

Challenges for Resolving Complex Conflicts

By [Robert J. Burrowes](#)

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Theme: [History](#)

While conflict theories and resolution processes advanced dramatically during the second half of the 20th century, particularly thanks to the important work of several key scholars such as Professor Johan Galtung – see [‘Conflict Transformation by Peaceful Means \(the Transcend Method\)’](#) – significant gaps remain in the conflict literature on how to deal with particular conflict configurations. Notably, these include the following four.

First, existing conflict theory does not adequately explain, emphasize and teach how to respond in those circumstances in which parties cannot be brought to the table to deeply consider a conflict and the measures necessary to resolve it. This particularly applies in cases where one or more parties is violently defending (often using a combination of direct and structural violence) substantial interrelated (material and non-material) interests. The conflict between China and Tibet over the Chinese-occupied Tibetan plateau, the many conflicts between western corporations and indigenous peoples over exploitation of the natural environment, and the conflict between the global elite and ‘ordinary’ people over resource allocation in the global economy are obvious examples of a vast number of conflicts in this category. As one of the rare conflict theorists who addresses this question, Galtung notes that structural violence ‘is not only evil, it is obstinate and must be fought’, and his preferred strategy is nonviolent revolution. See [The True Worlds: A Transnational Perspective](#) p. 140. But how?

Second, existing conflict theory does not explain how to respond in those circumstances in which one or more parties to the conflict are insane. The conflict between Israel and Palestine over Israeli-occupied Palestine classically illustrates this problem, particularly notable in the insanity of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman and Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked. But it is also readily illustrated by the insanity of the current political/military leadership in the USA and the insanity of the political, military and Buddhist leaders in Myanmar engaged in a genocidal assault on the Rohingya. For a brief discussion of the meaning and cause of this insanity see [‘The Global Elite is Insane Revisited’](#).

As an aside, there is little point deluding ourselves that insanity is not a problem or even ‘diplomatically’ not mentioning the insanity (if this is indeed the case) of certain parties in particular conflicts. The truth enables us to fully understand a conflict so that we can develop and implement a strategy to deal with all aspects of that truth. Any conflict strategy that fails to accurately identify and address all key aspects of the conflict, including the insanity of any of the parties, will virtually certainly fail.

Third, and more fundamentally, existing conflict theory does not take adequate account of the critical role that several unconscious emotions play in driving conflict in virtually all contexts, often preventing its resolution. This particularly applies in the case of (but is not limited to) suppressed terror, self-hatred and anger which are often unconsciously projected

as fear of, hatred for and anger at an opponent or even an innocent third-party (essentially because this individual/group feels 'safe' to the person who is projecting). See ['The Psychology of Projection in Conflict'](#).

While any significant ongoing conflict would illustrate this point adequately, the incredibly complex and interrelated conflicts being conducted in the Middle East, the prevalent Islamophobia in some western countries, and the conflicts over governance and exploitation of resources in the Democratic Republic of Congo are superlative examples. Ignoring suppressed (and projected) emotions can stymie conflict resolution in any context, interpersonally and geopolitically, and it does so frequently.

Fourth, existing conflict theory pays little attention to the extinction-causing conflict being ongoingly generated by human over-consumption in the finite planetary biosphere (and currently resulting in 200 species extinctions daily) which is sometimes inadequately identified as a conflict caused by capitalism's drive for unending economic growth in a finite environment.

So what can we do?

Well, to begin, in all four categories of cases mentioned above, I would use *Gandhian nonviolent strategy* to compel violent opponents to participate in a conflict transformation process such as Galtung's. Why *nonviolent* and why *Gandhian*? *Nonviolent* because our intention is to process the conflict to achieve a higher level of need satisfaction for all parties and violence against any or all participants is inconsistent with that intention. But *Gandhian nonviolence* because only Gandhi's version of nonviolence has this conflict intention built into it. See ['Conception of Nonviolence'](#).

'But isn't this nonviolent strategy simply coercion by another name?' you might ask. Well, according to the Norwegian philosopher, Professor Arne Naess, it is not. In his view, if a change of will follows the scrutiny of norms in the context of new information while one is 'in a state of full mental and bodily powers', this is an act of personal freedom under optimal conditions. Naess highlights this point with the following example: Suppose that one person carries another against their will into the streets where there is a riot and, as a result of what they see, the carried person changes some of their attitudes and opinions. Was the change coerced? According to Naess, while the person was coerced into seeing something that caused the change, the change itself was not coerced. The distinction is important, Naess argues, because satyagraha (Gandhian nonviolent struggle) is incompatible with changes of attitudes or opinions that are coerced. See [Gandhi and Group Conflict: An Exploration of Satyagraha](#) pp. 91-92.

To elaborate this point: Unlike other conceptions of nonviolence, Gandhi's nonviolence is based on certain premises, including the importance of the truth, the sanctity and unity of all life, and the unity of means and end, so his strategy is always conducted within the framework of his desired political, social, economic and ecological vision for society as a whole and not limited to the purpose of any immediate campaign. It is for this reason that Gandhi's approach to strategy is so important. He is always taking into account the ultimate end of all nonviolent struggle – a just, peaceful and ecologically sustainable society of self-realized human beings – not just the outcome of this campaign. He wants each campaign to contribute to the ultimate aim, not undermine vital elements of the long-term and overarching struggle to create a world without violence.

Consequently, given his conception of nonviolence, Gandhi's intention is to reach a conflict outcome that recognizes the sanctity and unity of all life which, obviously, includes the lives (but also the physical and emotional well-being) of his opponents. His nonviolent strategy is designed to compel participation in a conflict process but not to impose his preferred outcome unilaterally. See [Nonviolent Campaign Strategy](#) and [Nonviolent Defense/Liberation Strategy](#).

This can apply in the geopolitical context or in relation to ordinary individuals 'merely' participating in the violence of overconsumption. Using nonviolent strategy to campaign on the climate catastrophe or other environmental issues can include mobilizing individuals and communities to emulate Gandhi's asceticism in a modest way by participating in the fifteen-year strategy outlined in ['The Flame Tree Project to Save Life on Earth'](#) which he inspired.

But even if we can use nonviolent strategy effectively to get the conflicting parties together, the reality is that suppressed and projected emotions – particularly fear, self-hatred and anger as mentioned above – or even outright insanity on the part of one or more parties may still make efforts to effectively transform the conflict impossible. So for conflict resolution to occur, we need individuals who are willing and able to participate with at least minimal goodwill in designing a superior conflict outcome beneficial to everyone concerned.

Hence, I would do one more thing in connection with this process. Prior to, and then also in parallel with, the 'formal' conflict process, I would provide opportunities for all individuals engaged in the process (or otherwise critical to it because of their 'background' role, perhaps as a leader not personally present at the formal conflict process) to explore in a private setting with a skilled 'nisteler' (who is outside the conflict process), the unconscious emotions that are driving their particular approach to the conflict. See ['Nisteling: The Art of Deep Listening'](#). The purpose of this nisteling is to allow each participant in the conflict process to bring a higher level of self-awareness to it. See ['Human Intelligence or Human Awareness?'](#)

I am not going to pretend that this would necessarily be possible, quick, easy or even work in every context. Insane individuals are obviously the last to know they have a psychological problem and the least likely to participate in a process designed to uncover and remove the roots of their insanity. However, those who are trapped in a dysfunctional psychological state short of insanity may be willing to avail themselves of the opportunity. In time, the value of this aspect of the conflict resolution process should become apparent, particularly because delusions and projections are exposed by the person themselves (as an outcome of the expertise of the person nisteling).

Obviously, I am emphasizing the psychological aspects of the conflict process because my own considerable experience as a nonviolent activist together with my research convinces me that understanding violence requires an understanding of the psychology that drives it. If you are interested, you can read about the psychology of violence, including the 23 psychological characteristics in the emotional profile of *archetype* perpetrators of violence, in the documents ['Why Violence?'](#) and ['Fearless Psychology and Fearful Psychology: Principles and Practice'](#).

Ideally, I would like to see the concept of nistelers operating prior to, and then parallel with, focused attention on the conflict itself normalized as an inherent part of the conflict resolution process. Clearly, we need teams of people equipped to perform this service, a challenge in itself in the short-term.

If, however, conflicting parties cannot be convinced to participate in this process with reasonable goodwill, we can always revert to using nonviolent strategy to compel them to do so. And, if all attempts to conduct a reasonable conflict process fail (particularly in a circumstance in which insanity is the cause of this failure), to impose a nonviolent solution which nevertheless takes account of the insane's party's legitimate needs. (Yes, on just that one detail, I diverge from Gandhi.)

Having stated that, however, I acknowledge that only a rare individual has the capacity to think, plan and act strategically in tackling a violent conflict nonviolently, so considerable education in nonviolent strategy will be necessary and is a priority.

Given what is at stake, however – a superior strategy for tackling and resolving violent geopolitical conflicts including those (such as the threat of nuclear war, the climate catastrophe and decimation of the biosphere) that threaten human extinction – any resources devoted to improving our capacity to deliver this outcome would be well spent.

Provided, of course, that reducing (and ultimately eliminating) violence and resolving conflict is your aim.

In addition to the above, I would do something else more generally (that is, outside the conflict process).

Given that dysfunctional parenting is ultimately responsible for the behaviour of those individuals who generate and perpetuate violent conflicts, I would encourage all parents to consider making [‘My Promise to Children’](#) so that we start to produce a higher proportion of functional individuals who know how to powerfully resolve conflicts in their lives without resort to violence. If any parent feels unable to make this promise, then they have the option of tackling this problem at its source by [‘Putting Feelings First’](#).

If we do not dramatically and quickly improve our individual and collective capacity to resolve conflicts nonviolently, including when we are dealing with individuals who are insane, then one day relatively soon we will share the fate of those 200 species of life we drove to extinction today.

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Robert J. Burrowes has a lifetime commitment to understanding and ending human violence. He has done extensive research since 1966 in an effort to understand why human beings are violent and has been a nonviolent activist since 1981. He is the author of [‘Why Violence?’](#) His email address is flametree@riseup.net and his website is [here](#).

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