

ISSA Proceedings 2010 - Intractable Disputes: The Development Of Attractors



1. Introduction

In this paper an attempt is made to shed some light to a phenomenon that has created problems not only for the theoreticians of conflict resolution, argumentation theories and other various disciplines alike, but for the practitioners as well - the phenomenon of intractable conflicts or disputes. In this paper, I discuss the role played by the “third party” in dealing with disputes of an intractable nature by forming an “attractor” whose gravity is powerful enough to pull inside parties that are engaged in an intractable dispute. This powerful role played by the “third party” will be demonstrated by concentrating on a case study about a conflict in Macedonia between Macedonian governmental forces and Albanian armed groups.

2. Intractable Conflict

According to scholars, like Kriesberg (1999) and Coleman (2003), intractable conflicts are those that persist in a destructive state and seem impossible to resolve. Kriesberg (1999), for example, stresses three dimensions that distinguish intractable from tractable conflicts: their persistence, destructiveness, and resistance to resolution. I would add that conflicts of an intractable nature are the ones when there is a clash of underlying or fundamental principles between the parties engaged in such types of conflicts, or that they lack common knowledge or consensus about various issues. Despite the fact that such conflicts are uncommon, yet they are very important to understand them better because of our survival as species.

According to Coleman (2003), it is complex interactions among multiple factors across different levels of these conflicts over long periods of time that brings them to a state of intractability. Coleman is citing the centuries-old conflict in Northern Ireland as a good example of this multi-level complexity. The complexity of this conflict could be seen not only from the role played by religion, but also from other factors like global affairs, history of international dominance,

economic and other types of inequality, issues of social identity, and the existence of multiple factions within each community. These factors, claims Coleman (2003), have a considerable impact on interpersonal relations and personal functioning. Thus, claims Coleman, long-term patterns of interethnic violence in Northern Ireland are multiply determined. I could cite a similar example that would fit into this category, and that is the example of Former Yugoslavia, where multiple factors were at play that led to a destruction of the highest magnitude. This was true for almost all the republics that were part of Former Yugoslavia.

3. Understanding Intractable Conflicts through Dynamical Systems Theory

According to Coleman, Nowak, Vallacher (2005), the dynamical systems approach provides instruments that allow us to describe in mathematical terms the mechanisms underlying intractable conflicts. According to Lewenstein & Nowak (1994), a dynamical system is a set of elements that interact in time. According to these two scholars, multiple influences between elements of the system can be described with differential or difference equations. In a dynamical system, claim Guckenheimer & Holmes (1983) and Ott (1993), formal mathematical systems consisting of sets of coupled nonlinear ordinary differential equations that have proved valuable in modeling a number of different physical systems, the evolution of the system either reaches a stable state, or a more complex pattern, described by the attractor. For these complex systems, claim scholars, as each element adjusts to the joint influence from other elements, the system evolves and changes in time until it arrives at its attractor. Attempting to move the system out of its attractor promotes forces that restore the system at its attractor.

In trying to relate this phenomenon to psychological and social processes Coleman (2005) claims that the behavior of human beings runs along the same line of thinking. According to Coleman, it might happen that sometimes a very strong influence or information not to have any observable effect whatsoever on our thoughts, feelings, and actions of a person or a group, but that at other times, a seemingly trivial influence of a piece of information can promote a dramatic change in the way people think and groups function. With respect to psychological and social processes, claims Coleman, this means that some patterns of thinking, feeling, and action are deeply embedded in a person or group. Such patterns correspond to attractors, or in other words, they “attract” a wide variety of other thoughts, feelings, and action, so that over time even a highly incongruent thought or action tendency becomes assimilated to the

embedded pattern.

According to Nowak & Vallacher (2007), the properties of attractors have been shown to have clear relevance for social judgment, interpersonal relations, group dynamics, and societal processes. In similar lines, Coleman et al., (2007), believe that the properties of attractors may also be useful for understanding intractable conflicts. According to these scholars, as the time moves, the parties that are engaged in an intractable conflict develop a range of ideas and actions that tend to evolve toward the predominant mental and behavioral pattern characterizing a person, group, or society. This is known as the width of the basin of attraction accumulated through time. On the other hand, the depth of an attractor represents how difficult it is to escape the powerful gravity of evil thoughts and behaviors. When we are faced with such a situation, claim the authors, it requires a considerable effort in moving the parties from one attractor to another more powerful attractor. Sometimes, claim the authors, this effort might be futile because even a small thought or action might pull back parties in the original attractor.

According to Coleman et al., (2007), attractors develop as elements interact and form positive feedback loops. Generally speaking, positive feedback loops are balanced by negative feedback loops, which are a self-regulatory process that prevents a system from spiraling to an extreme state. Therefore, in order for these efforts to be successful there has to be a negative feedback loop that would counter the positive feedback loop that was created for quite some time by the parties themselves or even by external forces. The balance between positive and negative feedback loops is the essence of self-regulation.

4. The Attractor of "Third Party Intervention"

According to Coleman et al., (2007), once a conflict is governed only by positive feedback loops, the resolution of specific issues is unlikely to terminate or even reduce the conflict. Each party's goal is transformed from issue resolution to survival and causing harm to the opposing party. Issues then may come and go, but what remains constant are the negative perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and actions defining the relationship between the parties. From a dynamical perspective, claim Coleman et al., (2007), the maintenance of such negative mental and behavioral patterns can be understood in terms of attractor dynamics. In short, in order to get out of this black hole we have to develop another black hole that is powerful enough to suck in everything we had in the original black

hole. In dealing with intractable conflicts, however, I am proposing an attractor of “third party intervention” as powerful enough to balance the original attractor of being in a state of intractable nature. I believe that this attractor can be the solution for many, if not all, conflicts that are characterized as being of an intractable nature.

The point of departure is that it is not very likely that human beings willingly enter into an intractable conflict. Parties in a conflict will probably not know in advance that they will be locked into an “intractable conflict” and that they will continue to stick to their position no matter what. I believe that parties often seem to be capable of behaving, more or less, according to the ideal conditions presupposed by the critical discussion model of pragma-dialectical approach. Therefore, the analyst is obliged to look more deeply into discourses that are characterized as being in an intractable conflict because of the fact that parties are capable of having a “normal” argumentative exchange. The reason why we are nonetheless faced with such situations where parties are engaged in an intractable conflict can be answered by the fact that this is happening at the first level of engagement, but this is not so at the second level. In short, I believe that situations that are in an “intractable conflict,” at least some of them, can be treated as situations that attempt resolution of difference of opinion, if we introduce the concept of “third party.”

In order to demonstrate the role of third party in situations that are in an intractable conflict, I am going to refer briefly to a case study from Macedonia. In 2001 Macedonia faced a conflict that lasted about 7-8 months between the Macedonian governmental forces and the Albanian armed groups living in Macedonia. During this period, the media, be that the local or the international one started covering this conflict from the fear that this conflict might have far worse consequences than all other conflicts witnessed throughout the Former Yugoslavia. Both the Macedonian and the Albanian language media, among all other things, were constantly concentrating on the causes of the conflict between the Macedonian governmental forces and the Albanian armed groups. The most noticeable observation in both sides of the media was the huge gap that existed in both camps with regard to the causes of the conflict. When seen from a birds eye perspective, one might be forgiven for claiming that we are talking of a completely two different conflicts. On one hand, the Macedonian language media was constantly claiming that the conflict was caused by the actions of Albanian

people in creating a “Greater Albanian” state. On the other hand, however, the Albanian language media was constantly claiming that the conflict was initiated in order to get “Greater Rights” for the Albanians living in Macedonia. The situation between the Macedonian and the Albanian language media displays precisely the kind of incommensurability of viewpoints that has been discussed until now. The columns presented in the newspapers were incapable of generating resolutions of disagreements. The situation at hand displays an “intractable conflict” of the highest magnitude.

The newspaper columns from both the Macedonian and the Albanian language media generated an intractable dispute of the highest magnitude if taken as a discussion between the Macedonian and the Albanian language media. The discussion can be viewed in this direction due to the fact that the disagreement was between these two sides of the media with regard to what caused the conflict. The Macedonian language media was trying to reach across at the other side by claiming that the conflict started because of the desire for a “Greater Albania.” On the other hand, the Albanian language media was trying to do the same thing by addressing the other side that the conflict started in order to get “Greater Rights.” At this superficial level, there are clear indications that the disagreement is between the Macedonian and the Albanian language media with regard to the causes of the conflict, and that this discussion has generated an intractable conflict.

However, if we go beyond this superficial level, the analyst can reveal that there is a presence of another audience that plays a crucial role in reconstructing the discussion better between the Macedonian and the Albanian language media. This role is played by the “international community” and by the international community is meant the entire West. When we analyze the discussion at the second level, we can see that both the Macedonian and the Albanian language media were not trying to reach at each other, but at the international community. The two sides of the media function as a kind of a bridge in reaching the international community. The Macedonian and the Albanian language media were simply attempting to convince the international community that the conflict started because of “Greater Albania” and not because of “Greater Rights,” respectively, and vice versa.

Having done all this, we can see now that the discourse should be reconstructed as such where the international community is incorporated inside the discussion

between the Macedonian and the Albanian language media. This reconstruction will produce a kind of a triangle where the international community is on top of the discussion playing a role of a “judge.” This role meant as if the international community or the West are the only party that can judge the reasonableness of the arguments presented by both the Macedonian and the Albanian language media with regard to the issue of “Greater Albania” and “Greater Rights,” respectively. This kind of reconstruction opens the way for defending the claim made earlier with regard to the role of “third party,” i.e. the international community in resolving discourses that are stuck in an intractable conflict.

From this superficial analysis, we can see that what was considered as an intractable conflict at the first level, cannot be said the same thing at the second level, when incorporating the “third party” into the same discourse. The intractable conflict that was created in the discussion between the Macedonian and the Albanian language media is non-existent when incorporating the international community or the West into the discourse. At this stage, we can see a “normal” argumentative exchange, to use Fogelin’s concept (1985), between the Macedonian and the Albanian language media in relation to the international community. The reasoning of the Macedonian and the Albanian language media is part of the appeal to the common beliefs, values, and starting points in relation to the international community or the West. Therefore, with the incorporation of “third party” into those discourses that are in an intractable conflict, at least some of them, we can have a normal disagreement where parties in a discussion will attempt to resolve it through the use of arguments.

In short, the “international community” here functions as a powerful attractor that pulls together both sides of the conflict, i.e. the Macedonian and the Albanian side. The gravitational force of the “third party” here is so powerful that leaves both parties with no other choice, but addressing constantly this attractor. The basin of attraction is both quite wide and deep that leaves both sides of the divide with no other choice, but remaining inside this attractor for quite some time due to its gravitational force in pulling inside both sides of the media. Speaking from a practical viewpoint, the longer they stay inside this attractor the better it is for both side of the media to get out of this intractable conflict. It will take another powerful attractor in order to move both parties from this original attractor involving the force of the international community. It should be emphasized, however, that in order for the “third party” to play the role of this powerful

attractor, it must first have certain characteristics that would make this party to play this powerful role explained so far. In the following section, therefore, an attempt will be made to introduce some criteria that are of crucial importance of creating such a powerful attractor played by the “third party.”

5. Characterizing the “third party” attractor

According to Bitzer (1968), there are two conditions or criteria for recognizing who the “real” audience is that the discourse is referring to. The first criterion, according to Bitzer, is that an audience in a discourse is the one that must be “capable of being influenced.” There must be a certain elementary level of regard and openness to the speaker or writer’s arguments. For Bitzer, it does not make any sense to try to persuade an audience if that audience is not capable of being persuaded. It is possible, of course, for the discussants in practice not to think in the same way as does Bitzer. Nevertheless, this idea corresponds to what was stated earlier that it would be naïve to suggest that discussants willingly enter into such discussions of intractable disagreement. At the superficial level, it might look like that discussants continue to attempt to persuade even those that seems cannot be persuaded, but at a more deeper level, discussants seem to address those that can be persuaded. If the audience does not have this condition, argues Bitzer, then it would be fruitless or even impossible to try to influence an audience.

This condition simply means that an analyst is supposed to search inside the discourse an audience that can be influenced. This criterion would not allow any discourse of the type of “intractable disagreement” where the parties in a discussion stick to their own position regardless of the strengths of the arguments by the other party. In such a situation, no audience is capable of being influenced. Bringing this criterion to the case study at hand, we would say that according to Bitzer, we have to search for an audience that is capable of being influenced, i.e. the international community, and to ignore the discussion between the Macedonian and Albanian language media because of the fact that both of them stick to their own position without any chance of being influenced by one another.

The second condition, which for the case study at hand is even more important, says that an audience is that group of individuals who have the capacity to act as “mediators of change.” According to Bitzer, an audience is that person or group of people that has the capacity to change things. If an audience does not have that capability to change things in favor of the one or the other side, then there is no

need to try to persuade them in the first place. Usually, this type of audience that acts as “mediators of change” is more “powerful” than the one who is directly addressed, or that is physically present during the discussion. In the case study at hand, this particular audience can be recognized quite easily because of the fact that at the time the international community was the only party capable of playing the role of mediators of change because they were powerful enough to play this role. On the other hand, this criterion implies that it does not make any sense to consider the Macedonian or the Albanian language media as if they attempt to persuade each other because none of them had that capacity to play the role of mediators of change. Inferring from Bitzer’s condition, it would be naïve to imply that the Macedonian language media were attempting to convince the Albanian side because this side did not have that capacity to change things. The same thing might be said about the other side as well.

Another condition that is of equal importance for the powerful attractor of the “third party” is the condition of “neutrality.” According to this condition, the “third party” must be neutral or objective in order to be accepted as a party that can play that powerful attractor of pulling together the sides that are engaged in an intractable conflict. The parties engaged in an intractable conflict can redirect their attention to another attractor, provided that that attractor is neutral and objective in dealing with the conflict at hand. When talking about the conflict at hand, the Macedonian and the Albanian side referred to the “third party” as a powerful attractor because both sides believed that the international community was neutral and objective in mediating with the conflict between the Macedonian and the Albanian side.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this modest paper was to shed some light to the already existing debate on the implications of intractable conflicts to both theoreticians and practitioners alike. I tried to summarize most of research done on this topic without any intention to comment on the solutions presented by various scholars to the idea that there is no rational solution to discourses that are stuck in an intractable disagreement. In this paper, an attempt was made to provide another solution by reconstructing the discourse in a more careful way with the introduction of “third party,” as a powerful attractor that can pull inside its gravity both sides that are engaged in an intractable conflict. By working on a case study, albeit very superficially, we tried to show the role played by the

international community in understanding the discourse better. Through this reconstruction, the discourse that at first level was treated as “abnormal,” at the second level became “normal” thanks to the role played by the “third party.” At the end, we tried to provide some criteria, not meant to be exclusive at all, in helping to identify the role played by the third party, i.e. the international community.

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