

The role of dialogue in confronting power

A discussion paper prepared by Hans Abrahamsson, January 2004
Department of Peace and Development Studies (Padrigu), Göteborg University,
Sweden (H.Abrahamsson@padrigu.gu.se)

Introduction

The role of dialogue for social change and/or conflict mediation in different social contexts merits further studies and reflections. In order to contribute to such an undertaking I would like to introduce and discuss a transformative oriented method for improved understanding between partners whose relationship is asymmetric and characterised by important conceptual gaps and strong mistrust. The method is called “a confrontative dialogue”.

Before initiating such a discussion allow me to in a few lines give a short background to my concern. According to my understanding the increased importance of dialogue and the subsequent need for innovative methods, departs from the fact that the process of economic globalisation and the transformation of the fordist system of production into some kind of network capitalism has reduced the dynamics on the national political arena at a time when democratic structures for political decisionmaking on the global level are not yet born. Traditional political parties loose legitimacy and the importance of non-parliamentarian political activities increases in order to confront power.

Theorizing about this, I think that Karl Polanyi (1957) and Antonio Gramsci (1971) could provide useful guidance. Following Polanyi, I understand globalisation as a double movement. A corporate driven process of market penetration (the first movement) is, due to its inherent shortcomings and contradictions, giving upraise to social resistance and reactivation of politics (the second movement). My own research interest relates to the room for manoeuvre for dealing with global challenges within the International Political Economy. What happens when the first movement meets the second movement?

Applying Gramsci the meeting point between the two movements could be understood to constitute a political arena where a war of position is carried out within one or between various so called historic blocs. The outcome of the war of position is determined by the power relations between its main actors i.e. state, market and civil society. By the concept “civil society” is here understood

the ability of articulation of citizens demands and expectations (civility) in a society. A greater civility brings a greater ability of dialogue and visa versa (Hettne 2001). The civility of society is however challenged by how the various actors conceptualise the political decisionmaking processes as such. The social movements points to democratic deficits and claim that economic and political power elite does not listen; neither is interested in political change. At times, important elite groups do not however, share such conceptualisation. They express deep concern about the present state of affairs but refer to societal resiliencies to social change and the subsequent lack of political support from relevant constituencies in order to be able to do something about it. Hence, new political arenas and old conceptualisations of political dynamics have implied that the various actors many times talk past each other.

In my own work (Abrahamsson 2003), I have tried to elaborate an analytical model in order to understand the dynamics of Gramscian wars of positions in different social contexts and hereby also to better understand the room for manoeuvre. One hypothesis I have put forward is that history at times provide opportunities for structural transformations. Inherent contradictions in the system become unmanageable and are conceived by dominant elite groups to threaten their own long term security interests, something that I have called contradictory circumstances. This opens up the room for manoeuvre for different kind of problem-solving measures aiming to reform the system. Provided coherent strategies are at hand my argument is that the weaker actor can use such a room for manoeuvre for own benefit. However, whether such a historic opportunity for structural change (a) could be seized in order to set in motion a process aiming to a more radical transformation depends foremost on the interaction between elite having an own interest in change and the involvement of civil society (b). The alter-globalisation could possibly contribute to a more radical transformation of the structures and hereby also to increase the room for manoeuvre even further through an increased participation in the wars of positions at various levels and strengthened interaction with social forces (both horizontally as vertically).

Two interlinked questions are of special interest in this regard: Firstly; which are the conditions and circumstances under which various social forces are interested in increased interaction with other social groupings, especially so as regards economic and political elite group on the one hand and new social movements on the other? Secondly: How can the quality and political outcome of such an interaction between social movements and the power elite be improved, that is what is the role of dialogue in this process ?

The need and meaning of the confrontative dialogue

My understanding of the need for “a confrontative dialogue” is based upon my own experience from International Development Cooperation. Here it has over the years become increasingly clear how asymmetric relations impede a more genuine dialogue. At times peace agreements are short-lived as they do not tackle the proper roots of the conflict (i.a. the right to speak ones proper language) or are not negotiated by parties sufficiently legitimate within society in order for the agreement to be implemented and respected. In the same way various agreements on international development cooperation do not always include needs and requirements of the recipient country but reflect only conditionalities imposed by the donors. The poor cannot afford to say no thank you. The same kind of false communication repeats itself however to a less extent between policy decision-makers and the new social movements. Here new arenas and diverging conceptualisations make the social movements reluctant to become involved in any kind of dialogue what-so-ever.

Preparing for the EU-summit in Göteborg, Sweden (spring 2001) the intended and desired form for articulation of political positions varied from the desire of a more consensual *dialogue* as shown by the Swedish government to some kind of violent *confrontation* argued for by parts of the more militant activists. The alter-globalisation movement Attac searched for an alternative to both by introducing the *confrontative dialogue*. Before analysing its merits and shortcomings it is important to distinguish between different kinds of dialogues. The problem-solving and more reformist approach is characterised by the consensual oriented dialogue. Through a negotiating process, such a dialogue aims to create some kind of consensus as regards required reforms of existing structures in order to increase the sustainability of the system as such. Such an approach diverges radically from the more revolutionary approach when the dialogue between contending forces for obvious reasons is non-existent. The confrontative dialogue on the other hand should be understood as a transformative dialogue, confronting and hereby visualizing power structures, however through non-violent means.

The confrontative dialogue should be understood as a method for conversation suitable in asymmetric relations where the distance between the powerlessness and the powerful is great. The idea behind the confrontative dialogue is rather simple. The aim is not to try to make ones own point the most valid or to agree to solutions to complex problems during some hours conversation or debate. That would be to sweep the problems under the carpet. Instead of trying to achieve some kind of consensus, the aim of the confrontative dialogue is to make visible the diverging values and interests behind the different formulations of the problems and measures to be taken that the decision makers and their

opponents have proposed. By illuminating and making different conceptualisations and positions explicit, the room for manoeuvre of what is possible could be identified and available for assessment by the society in large. Hence, the confrontative dialogue offers a possibility for the more powerless and weaker partner to join the dialogue without fear of being co-opted into the logic and rational of the powerful. On the contrary, often the identity of the weaker partner could be strengthened by the affirmation of the fact that the differences could be considered legitimate. In this process it could also be possible to identify coinciding interests (albeit temporary) between the parties as regards problems to be addressed. Hereby, and furthermore, political issues could be identified to be used as entry points through which the actors could find it meaningful to engage in the political process.

Evidently the method of confrontative dialogue is based upon that both parties have a strong self-interest to participate. It is in this context important to also distinguish between a political debate and a confrontative dialogue. The aim of the political debate is to pick political points from a passive but listening audience. However, the aim of the confrontative dialogue to visualize divergences and differences requires that both parties are prepared to make required efforts in order to understand the motives and logic of the other partner. The issue is transforming and transcending patterns of thoughts, not winning a discussion. The political debate is furthermore an act with a beginning and an end. The confrontative dialogue should be understood as a process constituted by different phases over quite a long period of time. The first phase is a question of strengthening the identity and self-respect of the weaker partner. An arena must be created where different points of view could be formulated and further developed. As a second phase, coinciding interests and entry points could start to be identified followed by a possible third phase, more negotiating oriented and aiming to identify common approaches and possible measures to be taken.

As we all know, politics is not a tea-party. It is a question of transforming and transferring power. As highlighted by recent theory on power, the development of Networking Capitalism has made power more dispersed and invisible. Gradually the power over our thoughts and actions has increased its influence (discursive power). It is my understanding that the confrontative dialogue hereby has become an important tool also for confronting power. In order to transform discursive power the pattern of actions and thoughts must be confronted and made visible.

The complication here is obviously that the more efficient the confrontative dialogue is for the powerless and weaker partner, the more difficult will it be to get the more powerful and stronger partner to participate. Nevertheless, history tells us that there are several reasons for different actors to participate in such a

dialogue. As regards violent conflicts the existence of “mutually hurting stalemates” have been observed where the adversaries could not achieve their objectives through military force and consequently a ripe moment is at hand for some kind of conflict mediation. As regards political and economic decision makers they have, at least rhetorically, a need to anchor the decision within their constituencies in order to show that they are listening to the people and defend the principle of democracy. In the same manner, the aid-donors strive for dialogue in order to increase ownership and hereby to facilitate the implementation of the various conditions they want to impose. The stronger partner tries hereby to get the weaker to voluntarily do what is considered required without too much coercion, using the well known fact that the poor partner seldom could afford to say no. According to my understanding, the need for a more consensual relationship has increased during the present phase of network capitalism whose efficiency is based upon that the producers and consumers considers the networks reasonable legitimate. It is difficult for Mc Donald’s in Cairo to during the Ramadan celebrations force people to visit them in order to take in a Mc Ramadan after the sunset if the consumer does not want to. In the same way people must like to wear Nike shoes. At times the ruling elite are also interested in dialogue due to its enlightened self interest. This is for example often the case when they strive to implement problem-solving and more reformist oriented measures in order to save the market economic system from the disintegration that the inherent contradictions tend to provoke. In order to be able to implement such problem-solving measures, strong domestic political support is required. Here I believe that we could find one of the reasons why the Swedish government wanted to participate in a confrontative dialogue during the EU-summit in Göteborg. The government had just signed the U.N. Milleniumdeclaration and needed to increase its room for manoeuvre in order to take at least a minimum step towards the reduction of global poverty.

Experiences from Göteborg, Sweden

In order to be able to conduct the political dialogue during the EU-summit in Göteborg it became important to also conduct a practical dialogue between activists and the police force. The former needed housing and permissions to demonstrate. The police was in need of as much information as possible about planned activities. The difficulties for the dialogue in Göteborg were the lack of time required in order to build up confidence between parties representing different cultures without tradition to talk to each other. Even more difficult did it turn out to be to get the right parties to participate in the dialogue. The ones representing the police force lacked in reality required mandates in order to in practise keep to the agreements achieved. The same went on for the activists. The networks constituting the very foundations of the social movements make mandates of representation unclear and difficult to catch.

The political dialogues between political decision makers and the activists during the EU-summit worked out far better. The confrontative dialogue was carried out through two interlinked events. On June 13, hosted by Göteborg University, the Swedish Prime Minister and other governmental officials met with representatives from the social movements in a confrontative dialogue about Swedish policy in the E.U. Two days later, on June 15, a historically unique dialogue concerning E.U. policy for sustainable global development was conducted through big TV-screens linking various heads of European Governments inside with international activists outside the Summit. However, this unique event was not made known to the public as media focused their reporting on the street violence between police and activists going on in other parts of the town simultaneously. Accordingly, the objective of using a confrontative dialogue in order to visualize differences and political alternatives making it easier for the general public to engage and take a position was not met.

After Göteborg the dialogue between the government and various social movements has continued. The government is frequently inviting the alter-globalisation movements for consultation. Due to lack of experiences of how to organise a dialogue, these meetings are however often transformed into some kind of information meetings where the government during two hours informs the movements of its policies and thereafter invites 20 different organisations to in some five minutes each give their points of view. After each meeting the governmental officials invite the press in order to declare that the government has been listening to the civil society. Important methodological work needs to be carried out in order to increase the efficiency of the dialogue. Present shortcomings have to a large extent eroded the interest of the social movements to participate in similar activities.

Instead of conclusion

Based upon the experiences from various efforts to implement the confrontative dialogue I think that four prerequisites are at hand in order for the method to be used properly:

- 1) It is important that both parties are aware of the aim of the dialogue: to make diverging values and interest visible and understandable, and to illuminate political alternatives. As we are interested in identifying coinciding interests, the confrontative dialogue must not be confused with a more consensually oriented dialogue, where the differences between the parties are swept under the carpet. And even though the aim is to identify diverging interest and values, the

confrontative dialogue should not be confused with a traditional debate, in which parties try to beat each other at scoring points with the audience

- 2) It is important that the weaker party is allowed to set the agenda. The movements' fear of being used as an alibi by decision-makers wanting to increase their legitimacy only is obviously not groundless
- 3) It is important to have a moderator (facilitator) informed as well about the aim of the confrontative dialogue as about the content and complexity of the issues to be addressed. The moderator should also be able to assist the parties by, at certain intervals, summarising what has been said, exemplifying and illuminating diverging as well as coinciding values and interests
- 4) Sufficient time is essential. This goes for the occasional event, when it might be tempting to put too many issues on the agenda. Lack of time easily creates a debate-like atmosphere; the conversation turns into a fight for cheap points through catchwords and simplified political analysis, instead of serious and elucidative exchange of views. Furthermore, the confrontative dialogue should also be understood as a process over time, which by necessity encompasses several occasions. It will indeed require many trials in order to find its optimal forms.

I am personally convinced of the potential of the confrontative dialogue as one method in order to confront and transform power relations. However, the concept "confrontative dialogue" as such, could in some cultural traditions be misleading. While giving connotations to aggressive confrontation it searches for the opposite. In this sense it is important to separate and distinguish between issues and factual matters on the one side and the individual social carrier on the other. Whilst the former should be confronted the latter should be made aware of its actions and their implications. Accordingly, the aim of the confrontative dialogue is to confront different points of views and understanding of factual matters and hereby also to confront the actors' conceptualisation of the interests and values of "the other" actor. By making positions and conceptions visible, the roots of different opinions could be identified and the attitude towards "the other" could possibly be transformed. Paradoxically as it may seem, such confrontation is non aggressive. In fact the method constitutes some kind of a hybrid between occidental confrontative traditions with some oriental more consensual oriented input. Hence, I believe that the concept is closely related to what in Buddhist thinking is referred to as loving speech and deep listening. Following that tradition the method should perhaps more appropriately be called for "a mindful dialogue". The intention is to meet "the other" with an open mind, emphatically trying to understand the logic behind the positions and pattern of actions of different actors. The actors need to visualize and confront

differences in order to also become aware of its own patterns of action and thought. This requires confidence building. If too aggressively confronted the actors will take a defensive position and the objective of the dialogue will not be met.

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