

From Crisis Reaction to Conflict Prevention: A Session Retrospective

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When invited to prepare a brief retrospective on the session I initially felt little enthusiasm. In the first place, capturing the living character of a conference session a year after the fact is nearly impossible; the shelf life of an academic gathering expressly devoted to "immediate problems" is notoriously short, and the fresh conversational tone of paper presentations and discussions often gets stale in print. But more importantly, from the standpoint of process, the session came nowhere near achieving its goals. The papers, as reproduced here, can speak for themselves in terms of whatever substantive value they may hold. Taken together as a set, they may provide a number of potentially useful insights into ways future European conflicts might be averted. These points merit highlighting, which I will offer at the conclusion of these comments.

But the less satisfying news first. In terms of realizing, within the format of a AAA session, an open forum for the productive exchange of practical strategies for crisis prevention, embarking from the central question of the gathering: "given this complex and conflictual reality, where can we go from here?"-- the session felt short. Those in attendance could testify that the nearly forty minute discussion period was characterized more by heat than light, serving less as an investigation of solutions than a polemical debate (however interesting) over contrasting depictions of objective historical reality and professional positioning relative to it. Rather than this be dismissed as peripheral, inconsequential (and for AAA conferences, predictable) background noise, I would submit that it raises issues central to the participation (or lack thereof) of academics in conflict resolution, harm reduction, and mediation projects. As with past AAA conference discussions of European conflicts I have attended, it is unlikely the transcript of the session would offer governmental officials and professional mediators compelling evidence that academics, anthropologists included, are well disposed to participate productively in such programs. One mediator, working for years in Bosnia, has gone so far as to say she "gave up long ago" on regional specialists in academia being able to put aside their partisan inclinations (be these the blind advocacy of "one's people", defense of theoretical turf, or protection of

professional status), for the sake of resolving present and future conflicts. The American academic and university system socializes us to compete for positions of advantage, and to defend them, often moralistically (Miskolczy, 1992:148). These patterns of behavior cultivated by our professional training may contribute to the functioning of the human sciences, but run counter to the goals and procedures of mediation work (Fisher et al, 1994). More than a few in the audience, including its organizer, left the session with a far less sanguine view of the role social scientists could realistically be expected to play in such work. This was punctuated by perhaps the most compelling comments of the discussion, made by Pamela Ballinger, who, in drawing from her work in Yugoslavia, raised important questions about the emergence of conflict resolution as "a cottage sub-industry", that may actually help to perpetuate conflicts rather than resolve them. She cautioned that this process of conflict "monitoring" could in and of itself reinforce claims about ethno-national identities, and that we as scholars needed to recognize the implications of our own "Knowledge production" in political processes of identity formation and mobilization (Stedman 1996).

Having said this, let me offer a bald and brief recapitulation of the conflict prevention proposals that emerged from the papers and discussion period of the session. Underlying all is a recognition that such general strategies should be implemented without coercion and must be attuned to local cultural and historical conditions.

Social mobility and the "sharing of symbolic systems" across ethnic boundaries (e.g through intermarriage) should be promoted.

Representations of present and past social identities and intergroup relationships should be devised that are simultaneously meaningful and non-polarizing.

Efforts at promoting intergroup reconciliation should be linked with efforts (and funding) targeting economic development. Overarching bonds having legitimacy among multiple populations within specific states should be strengthened (to outflank the bond of ethnic nationalism, generally identified as the Great Bogey).-

A "culture of civil rights and citizenship", detached from locality and territorial associations, should be cultivated.

Efforts should be made to attenuate the ties between specific ethnic groups and specific territories, including the promotion of internal geographic mobility.

Key players, including outsiders, in the process of building "transcendent" loyalties, structures, and associations must possess mutually recognized authority and legitimacy.

It would be disingenuous to dress up these proposals as novel and groundbreaking. Most have been proposed in similar form in a multitude of places over the past decade, including Kurti's seven-year old report appearing in this same publication. Most of them remain generalized suggestions, without specific, implementable, testable vehicles. As members of the other AAA, we seem to be well-stocked with map-makers and tour guides telling us where we should go, when maybe what we need are more truck drivers motivated with the sense of urgency that goes with carrying a perishable load.

References

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