

from description and critique to constructive action to solve today's global problems.

## World Society and Conflict

Ann Hironaka. *Neverending Wars: The International Community, Weak States, and the Perpetuation of Civil War*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2005, pp. 204, ISBN 13: 978-0-674-01532-6, £36.95.

Stephan Stetter (ed.) *Territorial Conflicts in World Society: Modern Systems Theory, International Relations and Conflict Studies*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2009, pp. 256, ISBN: 978-0-415-54360-6, £23.50 (Pbk).

By Didem Buhari-Gulmez

An important part of contemporary conflict studies is concerned with understanding why conflicts emerge and persist. Many explanations are limited, though, in the sense that they stay within the materialistic realm and overlook the systemic processes underlying the self-activation of social conflicts. Both Hironaka's *Neverending Wars: the International Community, Weak States, and the Perpetuation of Civil War*, representing the Stanford School, and Stephan Stetter's edited volume *Territorial Conflicts in World Society: Modern Systems Theory, International Relations and Conflict Studies* suggest shifting the focus from an actor-oriented approach that primarily considers the individual motives and interests of the conflicting parties to analyzing conflicts from a world society perspective.

The world society approaches suggested by these works is not to be confused with the developing constructivist scholarship studying the regulative impact of specific norms on domestic decision-making. They do not limit their focus to particular norms and instead conceptualize an international structure that is ontologically prior to states. Hence, they differ from the English School, which investigates the role of a 'society of states' that is capable of granting international legitimacy. World society involves a systemic unit that sets not only normative but also cognitive standards and thus, the very limits of political agency.

There are, however, significant differences between the two macro-sociological approaches. The Stanford School draws upon the sociological institutionalist work by John Meyer and his research team at Stanford University starting from the 1970s. This scholarship focuses on the increasing organizational

---

standardization (isomorphism) across national societies. For its part, Luhmann's systems theory emphasizes the functional boundaries of societal systems from their environments. In this sense, the Stanford School emphasizes the cultural aspects of world society whereas Luhmann's school relies upon its functional dimension. The difference in their ontological stance is demonstrated in their conceptualization of actors. The Stanford School considers actors as open system units whose behaviour could be predicted by the world cultural structure, whereas MST defines actors as closed units which are inclined to reject external structural pressures. In light of this ontological difference, both approaches define conflicts in distinct ways.

According to the Stanford School, conflicts arise from a clash between global cultural scripts. So, world society could provide contradictory models for legitimate behaviour and this might lead to conflicts. States' location within world culture is also likely to affect their conception of self-interests. Hence, core and periphery states within world society would maintain clashing self-interests, which might lead to wars. For instance, in the post-Westphalian era, many advanced countries – core states in world society – exclude territorial annexation as a choice of foreign policy. Hence, when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990, it led to a significant reaction on the part of the advanced states.

Different than the Stanford School, MST directs attention to the dialectical relationship between territorial and functional levels in explaining conflicts. Stetter (2007, p. 48) argues that conflicts are likely to arise "if inclusion/exclusion patterns at the functional level accumulate across various social spheres and affect specific social groups within a distinct spatial context." In this sense, if particular groups in specific geographies become able to claim that they are deprived from using their economic freedoms or legal rights, this paves the way for the emergence of conflicts.

Altogether, given their different conceptions of actors and conflicts, it is difficult to claim that these macro-sociological approaches are complementary. Rather, it is suggested that the Stanford School provides a strong account of the structural origins of conflicts whereas MST has a greater explanatory power in explaining internal complexities of conflicts.

### Stanford School

In the Organizational Sociology literature, it is seen that the Stanford School is distinct from prevailing approaches such as ecological and resource dependency models by its conceptualization of the environment as having an autonomous cultural content. In this sense the environment is constitutive of the actor rather than solely constraining it. The environment is thus beyond a mere empirical summary of prevailing action and interaction patterns. Using a theatrical metaphor to describe actorhood in the modern era, Meyer (1999, p. 137) says that actors

resemble 'enactors of multiple dramas whose texts are written elsewhere'.

As a student of the Stanford School, Hironaka (2005) emphasizes two exogenous structural processes that determine the length of civil conflicts, in addition to Cold War bipolarity. The first process involves the founding and sustaining of the 'weak states' – the states which lack the capacity to govern their people and territories – by the international community, which grants them both international recognition and aid. Many claim that African states became independent as a result of the global campaigns of decolonization even though they were neither ready nor capable of governing themselves. According to Hironaka, they suffered, from the beginning, major structural weaknesses related to the lack of national integration within the society, lack of robust political institutions and identities (including rationalized bureaucratic and judicial structures), and lack of national resources to ensure domestic autonomy. Thus, unable to find efficient political avenues for placating their concerns over being excluded from political participation, people in 'weak states' mobilize around ethnicity/identity and do not avoid conflict since the already weak military of the governing authority fails to intimidate them (p. 95-97).

The second exogenous structural process in modern conflicts involves the inter-state interventions whose nature has been transformed under the globally institutionalized principle of non-aggression. The contemporary inter-state interventions are very different from the Great Powers' decisive interventions in the 19th century, which had put abrupt ends to conflicts; the modern intervention is rather a "dual-sided" [low-intensity] intervention with infinite resources (*ibid.*, p. 142). In other words, both sides of the conflicts find external – often covert – assistance, particularly in terms of arms and money supply, which ultimately prolong the conflicts.

### Luhmann's Modern Systems Theory

First of all, conflict is considered as an institution per se in Luhmann's theory. In his seminal article entitled "Contradiction, Conflict and Borders," published in Stetter's volume, Messmer contradicts the general view that institutions are the solutions to conflicts as they would maintain or restore the societal order through the mediation of the existing hostilities. Yet, conflict is also an institution, which self-activates through conflict communication. Correspondingly, conflict is thought of as a social system à la Luhmann, which establishes and reinforces its own semantics, elements, properties as opposed to an environment it constructs. Therefore, conflict is not the outcome of conflicting interests, but rather a social conflict precedes the motives, interests, actions, and identities of the conflicting parties. Hence, as against the mainstream scholarship that focuses on the individual motives and interests of the

---

conflicting parties as the causes of social conflicts, Messmer shifts the focus to the structural dynamics of conflict development, because a motive might provoke a conflict in one context but not in another one.

In chapter 4 of Stetter's volume, Schlichte highlights the contextual processes and the self-referential mechanisms through which conflict gains its own momentum. Therefore, the communication processes within conflicts are thought as a functional system, which could lead external interventions to fail in their efforts to destabilize the status quo in favour of a viable solution. Thus, external intervention could not affect the conflict independently from the existing contextual communicative processes. Accordingly, the success of an intervention is not really dependent on the intention of the intervening parties. It rather depends on the stage of the conflict communication during the intervention, or in other words, upon the reception/translation of the intervention by the conflicting parties (Albert et al., 2008).

This makes it difficult for 'neutral' actors to avoid becoming part of the ongoing polarization and conflict. Both the United Nations and the European Union have had to face this systemic trap in Cyprus. Parties to the conflict either perceived them as partial or instrumentalized the external interventions to further their nationalistic aims. For instance, the intention of the EU was to support the UN-led reunification plan known as the 'Annan Plan,' but the Greek Cypriot administration connected its nationalistic agenda, particularly its political demands of unlimited mobility within the island, with the freedoms granted by the European Single Market. To the dismay of the EU, it vetoed the UN-reunification plan in 2004.

To conclude, both volumes are a substantial contribution to conflict studies as they add the crucial global dimension into analysis of international conflicts, but they also apply macro-sociological theories to empirical cases in International Relations, which opens up new interdisciplinary horizons for IR students. Despite their potentially valuable contributions to the field, systemic theories have been generally overlooked by mainstream IR scholarship. They reject the mainstream assumption that states are autonomous and insulated units in an anarchical environment and that non-state actors are only secondary in world politics. Additionally, they problematize both the rationality and the interests of social actors. In this sense, conflicts are considered as the outcome of interests and behaviour determined at the global level. This allows for both an ontological openness to go beyond the state-centric realm, and the inclusion of the much needed societal element into conflict analysis. Indeed, there is a significant basis for suggesting world systemic approaches, which could enhance our understanding of the conflict origination and dynamics as well as the effects of external interventions.

## **Bibliography**

- Albert, M., Stetter, S., & Diez, T. 2008, "Cycles of Intervention: The European Union and International Conflicts", unpublished paper. [Online]: [<http://www.ies.be/node/416>]
- Meyer, J.W. 1999, "The changing cultural content of the nation-state: A world society perspective", in G. Steinmetz (ed.), *State/culture: State formation after the cultural turn*, New York: Cornell University Press, pp. 123–43.
- Stetter, S. 2007, "Regions of conflict in world society: The place of the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa", in Stetter (ed). *Territorial Conflicts in World Society*, Ch 3, London: Routledge.