

Johan Galtung

*Transcend and Transform : An Introduction to Conflict Work*  
(London: Pluto Press, 2004, 189pp.)

As Johan Galtung points out “Since the end of the Cold War, the need to transcend war as an institution and to transform the underlying structures and cultural pathologies which legitimise and reinforce war and violence at all levels of society has not diminished. In fact, in many ways, it has grown stronger.

“Today, there is no such thing as a purely intra-or inter-state conflict. The nodes and networks linking actors across state boundaries dictate that any conflict is likely to involve more parties than those fighting directly on the ground. Thus, today’s challenge is not only to be able to come up with mechanisms and institutions to prevent war, but to develop the creativity and imagination necessary to come up with creative and viable alternatives.”

Thus, TRANSCEND, the network of peacebuilders which Galtung has brought together, uses a multitrack approach to conflict transformation “promoting a plurality of visions, alternatives and voices, and by building peace work upon the search for creative and viable alternatives to violence, drawing upon the background and experiences of actors at every social level .

“To transcend conflict, dialogue is vital. There is a need to invite participation and insight from a variety of actors and drawing upon their own knowledge and experience of conflict and conflict transformation. If one limits mediation to a top-level approach among only those currently holding positions of power, such mediation reinforces the hierarchical divide between those identified with the power to take and implement decisions and all the others who are treated as the objects or victims of conflict. Such a division casts people into the role of spectators, promoting feelings of helplessness and apathy and may serve to estrange people from the peace process.”

Resistance to peace can sometimes be very strong as there are those who have a vested interest in maintaining conflict as well as those who feel their fundamental needs and fears have not been addressed. Therefore, it is important to bring into a dialogue for peace, groups and individuals from every level of society and from the traditional, pre-modern networks so often left out of approaches to conflict resolution.

“Even the best peace agreement is insufficient to guarantee a good peace process unless it is based upon widespread support and involvement by large numbers of people at every level of society”

However, having multi-partners in the peace process does not mean having them all talking to each other, especially at the start. Peacebuilders have a tendency to rush antagonists to the negotiating table before they are ready, especially if violence has already broken out. If parties meet too early, anger may well be the dominant emotion. Anger is likely to be contagious, especially as each person has heard the positions before. People can be emotionally overwhelmed by the hatred for each other and fear what may happen if seen to be yielding on some point.

“Real dialogue requires empathic listening, not so much concern for the other as concern for the total, inclusive ‘system’ (like ‘Europe’ in a broad sense during the Cold War, the ‘sub-continent’ in any Indo-Pakistani encounter), and willingness to take a fresh look instead of running up and down fixed grooves of thought”.

TRANSCEND produces diagnosis of the roots of conflicts, prognosis about what is happening and will continue to happen in the future if nothing is done to modify the trends, and therapy perspectives on how conflicts can be transformed and peace built with an emphasis on countless dialogues with the conflict parties. Such conflict parties are basically fellow human beings with a different understanding of the past, present, and future. As Galtung notes concerning the approach “Values are fundamental; they set the course. But theory is also needed as a map of uncharted territory. And data are indispensable in order to know where we are. All true research is action research. All true politics is an experiment where value and theory-driven action will be confronted with data on behalf of humanity.”

Thus conflicts must be transformed so that the parties can live creatively and non-violently. The parties have to break down the polarisation within themselves and between them. Yet Galtung does not underestimate the task. He is very telling on the loss of vision and compassion which prolonged violence brings. People are apprehensive and confused. “Fear of becoming a victim works on the body, mind, and spirit and reduces human beings relative to what they might have been...Every day we can hear, at the micro-and meso-levels, stories of violence from people forever marked by conflict and violence. They have become offended, and have built their lives around the injustice they feel they have suffered. They become dark, sombre persons who radiate nothing, like black holes in the social universe, rather than a source of light that can shine within them and for others.”

Galtung stresses the importance of experience, of being able to recognize common elements in different situations of tension. Thus, those, like myself who first became involved in possible mediation efforts in the Nigeria-Biafra civil war of the late 1960s are today concerned with the Christian-Islamic tensions in northern Nigeria because we have seen Nigeria go up in fire before. The restructuring of the Nigerian federation from three states to more than 30 has changed the institutional and constitutional framework, but at the local level, religious tensions remain dangerous. We recall that the spark of the Biafra war had been religious riots in northern Nigeria and the stories that refugees going south told of their experiences.

There are three themes in Galtung’s work which I find crucial and his presentation are useful reminders: the need for creativity, the need for a future orientation, the continuing impact of deep psychological and cultural factors.

What is needed for transcendence is creativity. “The problem is that strong emotions will tend to make them look to the past rather than to the future, and to emphasise the destructive rather than the constructive. A destructive past orientation, particularly when shared, can paralyse all creativity.” There is a need to arrive at something new that is acceptable and sustainable – new attitudes, new relationships, new institutional structures. But the new should not be so new that it is incomprehensible, even menacing.” This birth process has to be assisted in a loving way. There is an enormous reservoir of energy in any conflict which can be used to transform the conflict upwards, toward creativity and non-violence. What has to be avoided is a transformation downward, to aggression and violence,

through the flatness of the compromise or the cowardice of withdrawal, let alone fighting for extremist positions.”

The TRANSCEND approach is future-oriented. “Transcendence presupposes hope, and hope is located in visions of a positive, constructive future, not in rehashing a traumatic past.” As Galtung notes “One basic assumption would be that people are better able to discuss a root problem when they sense there is a solution. A glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel makes it considerably more easy to admit that we are in a tunnel. If there is no light, then it’s better not to mention the tunnel in the first place; the truth becomes unbearable.”

If one needs to be future-oriented to get conflicting parties to look ahead, there is also a need for the peacebuilders to recall that there are deep, largely subconscious attitudes and behaviour patterns often the result of history and culture. “We are more interested in the subconscious, in the *deep texts*, which drive the parties without them being fully aware of what is happening, because it has been suppressed, because it has become a habit, or simply because it looks so obviously an expression of what is normal and natural that it remains unarticulated.”

Such deep structures of a culture keep people looking at a problem in just one way, going over and over the same intellectual ruts and emotions. Mental images have deep roots and are embedded in deep emotions. Thus, negotiations can easily degenerate into a shouting match or verbal duels. In such situations, it is highly unlikely that creativity will emerge. Hopefully, creativity will open new ways of looking at issues, and so creative thinking must begin before the parties come together for negotiations.

Creativity and political imagination are in short supply in the world. While there has been a good deal of research and study on individual creativity, especially in the arts and natural sciences, there has been much less study on the ways of political imagination. Ideas are often examined as reactions to events, that is, human rights are seen as reactions against tyranny and abuses. We need to ask how we can imagine a new society, new types of relationships. Collective creativity may be the most important factor in transcending conflict and thus merits close attention.

The wise observations of Johan Galtung with their emphasis on imagination will be of use to all peacebuilders – those who use the energy conflict generates to arrive at creative solutions.

Rene Wadlow

