

## Games with Names

Beyond recognising the requirement for the sort of intelligent scepticism proper to any academic enquiry, and the need to avoid being manipulated by discourses, is there anything positive that we can do to improve our understanding of security, conflict and development

and their interactions? I concentrate here on conflict, since post-conflict work, to be effective, has to be based on a good understanding of the nature and origins of conflict itself.

The first issue is whether, indeed, anything as simple as 'conflict' actually exists, or whether it is better simply to think of 'conflicts' in the plural, which may have some common characteristics. In practice, this is what happens anyway. When deconstructed, most theories of 'conflict' are actually based on a limited number of cases, usually of domestic armed conflict, and usually selected to support a general theory. For this reason, definitions of conflict are often cast very wide, to include low-level political violence and even demonstrations.

Yet it is obvious that any general theory of conflict has to be just that: general. It should at least explain all contemporary conflicts, or situations where conflict is likely. For example, the two most destructive conflicts of modern times have been the (US-led) invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. Any general theory of conflict has to explain why they happened, as it has also to explain why conflict between the US and Iran (and also Israel and Iran) seemed likely at one time but did not actually happen, why war between several western powers and Syria seemed likely in 2013, and so forth. But it should also enlighten us about the reasons for the Rwandan/Ugandan invasion of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in 1996, about the rationale for the wars between Ethiopia and Eritrea, or why NATO attacked Serbia in 1999. In practice, most theories of conflict do not even try to do this. They first define conflict to mean internal conflict only, thus ignoring not only conflicts that are clearly external, but also those (the majority) where the internal and the external are hopelessly mixed. They then select the examples to support their thesis, and usually argue that certain measures should be taken (for example protection of human rights) that will prevent the outbreak of more conflicts, as they define them.

This is obviously not very helpful if one actually wants to understand real conflicts, still less to prevent them from occurring. But such one-dimensional explanations are in fact quite common, and it is worth looking at a few of them briefly, and explaining why they are deficient.

The oldest and best established (if in some ways the strangest) is the idea that conflict begins, as the UNESCO Constitution puts it, 'in the minds of men' and because of 'suspicion and mistrust among the peoples of the world' (UNESCO, 1945). It defies belief that even those who drafted the Constitution actually believed this: they had just emerged from a war in which the feelings of the publics of different countries played no part at all. Obviously, the concept is useless as an explanation of real conflicts at actual times. But it performs two important political functions: it places the responsibility for conflict firmly with ordinary people like you and me, rather than with those who actually start conflicts, and it provides legitimacy for the work of UNESCO as a force for peace, whether that is merited in practice or not. This explanation draws a little surface plausibility from the obvious fact that conflict (in some form) is endemic in the kind of society in which we live. Not everybody's preferences can automatically be accommodated peacefully, and groups will have objectives

that are often opposed to each other. But it is a huge, and illegitimate, step to then assuming that governments or factions are thus pushed into conflict by popular pressure.

More recently, and partly in reaction to the kind of argument described above, some commentators have taken to emphasising the rational, economic aspects of conflict. These certainly exist, and we will return to them in a moment, but it is important to be clear that while economic factors play a part, it is much harder to argue that they 'cause' conflict in any mechanistic way. It is recognised that economic problems can produce desperation and recourse to political extremism, but this does not happen consistently, or in the same way. In the 1930s, for example, extreme nationalist governments came to power in some countries (like Germany), extreme nationalist parties had some influence elsewhere (in France, for example), whilst in other countries (like Britain) they had no influence at all. All this in spite of the fact that economic conditions throughout Europe were broadly similar. Likewise, many African countries today, from the DRC to the Côte d'Ivoire, were very stable for long periods of time, in spite of having all of the economic ingredients for a conflict. What is interesting, in fact, is not the background but the foreground: not why conflicts might happen, but why they actually do so. More generally, the idea that leaders rationally choose war whenever the anticipated rewards exceed the anticipated costs, whilst appropriate for an age whose dominant discourse is that of rational economic self-aggrandisement, is bad at explaining real examples of conflict.

If the above explanations can be loosely characterised as 'greed', then an alternative is to think of conflicts as begun by 'grievance' (Berdal and Malone, 2000). Grievances certainly exist, and have been instrumental in fuelling conflict for a long time. But again, there is no simple chain of cause and effect. The international system, with its ever-increasing patchwork of states, is guaranteed to produce social, identity and economic grievances of various kinds: what is unclear is why and how such grievances lead to conflict. In principle, domestic conflict is avoided when the domestic political system is robust enough to contain and resolve differences. But some differences are actually impossible to resolve peacefully, and some political systems are not robust enough anyway. Once more though, even dysfunctional systems and irresolvable grievances do not necessarily produce conflict: discrimination against Catholics had been practiced for nearly fifty years before the Troubles in Northern Ireland began, and the situation was, objectively, no worse in 1969 than it had been before. This example (like that of Kosovo thirty years later) also reminds us that, even if there are grievances, not everyone believes that violence will solve them. The armed hardliners who conduct the conflict often have different objectives from ordinary people. The Irish Republican Army's goal of a united Ireland, like the Kosovar Liberation Army's goal of an independent Kosovo, do not seem to have been shared by a majority of the populations in whose name they were fighting. The situation is also confused by the tendency to assume that felt grievances are the same thing as human rights violations, which is rarely the case in practice.

Another set of reductionist arguments, inspired by post-First World War pacifism, takes the self-evident fact that conflicts require armed forces with weapons, and converts it into the hypothesis that if there were no armies and armaments, there would be no wars. This

hypothesis is self-evidently not true, since wars tend to produce armies rather than the other way round, but it still exerts a nostalgic attraction in certain quarters. The related idea that 'arms sales' cause conflict, if unsupported by any evidence, is probably based on half-remembered stories of the effects of Anglo-German naval rivalry before 1914.

A final type of one-dimensional explanation (not the last, but four is enough) is that of instrumentalisation. Here, ruthless ethnic entrepreneurs are alleged to stoke real or imagined grievances into actual conflict, and then, as 'spoilers' obstruct international efforts to make peace. Now as with other one-dimensional explanations, this is not entirely false. There are certainly individuals who have deliberately set out to start wars for their political and financial benefit (Charles Taylor and Paul Kagame come most immediately to mind) but in neither case was there an attempt at mass mobilisation of populations. Likewise, attempts to gain or reinforce political power by targeting foreigners or minorities have been common throughout modern history in most parts of the world. But in the Ivory Coast, for example, though they contributed to destablisation, they cannot really be said to have caused the conflict. In fact, skilful leaders do not try to invent grievances: they articulate them. History 'is not an infinitely malleable political tool' and experience suggests that you can't get people worked up over fears that don't exist (Rubin, 2002: 27). In reality, this is another case of half-remembered historical analogies being interpreted as contemporary reality. It is a recollection of the alleged rise of nationalist extremism that is alleged to have produced the Second World War. In fact, the reality is rather different, and the grievances felt by the German people about the Versailles Treaty were entirely genuine: the Nazis just exploited them before anyone else.

If none of these simple explanations of conflict, each with its own discourse, is an adequate explanation, how can we nonetheless intelligently conduct a post-conflict reconstruction policy? We can begin by insisting that there is no such thing as 'conflict', but only conflicts, which start for various reasons, some deliberate, some accidental, some sought, some involuntary; and may also stop for reasons nobody can quite explain. This means that the famous 'underlying causes' of conflict are likely to be different from case to case, and in some circumstances there is nothing much you can do about them. It also means that some conflicts will stop relatively quickly, if those in charge judge that peace is a more profitable option, and that some may drag on until the two (or more) sides have reached exhaustion. External actors may, in the end, have little influence on whether a conflict ends, or whether it restarts again.

If there are no generic explanations of conflict, there are a number of historically attested patterns to look out for. One is simply fear. This may be fear that what others have done to you may be repeated, fear that others will take revenge on you for what you did, fear of the strength of others, fear of your own weakness, fear of what will happen if you don't act now, fear of what happens if the other acts first. Sometimes this fear is shared at the national level, but sometimes it is strictly personal. The UN representative in Burundi in 1994 noted in an interview that what Burundi needed was not peacekeepers but psychiatrists: the politicians were all terrified of each other (Abdullah, cited in Ignatieff, 1999). Fear is by definition

irrational, and hard to study objectively, which is why it is too easily dismissed as a factor in conflict.

Another is confusion and misunderstanding. The tidy patterns clear to historians seldom seem so obvious at the time. For those who have lived through real-life crises, the usual experience is of confusion, uncertainty, lack of information on some things, too much conflicting information on others, and never enough time to think clearly or analyse sensibly. Nations and groups become ingrown and self-reflexive, finding it hard to understand how others will view their actions and statements. Fear reinforces confusion, of course, just as confusion reinforces fear.

If simple economic models of war and peace are misleading, economic and financial factors do play a role. Historically, wars have been fought to control natural resources and access to them: indeed, much British Middle East policy until the 1960s was expressly based around that objective, just as French policy was intended to frustrate it (Barr, 2012). Whilst the desire to control resources does not necessarily produce wars to order, it is often a major factor in making them attractive, as in the Rwandan/Ugandan invasions of the DRC in the 1990s. It also often tips the balance between war and peace when the outcome is not obvious. Thus, when the West was trying to work out what to do after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, it is clear that securing oil supplies from the region was a major factor in the decision. As one senior US official put it at the time ‘‘If Kuwait grew carrots, we wouldn't give a damn.’ (Lawrence Kolb, quoted in *The Guardian*, 2001).

At a domestic level, the easiest way to understand economic-based conflict is through the idea of rent, which is to say income earned from exploiting goods or services you own or control access to. This can include control of smuggling in times of conflict – one reason why conflict is often attractive. In the West, elites enjoy rents from all kinds of sources (land, property, stocks and shares, public assets and so forth) and competition and struggle, whilst often fierce, is usually confined to law courts and parliaments. But in other parts of the world, opportunities for rent-seeking may be much more restricted, the political system is often weaker, and political power, much more than in the West, will be based on establishment and maintenance of patrimonial networks (Reno, 1999). Such networks, of course, have to be ‘watered’ as the French put it, which means that a constant supply of money is needed, and conflict at some level is more or less inevitable.

A final common cause of conflict (again, four should be enough) is the sense that there is no other way to resolve a crisis. When Argentina invaded the Falklands/Malvinas in 1982, a conflict began, costing a thousand lives, which every rational person knew could and should have been avoided. If it was ‘two bald men fighting over a comb’ in the words of the great Argentinean intellectual Jorge Luis Borges (cited in Fiorentini, 2011) it was nonetheless a fight from which neither government could withdraw, without being destroyed by their own domestic political process. As is so often the case, conflict was a dangerous gamble, but the alternative was certain destruction. The idea that the alternative is worse, and that conflict, however grim, at least offers some hope of survival and victory, explains a great many conflicts. It also explains why many peace processes are so difficult.

The western liberal tradition, which lies behind most thinking on security, conflict and development, views war as an unnecessary evil. Armies are expensive and can lead to foreign entanglements, nations that trade do not fight, arms spending is a waste of money, politics is a struggle for power and wealth governed by rules of good behaviour, no rational person would prefer conflict to peace. Not all of these ideas are necessarily false, but all of them are the product of certain types of political and economic systems, which themselves, ironically, have evolved often through conflict.

Because conflict may, in fact, be avoidable. The blood-soaked history of Europe is, one hopes, now behind us, but it remains true that the unification of European states, and indeed the unification of Europe itself, was a conflictual and often violent process. Likewise, the struggle for representative political systems has involved conflict in virtually every country that has them: in some (Spain, for example), it has provoked actual civil war. History suggests that few ruling elites ever give up power without a fight, and sometimes they use actual weapons.

This does not mean that conflict is inevitable, still less that attempts to prevent it should be abandoned. There is an important category of political crisis where violent and non-violent solutions may be equally plausible, but where national leaders need practical help and advice to find the latter. What happens then may owe more to chance than anything else. This appears to have been the case in Bosnia in 1992, for example, where no party actually wanted conflict, but where the kind of bureaucratic skills and the experience of political culture that could have generated a peaceful compromise were horribly lacking. The outside world, which could perhaps have supplied this lack, was instead busy cheering on the proponents of independence and therefore of conflict.[3] On the other hand, peace treaties for the sake of peace treaties are not a solution either: wars that end in negotiated settlements are more likely to produce more conflict than wars that end in victory for one side (Toft, 2010 cited in Trefon, 2011: 22). The problem, of course, is that the DRC in 2014 is not Spain in 1936, or even France in 1871. International opinion demands intervention to 'stop the violence', determinedly and systematically confusing causes and effects.

Finally, it should not be thought scandalous to say that some conflicts are necessary. Few of us, after all, would swap the democracies in which we may live today for some hypothetical authoritarian alternative, in order to retrospectively undo the conflict that brought about the change. Few of us, except hopeless pacifists, would regard conflict as too high a price to pay for the liberation of our countries if they were invaded, or indeed, the survival of some group in a foreign country that we support.

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[3] It was not until well after the end of the war that western governments started to send to the new parliament in Sarajevo experts to help with such mundane issues as framing agendas, writing procedures and taking minutes, although it was a bit late by then (personal communication).

Which is where we began: thinking about conflict, at all levels from national governments to private individuals, is hopelessly confused, and inconsistent. Thus, lifelong pacifists turned into raving militarists overnight during the fighting in Bosnia. Public intellectuals tied themselves in conceptual and moral knots trying to explain how they could simultaneously support the war in Kosovo in 1999, and oppose that in Iraq a few years later. To non-westerners, this is easily dismissed as hypocrisy, especially when framed in the fashionable but selectively applied discourses of humanitarian intervention and the responsibility to protect. But, whilst hypocrisy is a feature of all political debate, there is more to it than that.

In effect, our thinking about conflict (as with security and development) is confused because we actually accept several competing discourses of conflict at the same time, without being aware that we are doing so, and without appreciating the contradictions between them. Thus, when internationals arrive in the post-conflict stage, they are themselves conflicted, coming with different and conflicting ideas not only between them, but even within the same organisation or the same person. Careful drafting can smooth over the conflicts at the verbal level, but cannot create a viable policy on the ground.

Ironically, therefore, one of the major impediments to the sensible handling of post-conflict problems is the conflict over the causes and nature of conflict, and of security and development and the relationship between them. It has to be hoped that, as elsewhere, peace will break out soon.

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