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Multiple Histories and Peace Mediation and Dialogues¹

Main points:

- 1) In violent conflicts, the right to determine history is usually also part of the struggle, and is used as a means of justifying specific actions and for reinforcing loyalty to a group, but also for creating conceptions of the enemy.
- 2) Peacemakers should give more attention to how conflict creates mutually antagonistic identities and hatred that become anchored in historical narratives and myths, and how the practices of understanding these fabrications can be influenced. Removing, or at least containing, antagonist relationships is a basic precondition for a durable peace.
- 3) Focus should not be on identities as such but in the process of identification: on transformation of narratives, symbols and myths shaping identities as well as on recognizing agents using their power to influence identity narratives.
- 4) More important than the past in itself is how the past is present in the practices of today.
- 5) The acknowledgement and acceptance of the diversity of interpretations should be an important goal of conflict transformation, which could be enhanced by reconciling dialogues.

Is it possible, as part of peace processes, to negotiate interpretations of history and forms of remembering the past? Although interpretations of history have been understood as part of conflict, there has been general avoidance of the possibility to treat history as part of mediation and dialogue processes in both the theoretical and practically oriented literature. History has been taken for granted and understood as an unchangeable structure and non-negotiable issue. This paper is an attempt to argue the opposite: that history is multi-faceted, complex in its range of meanings, and constantly changing. For these reasons it is always open to novel interpretations and outlooks. The past can be understood in different ways and it is in that sense open-ended. This paper argues that the forms of remembering and of interpreting history can and should be a focus of peace mediation and dialogue processes if we genuinely claim to be striving for sustainable peace. This cannot, however, be simple, straightforward or based on traditional negotiation models that pursue compromise. It requires a new kind of dialogic approach.

In violent conflicts, the ownership of history and the right to determine history is usually part of the struggle. It is often used as a means of justifying specific actions and for reinforcing loyalty to a group, but also for creating conceptions of the enemy. The attainment of sustainable peace requires dismantling antagonisms and conceptions of the enemy that are maintained by historical narratives. The argument of this paper is that forms of remembering and of interpreting history can be a focus of peace mediation and dialogue process, and – if we are really after sustainable peace – this is precisely what they should be. This in turn requires paying attention to reconciling antagonistic identities as well as to the essence of historical thinking, and finally, to forms of reconciling dialogue.

Peacemakers should give more attention to how conflict creates mutually antagonistic identities and hatred, which become anchored in historical narratives and myths, and to how the practices of understanding these fabrications can be influenced. The problem with dominant rational models of peace mediation is that

¹ This paper is revisited version of the article “Multiple Histories and Peace Mediation” published in in A. Blåfield (ed.), *The Use and abuse of history*. Helsinki: Siltala 2016, pp. 234-263.

antagonisms and hatred created through conflict situations are often left unattended.² The peace process, in other words, is understood mechanistically: the mediator is akin to a doctor, whose task is merely to identify the illness and its cause, and then to seek a cure.³ However, conflict strengthens and incites us-versus-them arrangements, at all levels of society, be they local, national, or international. Removing or at least containing this division is a basic precondition for a successful peace process. From an identity-based perspective, the uncovering of the roots of the conflict may not be the most important thing, since it is not in any case possible to return to the pre-conflict state of affairs. What may well be of more use may be to examine how the various sides' conceptions of the causes of the conflict have changed, how these conceptions form part of the self-understanding of communities, and how the very idea of causes is itself intertwined with power-maintaining structures. This goal then is not to identify and rectify the original causes of the conflict, but to recognize and change how the causes and their significance are understood as things currently stand.

For example, ceasefires have not yet brought lasting peace to Ukraine. Building sustainable peace demands breaking down the many oppositions to which the conflict has given rise. The antagonisms of the Ukrainian case include those between Russophile factions and nationalistic Ukrainians, Ukrainians and Ukrainians, Russia and Ukraine, as well as between Russia and the West. The question is therefore not only of reaching an agreement between elites, but also of achieving far more broad-ranging settlements between groups and communities. A wide rift and a fundamental lack of confidence have developed within the Ukraine but also between former sister-nations. Whereas early in the conflict Ukrainians still distinguished between "bad Putin" and "good Russians," now all Russians are perceived as the enemy. The further both sides adapt to thinking of each other only as the enemy, the more difficult it is to achieve a return to the conditions that existed before the outbreak of conflict. At the same time, the flexible conceptual border that formerly existed between what it was to be Russian or Ukrainian has now narrowed and hardened into a mutually exclusive rift.⁴

In the popular imagination, history is often presented as one explanatory factor of the emergence of conflict. And it is of course true that understanding a given conflict requires knowledge of a region's history and an ability to grasp the various social processes, decisions, and reactions that have led to escalation of the conflict. However, history is often used as a way of oversimplifying diversity and complexity. When put to such uses what is at stake is often not history in the genuine sense but instead metahistory and myth. These sorts of metahistorical conceptions can take the form of e.g. ideas of a clash of civilizations, such as between Russia and the West or between Islam and the West. These phenomena are assumed to contain super-historical structure and dynamic relations that are further reinforced by the way in which they are applied to specific conflicts or acts of violence.

In the 1990s, the wars associated with the breakdown of Yugoslavia were seen in the West from the perspectives of several Balkan-related stereotypes. It was widely believed in Western countries that violent ethnic conflicts over history somehow came more naturally to the Balkan peoples than to civilized Europeans. Historical memory was also understood as being different, and was believed to be linked in the Balkans to primordial blood feuds. The cruel acts of the forefathers were believed to be fresh in the memories of the present generations of Balkanese, fuelling conflict from the moment that the structures of the Yugoslavian state that restrained the conflicting ethnicities were demolished. Hatred, violence and barbaric cruelty were seen as distinctively Balkan characteristics, to which the only real solution was Europeanization, i.e. civilization. Such interpretations were of course wildly mistaken, and were especially harmful to the future of Bosnia-Herzegovina.⁵

² Deiniol Lloyd Jones (2000) 'Mediation, conflict resolution and critical theory', *Review of International Studies* 4, 26, 650.

³ Jeffrey Praeger (2008) 'Healing from History: Psychoanalytic Considerations on Traumatic Pasts and Social Repair.' *European Journal of Social Theory*, 11, 407.

⁴ Oleg Kozlovsky (2015) 'Can we ever be Brothers Again?', *New Eastern Europe* 5, 18, 53-60.

⁵ Marko Lehti (2002) "Ymmärtämisen haaste. Balkanin mielenmaisemaa kartoittamassa (The Challenge of Understanding: Charting the Balkan Mindset)", *Idäntutkimus* 3, 5-17.

It must be remembered that violence severely affects identities and stories of the past. Us-versus-them, friend-enemy divisions and other dichotomies become reinforced through conflict, and further intensify it. Such battle lines bring to the uncertainty of conflict a certain existential security; they also give a sense of meaning in the midst of chaos and help a community maintain some feeling of self-worth. In the case of Bosnia, the division into three nationalities was imprecise before the 1990s; the identification of Bosnian Muslims, in particular, as a separate nationality, Bosniaks, was more the outcome of war than a cause of it. To highlight their separateness from the Serbs and Croats, the Bosniaks salvaged from the past Ottoman influences that others had cast off, and in the process religion attained a greater role. Strengthening of the internal cohesion within the three different ethnic groups, thereby creating a growing divide between them, reinforced the feeling of mandatory belonging to a distinct national group, and excluded the idea of a common Bosnian identity. Nonetheless, in Bosnia before the war, and especially in the capital Sarajevo, there were many whose ethnic background was mixed and who made little of it. In the censuses carried out during the Yugoslavian era, these people tended to tick the Yugoslavian category. Not because they necessarily subscribed to the state ideology, but because of their cosmopolitan, urban and ethnically indifferent heritage.

The Dayton peace agreement that was negotiated by the United States in 1995 was premised on a division of power between three ethnic groups or nationalities. In the agreement, these nationalities and the sharp division between them were accepted without questioning their historical roots, and were assumed to be untouchable historical facts that had an incontestable right to self-determination. Over the last two decades or so, each and every Bosnian has had no option but to identify him- or herself as belonging exclusively to one or other of these three nationalities. Education and other services are organized along this inflexible division. It is no longer possible for anyone to exist outside of nationalities, as it was before the war. The societal structures put in place with the Dayton agreement make this impossible.⁶

A second error in the Western conception of mediation is to put heavy emphasis on the violent history of the Balkan region: ethnic conflicts are understood as practically normal, with the result that the overarching goal of mediation was a new, controlled situation. Unfortunately, it was the Dayton agreement itself that instated the ethnic divisions created by war, thereby destroying the last vestiges of multiculturalism that had survived from the Ottoman era. Historically, towns and even villages in the region were ethnically and religiously diverse. It is wrong to romanticize premodern times, but these multicultural communities did have well-established ways of living and working together. Coexistence was founded on a certain level of mutual respect, even in cases where genuine interaction was rather scarce. The Dayton peacemakers, however, seem to have been entirely ignorant of the multicultural administrative tradition of the region, which was simply overlooked.

A third error is that although history was of course strongly present in the Balkan wars and above all in Bosnia, there were few clear relations of cause and effect. The warring sides often made concrete reference to history and the past through symbols, historical sites, theatrical rituals and forms of dress. Appearances were an important part of the message, but on the other hand things are not always what they are portrayed to be. For example, the destruction of historical monuments became an important part of the ethnic cleansing project of the Serbs; communities were robbed of historically important mosques and other sites and items of key symbolic value. Most attention was paid at the time to the destruction of the ancient Mostar bridge by Croat artillery. The bridge was rebuilt after the war with EU support – and, ironically, by Turkish builders – but it still does not connect the Bosniaks' old town to the modern Croat town of Mostar.

During the war many references were also made to the struggles and atrocities of the Second World War, and as way of justifying the various sides' own actions and endowing them with historical significance. For example, some Serbian paramilitary factions took to wearing the WWII uniforms of the *Četnici*. From outside it looked as if the Second World War was still unfolding in Bosnia, in the 1990s. In a sense it was,

⁶ Roland Kostić (2013) "American nation-building abroad. Exceptional powers, broken promises and the making of 'Bosnia'," in Eriksson and Kostić (eds.) *Mediation and Liberal Peacebuilding: Peace From the Ashes of War?* Routledge, 27-37; Sirkka Ahonen (2012) *Coming to Terms with a Dark Past: How Post-Conflict Societies Deal with History*. Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang, 120-148.

in a rather perverse and postmodern way. Cathie Carmichael has written of how young Serb fighters copied their uniforms, replete with historical errors, from Serbian war movies of the 1980s. And it was a boom in these kinds of films that fed the Serbian nationalist self-image and warped popular interpretations of history.⁷

The forms of interpreting history and remembering the past are indeed intertwined in several ways as part of conflict, and they become important parts of the efforts of groups to justify their own goals and ownership. The idea of historical continuity is an important part of the construction of shared identity and ownership, for example of a certain area. Efforts are made to forbid competing interpretations, and the other side is displayed as an alien intruder. The focus of historical struggles can be traced back in time through the centuries, as was the case for instance with the Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo. From a historiographical perspective, the question is in many ways absurd, but even still in many ways politically explosive.⁸ History becomes the fuel of hatred and opposition, making it almost impossible to maintain a clear view of how things actually were before the war.

After war, the interpretations of history that were created in the course of violent conflict are often stronger than they were before. Their exaggerated significance is due to their being used to justify and bolster gains that were made through war. The dichotomy between *victims* and *perpetrators* can even be strengthened, because how the conflict is remembered and spoken of attains a central role in the post-conflict construction of identities. Often, the forms of memory are given institutional expression and official actors, such as the state itself, seek to control what is said of the past, and how. When certain closely delimited historical interpretations come to determine the dignity and self-esteem of a community, the situation can lead to “securitization” of memories related to the conflict. Securitization is the development whereby the challenges and open criticism that are fundamentally characteristic of democratic discussion are forbidden, and in which dissenting interpretations are seen as destabilizing, as a threat to the dominant group.⁹ It is also quite common that stories and beliefs about a past conflict spread over time to apply to a group’s own history, and so the conflict is framed as a natural continuation of ancient animosities.

The role of historical narratives in post-conflict changes is major: narratives that stress maintaining animosities and sharp divisions keep the conflict alive in people’s minds, even after the actual fighting has ceased. Such narratives that prey on and play up oppositions are hard to supplant, because often the community has used these tales to give added security to their own collective identity. The prospect of setting aside simplistic us-and-them- divisions can easily be seen as a threat to the dignity of the group, or even as an existential threat. Indeed, letting go of divisive interpretations of the past requires a psychologically difficult reappraisal of the foundations of both one’s own identity and the whole group’s collective identity.¹⁰ In post-conflict situations, communities often take refuge in forms of collective memory that provoke opposition.

On the other hand, the condition for a sustainable peace process is precisely the transformation of those oppositions. Often this change in historical interpretations is thought of as happening over extended time, taking decades. In my view it is important to ask whether this process could be expedited from the very beginning of the peace process, or even recognized in the early phase of conflict when this could become the target of preventive mediation. Inversely, it is equally important to ask whether at the outset of peace processes decisions are being made that unwittingly, yet directly bolster these oppositions? Do third parties have any possibility to influence the forms of collective memory without simultaneously adding to the feeling of threat? Peace mediation that rests on historical interpretations can, if it fails, do much to stall future developments towards peace.

⁷ Cathie Carmichael (2002) *Ethnic Cleansing in the Balkans. Nationalism and the Destruction of Tradition*. Routledge, 48-50.

⁸ Kinga Gadja and Monika Eriksen (2015) “The Problem with Memory,” *New Eastern Europe* 5 (18), 142-148.

⁹ Maria Mälksoo (2015) “Memory must be defended: Beyond the Politics of Mnemonical Security;” *Security Dialogue*, 3, 46, 221-237.

¹⁰ Bahar Rumelili (2015) “Introduction” and “Ontological (in)security and peace anxieties: a framework for conflict resolution,” in Rumelili (ed.) (2015) *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security: Peace anxieties*, London: Routledge, 19.

Although present-day peace mediation methods and models do not attempt to influence the prevailing historical interpretations or forms of collective memory and do not understand these as negotiable issues, the significance of both national and ethnic identities for a community is widely recognized in the conflict resolution field. The prevailing means and methods, however, in the views of many peacebuilders do more to reinforce oppositions than to relieve them. Good examples of this are the power-sharing agreements that have been reached for example in Bosnia, Northern Ireland and Lebanon.

The modern powersharing model, called the consociational model, has its roots in the theoretical models developed by Arend Lijphart in the 1970s. In their updated form, these powersharing deals between ethnic groups have been widely used in the negotiated peace agreements of the past two decades or so. Some of these, such as the aforementioned Dayton peace agreement, have been fiercely criticised, while e.g. the Northern Ireland Good Friday Agreement of 1998 has been widely presented as something of a success. Developments in Northern Ireland since the Good Friday Agreement have indeed been positive for the most part, but less so than what is sometimes led to believe. For example, Andrew Finlay has criticized the Northern Ireland peace model for locking in the existing available identities, and for thereby reinforcing the division between the two community identities. Finlay's argument, then, is that the Good Friday arrangement institutionalized the ethnic divisions, and although it has succeeded in quelling the violence, the seeds of the conflict are still present in the diametrically opposed identity stories that prevail in Northern Ireland. Finlay believes that there would have been a possibility to think differently about the situation, and to help create new identities and historical interpretations that support them. If the aim is to support change, then any transformative process that is based on dialogue between groups and that is not hampered by any preordained goal or envisioned end point, would be best.¹¹

The basic problem with the way identities are approached in these power sharing models is that identity is understood inflexibly. Most of the models in use are still based on a somewhat updated, but basically unchallenged primordial model of group identity: nationalities and ethnicities may not be explicitly claimed to be perpetual, but their existence is seldom questioned and they are instead taken as given. This is so even when the conflict has brought about major changes to the general situation. External mediators too often accept the participating sides' own interpretations of the supposedly clear, supposedly historically sanctioned divisions between the groups. If we instead could interpret identities as continually in flux, the solution models would be completely different. At the same time, peacemakers seldom acknowledge their own power to shape identities. Yet the normative power of the mediator to accept or reject various determinations of identity is considerable, in particular in peace mediation. Peacebuilders can either unconsciously or consciously wield normative power to determine groups even by such seemingly innocent acts as using a certain name for a group or other specific terminology, or even just by assuming the existence of a particular group. By either emphasizing the principle of national self-determination or by downplaying it the mediator is already exercising normative power.

If identities are to be seen as dynamic and contingent, focus should not be on identities but identification. Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper stress how identity narratives feed into the idea of homogenous groups and clear boundaries, but this is nonetheless part of identity politics and one should not conclude from it that identities are the uniform. Although communities may favour certain forms of remembrance as the only possible ones for them, individuals may relate to these forms in markedly different ways. Borders are always more or less blurred, and dividing lines are rarely static. If we emphasise the processes of identification, then the focus is on narratives, symbols and other devices used to create, enforce and reinforce a sense of togetherness. In this way, the agency behind these identifications also becomes more apparent.¹² When attention is turned to research on conflict resolution, the effect is even more radical. The identities of communities must be respected, but they need not be taken as self-evident. An effort should be made to identify especially those history-related stories and interpretations that are at the core of self- and group-identification and which, by the same token, are used to construct enemy images. The expression of identification processes during and after conflict is a basic requirement for reconciliation among interpretations of the past, but so is the acknowledgement of those who enact these identities. This

¹¹ Andrew Finlay (2011) *Governing Ethnic Conflict: Consociation, identity and the price of peace*, Routledge.

¹² Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper (2000) "Beyond Identity," *Theory and Society* 29, 1–47.

acknowledgement requires expertise that has the ability to grasp how history is used and how remembrance can take on several different forms. Historians and other (theoretical) experts are not necessarily the best people to organize peace mediation, but they can offer indispensable help in identifying and understanding the identification processes at play during conflict as well as the actors behind them.

Reconciliation processes related to history and dealing with the past are generally held to be extremely slow, usually spanning across generations. In Finland, for example, reference is often made to the idea that it is only now, after a century of independence and a century after the country's bloody civil war that the old dividing lines and wounds of that time have healed.¹³ It is true that momentous changes mostly do not happen with a click of the fingers. Hatred does not soften into forgiveness overnight, nor does hostility turn to tolerance; the changes in the opposite direction, however, can be alarmingly rapid. My question is therefore: could ongoing reconciliation processes be supported in a way so as to diminish the duration required for dealing with the past? And further, what could mediators do on this score? In minimum it should be ensured that no fruitful possibilities in this regard are left unexplored.

Opening up the significance of history as part of peace processes requires reconsidering the meaning of history in itself. Susanne Buckley-Zistel approaches the problem from the perspective of hermeneutics, and in particular through the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer who wrote: "the future is a beginning." Although Western thinking is largely based on conceptions of linear progress, our way of envisioning the past is strongly bound to our conception of the present and our expectations of the future. Past, present and future form a circle in which the later two dominate our view of history. Put simply, if the parties to conflict imagine a shared future, then it is possible that they can also bring themselves to imagine a shared past. The hermeneutic approach emphasizes the fact that there is no single conception of the past; it is always open to interpretation. New ways of remembering the past are the key to the fusion of horizons called for by Gadamer. They also enable the breakdown of oppositions and the achievement of peaceful coexistence, once the boundary between them and us can be seen to be flexible. According to Buckley-Zistel, peace processes must therefore allow for negotiations on identities, the goal of which is to transform how the past is remembered and how the prospect of a shared future has heretofore been shunned. Such a peace process really has no closure, and its ultimate goal is not uniformity but the acceptance of diversity.¹⁴

According to Jeffrey Praeger, society must make an effort to envision a present in which the past conflict no longer controls one's daily experiences, feelings, and political decisions. Through this kind of transformation, it also becomes easier to listen to the other side.¹⁵ The control of the past is thus not a question of the past at all but of how the past is present in the practices of today. As such, peace mediation and dialogue processes should be able to support this change in various ways. The means of doing so could be very diverse, as can be seen from the proposals that have been made. It is, however, important to remember that the starting point for transforming the significance of the past is not necessarily an external expert's supposedly objective study of what has actually occurred, nor in legal investigations of war criminality. In this light, the truth and reconciliation commissions that have been used in many peace processes do not serve the goal of transforming the past. However, before considering other possible methods, it would be good to deliberate what is actually being pursued by changing historical conceptions.

During and after conflict, historical stories and rituals of communal commemoration feed into oppositions, reinforce and increase divisions, and shut out certain groups. The post-conflict situation typically involves emphasis on the victimization of one's own group and the guilt of others. These roles appeal strongly to emotions, but at the same time they are used to build a sense of security. Interfering with them can therefore provoke severe reactions. The goal of the process can thus not be to directly break down these divisions by transforming historical interpretations, which may not be mutually compatible. In this sense, the goal can also not be to form from them a united and harmonious historical conception. In post-conflict situations, the sense of the justifiability of one's own conception can be heightened, making opposing conceptions

¹³ Ahonen 2012, 27-35.

¹⁴ Susanne Buckley-Zistel (2006) "In Between War and Peace: Identities, Boundaries and Change after Violent Conflict," *Millennium* 1, 35, 3-21.

¹⁵ Praeger 2008, 416-418.

seem all the more threatening. The acknowledgement and acceptance of the diversity of interpretations is therefore the most important goal of transformation.

The underlying requirement for this transformation is to see representatives of the other side not as enemies to be destroyed but as opponents to be constructively engaged with. This change is vital to the formation of mutual respect.¹⁶ What mutual respect means in practice is another matter, but I will not here consider the relation between respective and historical narratives.

From this perspective the interpretations of history and the various practices and rituals of remembering are the focus of change. At the same time they are the prerequisite for change, since the process must be able to create new practices that drive and guide change. The aim is the maintenance of mutual respect between the parties by enabling each to maintain their self-esteem and self-respect. Such a process can only proceed incrementally, not in leaps and bounds. Change is almost impossible to bring about if each community barricades itself away from the others through their own interpretations of history. When this happens, the reason is typically their fear that broadening or questioning their own historical truths poses an existential threat to the community. Following the ideas of Buckley-Zistel and Praeger, it is clear that the starting point for change lies not in directly challenging the prevailing historical interpretations but instead in attempts to imagine the present and the future in new ways. Efforts must be made to relieve the burden of the past as a determinant of the present and future. This requires that the most painful elements of historical memory are recognized, and that key elements of this kind are presented for open discussion. This enables new memories of the past, the kind that are not so tightly controlled by one's community or that are not burdened with such heavy existential significance.

The possibility of reinterpreting the past in this way opens up the potential of being freed of the idea of history as a straitjacket on one's conception of the present and future. In this way individuals from previously opposed communities can find common interests, be directed toward a common future, and can imagine shared possibilities. This also makes it possible to find reinterpretations of the past that support peaceful coexistence.

As I have argued, conceptions of the past are often highly representational, being related to monuments, buildings and sites of historical significance or public rituals that sacralise some historical event. These public expressions serve two purposes: they reinforce the memories of the community, and give individuals the possibility to identify with and emotionally share in the story of the past that is offered. Second, the erection and destruction of monuments and public rituals can also serve to build borders, and to visibly exclude those who are considered different. The ability to influence historical interpretations should first be directed at precisely these forms of presenting history. It also offers a potential concrete focus for mediation efforts and dialogue platforms. The underlying goal, however, is to open up the identity stories of one's own community and to reach acceptance of the diversity of historical interpretations. Acknowledging the sufferings endured by the other side is a precondition to getting this process started. The attainment of change requires sacrifices and the breakdown of securitized ways of thinking. The outcome of the process, if it is successful, may be a broadened horizon of experiences and a new practice of questioning things that narrow the outlook of the community.¹⁷

This is far from an easy goal, as antagonist identities offer ontological security for communities. Reinterpretation of history might be understood as a threat to the very existence of community, thus possibly creating fundamental resistance against reinterpretation. Seen from this perspective, staying in violent conflict may in fact offer an ontologically secure position when transformation towards peace is seen as an essential threat. According to Oliver Ramsbotham, the narrative style that accompanies violent conflict is radical disagreement – not simply a difference of interpretation of some point, but rather the complete opposition of starkly different worldviews. The situation then becomes one of an existential

¹⁶ Chantal Mouffe (1999) "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism," *Social Research* (3) 66, 754-756; Rosemary Shinko (2008) "Agonistic Peace. A Postmodern reading" *Millennium*, 6, 39, 478-480.

¹⁷ Karin Aggestam (2013) "Recognitional Just Peace" in K. Aggestam & A. Björkdhal (eds.), *Rethinking Peacebuilding. The quest for just peace in the Middle East and the Western Balkans*. Routledge, 44.

struggle for complete dominance, including legal, of one absolute truth over all other interpretations.¹⁸ When this is the situation at the outset, conflict is not a question of misunderstanding but of fundamental discord, often accompanied by stark power inequalities.¹⁹ The decades of festering conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is a classic example of radical opposition, and demonstrates how difficult it is to bring about any change in such a situation. Ramsbotham points out, however, that hate-filled interaction between enemies, which is based exclusively on blame, is nonetheless a form of dialogue, and as such this kind of agonistic dialogue offers at least some ground for progress. In such agonistic dialogues the third party, i.e. the mediator, can attempt to reveal the foundations of the disagreements by urging the opposing sides to explain their statements. This could be an opening, however narrow at first, through which the hostilities could be toned down. If this can be achieved, the next important step is to strengthen the sides' strategic commitment to the process. The road to reconciliation necessarily entails acceptance of diversity, and as such can be an exceedingly hard road. As such, it is vital that all sides, including the mediator, understand the slowness of the process – whatever progress is made will most likely consist of a succession of very small steps. It is equally vital to begin the treatment of problems not by hastily trying to solve them, but by trying first to really understand them.²⁰

The dominant problem-solving model of traditional peace mediation does not support this sort of approach. Professional mediation work has traditionally relied on small-group, elite-based negotiations, and the task list of such negotiations has invariably been interest-centred. This entails the negotiating sides leaving emotion outside the room before coming to the negotiating table.²¹ This kind of approach requires that the sides have the ability for rational discussion, which is far from being something that can be taken for granted in the midst of or immediately after a violent conflict. Remembering the past cannot be handled through rational, interest-based and solution-focused mediation. Instead, there is reason to consider whether dialogue offers a better model for transformation.

In recent years national dialogue processes have become popular, and have largely focused on constitutional regulation and renewal, and on negotiating internal divisions of power. In contrast to externally guided processes, national dialogue processes have been seen as local processes in which outsiders at most provide funding or training. Clear models have been developed for carrying out these processes. Various dialogue processes have been put together in Northern Africa and the Middle East in particular, and the awarding of the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize to the team behind the Tunisian national dialogue process indicates the promise of these models. The national dialogue in Yemen was just a few years ago held up as an exemplar of a process that supported the official peace process, but since then the country has sunk into chaos and violence. One indicator of the severity of the contradictory nature of the present situation is that the models being used are based on highly legalistic, formal solutions, and often neglect dialogical processes that aim at national reconciliation by mediating the opposing interpretations of the past and the forms of commemoration.²² According to Antti Pentikäinen “the process remained too elite-centric and did not facilitate enough grassroots reconciliation. More importantly, it failed to address some of the crucial underlying causes of conflict, which raises questions as to whether the standard approach to dialogue gives sufficient consideration to the need to build legitimacy before entering into dialogue about how to establish or reform institutions.”²³ It can be also argued that the Yemen dialogue, in particular, and the national dialogue process in general, do not attribute to antagonistic relationship and presume that this would be merely spill over effect.

There is a need for a particular kind of reconciling dialogue which would contribute to antagonistic relationships, but that kind of dialogue cannot be based on a problem-solving model. Following sociologist

¹⁸ Oliver Ramsbotham (2010) *Transforming violent conflict. Radical disagreement, dialogue and survival*. Routledge, 1, 163.

¹⁹ Lloyd Jones (2000), 655.

²⁰ Ramsbotham 2010, 165, 169.

²¹ Lloyd-Jones 2000, 650.

²² Charlotta Collén (ed.) (2014) *National Dialogue and Internal Mediation Processes: Perspectives on Theory and Practice*. The Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

²³ Antti Pentikäinen, “Reforming UN Mediation through Inclusion of Traditional Peacemakers,” *Development Dialogue* 63 (2015), 68.

Richard Sennett Sergei Bakhtin's idea of dialogue offers one plausible alternative. Bakhtinian dialogue does not aim at a solution by finding common ground between opposing sides but instead emphasizes that as the process progresses the individuals involved become increasingly aware of their own outlooks, and in this way are able to expand their understanding to also encompass the views of the others present. Whereas traditional dialogue is problem-solving the Bakhtinian model is problem-*finding*. Instead of looking for solutions, it emphasizes the crucial role of listening. Or to put it another way, whereas traditional dialogue is solution-centric, Bakhtinian dialogue is continuity-centred.²⁴ This sort of model is clearly more appropriate to dealing with interpretations of history and for building reconciliation between hostilities founded on practices of remembering the past. The requirement for the transformative process is the ability to create pathways towards acknowledgement of the differences of view relating to historical memories. Each participant in a Bakhtinian dialogue argues from his or her own standpoint, but must also be ready to listen. The starting point is the interpretation of two opposing conceptions of truth, the foundations of which need to be identified and explained. An external mediator can help in and further such a dialogue in many different ways – one of which is simply to concentrate on facilitating the dialogue without intervening in it him/herself.

In the literature on peace processes and also in the literature on peacebuilding protocol a distinction is made between mediation and reconciliation. Mediation requires breaking the chain of violence, and is characteristically premised on short-term goals. Mediation is usually carried out between carefully selected representatives of conflicting parties. All in all, mediation is goal-oriented negotiation in small groups at close quarters towards a specific outcome. Reconciliation on the other hand is longer-term work that is focused not only on elites but on the entire populace. Whereas the agenda of mediation is negotiation over materialistic interests, the reconciliation process focuses on healing the traumas of conflict and on settling oppositions. The time for reconciliation comes around when the threat of violence has largely lifted, and when the society has been made more stable. The difference between mediation and reconciliation need not however be so sharply delineated; many researchers have shown that even though the timescale of mediation is short, the agreements that it produces have far-reaching consequences for the subsequent parts of the broader peace process.²⁵ Moreover, it is too often that successful peace mediation is followed by a state-building process (supported by the international community) in which reconciliation is given far too small a role. In other words, it should not be assumed that mediation automatically leads to acts of reconciliation. I would argue that when we approach the peace process from the perspective of oppositional and hostile identities, there is a call for *reconciling dialogues*. Of course negotiations are still needed to bring about ceasefires and a cessation of other violence as well. But because mediation either provides the groundwork for or shuts off the possibilities for some possibility or other, the mediators should always make an effort to be aware of the politicized nature of identifications and of their importance to the peace process. Reconciling dialogue is needed not only between chosen elites – it must also be applied to wider groups and be inclusive as it is crucial for the change how new interpretations are accepted and agreed by the larger population. Thus, the ability to promote change and new interpretations are essential for participants of dialogue platforms.

Even from the earliest stage, an effort should be made for mutual enemies to find a way of becoming not friends but the next best thing, namely each other's opponents. Changes in historical interpretations begin from small details, so it is important to negotiate not only the overall peace plan but also matters of local concern. No two peace processes are the same. The very nature of the violent conflict itself – whether a civil war, an interstate war, or an occupation – has an effect on how the problems are approached, as does the relationship of the community with the past, and as do culturally influenced understandings of peace and negotiation. On a general level, one cannot overemphasize the importance of mutual respect to bringing about positive change, and of the importance of each community being able to maintain its pride and sense of self-worth. Equally important is it to emphasize that the goal of dialogue should not be harmonization, but acceptance of diversity.

²⁴ Richard Sennett (2012) *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation*, London: Allen Lane, 19-30.

²⁵ Michael Eriksson and Roland Kostić (2013) "Peacemaking and peacebuilding: Two ends of a tail" in Eriksson & Kostić, *Mediation and Liberal Peacebuilding, Peace from the Ashes of War?*, London: Routledge, 9, 17.

