

Building Resilient Peace in Liberia

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Abstract

Post-war peacebuilding is a delicate undertaking, and even the most promising process will face challenges and setbacks, purposeful as well as accidental. Examples include residual violence, coups d'états, terrorist attacks, delays of implementation, disagreement over what has been agreed, etc. Sometimes these challenges derail a peacebuilding process, but in other cases they are overcome allowing the process to continue more or less unaffected. The ability to withstand challenges should be an important indicator of the quality of peace and the success of post-war peacebuilding, and is now entering the conceptualization of peace and peacebuilding in the form of "resilience."

This paper starts from the need for a conceptualization of peace between negative and positive peace, and argues that resilience would be a useful concept. It then traces the argument back again, from adaptive cycle theory, via resilience, to peacebuilding. The tentative conclusions are very general, but I have not yet had the time to actually conduct a case study of Liberia.

Introduction

This paper is very much work in progress. It is part of a project where I try to bring resilience thinking to bear on peacebuilding, and trying to understand resilience has taken me further than I expected when I initiated the project (and when I signed up for this conference). In the end I believe it will turn out to be more exciting and useful than I first thought, but at this stage it means that I have not yet had the time to actually conduct any case studies.

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In other words, this paper will reflect where this project stands at this time. While the concept of resilience has begun to enter the field of peace and conflict research, this paper will outline the usefulness of resilience first by opening up the problematic to a new angle which leads to adaptive cycles theory, and second by tracing the argument back to peacebuilding from the starting point of adaptive cycles theory. This approach is different from simply adding the word resilience to established models of peacebuilding.

I will argue that adaptive cycles theory and resilience thinking are much more than slight variations on or developments of mainstream peace research. They are based on fundamentally different ways of understanding how the world works. The extent of these differences will only be hinted on. I will, however, also argue that much of what is done on current peacebuilding research and practice can be understood from a resilience perspective.

The paper does not do justice to the implications of resilience thinking. I argue instead that resilience thinking can be used to inspire concrete peacebuilding without the whole peacebuilding industry first having to embrace adaptive cycles theory. By being ruthlessly modest in our ambitions (Cousens 2001, 15), a focus on the prerequisites of resilience may guide peacebuilding operations, and form the basis for a conceptualization of the peace-in-between, according to which peacebuilding operations can be evaluated in the medium term.

Peacebuilding

Peacebuilding, obviously, means building peace, but while the “building”-part has received a lot of attention from both researchers and practitioners over the past few decades, the “peace”-part, according to Mac Ginty (2006, 12), remains “grossly under-conceptualised.” He argues that the main theoretical themes in peace and conflict research have long centered on the causes of peace and war, but devoted less attention to the core concepts themselves. Over the past several years, however, researchers have begun to address the outcome side of peacebuilding, the peace that we aspire to build. This concern largely – though not exclusively – takes the form of critique against the “liberal peacebuilding paradigm”, and is at least in part related to Galtung’s notions of negative and positive peace.

Critical approaches to peacebuilding argue that the liberal peacebuilding formula has developed into a narrow “peacebuilding consensus” (Richmond 2010b, 22) insensitive to context, and resulted in “template-style peace implementation” (Mac Ginty 2006, 7). Liberal peacebuilding is considered closer to state building (the establishment of formal institutions) than peacebuilding (aiming to understand context and integrate local culture and decision making, and engaging with the everyday lives of people). This way, according to Richmond (2010a, 24-25), “liberal peacebuilding has been turned into a system of governance rather

than a process of reconciliation.” Jabri (2010, 54), in the same volume, argues that security is “the ultimate imperative of the liberal peace project.”

The aim of liberal peacebuilding, according to its critics, is security, stability, the absence of armed conflict – that is, negative peace. Any components or aspects of positive peace, such as justice, development, respect for human rights, the absence of structural violence, however, are perceived as being beyond the remit of liberal peacebuilding (or will naturally follow from the establishment of liberal market democracy).

Mac Ginty (2006) explicitly discusses the gap between “aspirational notions” and “the practical operationalisation” of peace, and regrets that the consideration of what is feasible tempers the utopian conceptualizations of peace. He concludes that “peace demands utopian and lateral thinking,” and defines peace as the facilitation of non-exploitative, sustainable and inclusive social relationships free from direct and indirect violence and the threat of such violence (Mac Ginty 2006, 24). Many seem to agree, and critical approaches to peacebuilding often present alternatives which are, to talk with Mac Ginty, utopian.

The temporal aspect is part of the explanation of these differing views. Many arguments can be said to emphasize either the short-term prevention of renewed armed conflict or the long-term eradication of structural violence. But while some level of security and stability is needed for peacebuilding activity to be possible, that security and stability is incomplete as a target for that peacebuilding activity. And, on the other end of the scale, while the absence of structural violence should be the long-term goal of peacebuilding, it is seldom something that can reasonably be achieved five to ten years after the end of armed conflict. According to Cousens (2001, 4) the defining priority of peacebuilding is “the construction or strengthening of authoritative and, eventually, legitimate mechanisms to resolve internal conflict without violence.”

However, if liberal peacebuilding aims too low, critical approaches can be questioned for aiming too high, specifically in relation to a much-needed standard for evaluating peacebuilding operations in the medium term. If peacebuilding success is to be evaluated according to Mac Ginty’s definition above, then most, or all, peacebuilding operations have failed. Hence the need for a conceptualization of peace which bridges the gap between negative and positive peace and captures the various forms and degrees of peace in-between, a conceptualization which requires more than the absence of violence for peacebuilding success, but which is still possible to achieve within five to ten years after the end of active warfare.

I want to emphasize that a more realistic conceptualization of peace in the medium term is supposed to be just that, more realistic. The rationale behind the idea is not to lower the demands in order to achieve a better track record, but to use more realistic expectations when peacebuilding operations are evaluated, in order not to discard good progress for

failing to achieve impossible standards. In practice, there may not be much of a difference, but it's important to keep this rationale explicit. As cautioned by Cousens (2001, 11):

A failure to differentiate among peacebuilding's goals courts strategic incoherence among the components of international assistance. It also risks holding peacebuilding efforts to an impossibly high standard, overestimating what international engagement can plausibly and constructively deliver while diminishing the importance of more modest achievements.

As an example, consider Richmond (2010a, 24): of 18 attempts at democratization since the end of the Cold War, 13 had suffered some form of authoritarian regime within 15 years. While this set of cases is partly questionable², labeling all cases that do not meet high expectations as failures, and not distinguishing between differences among them, leaves us with little to learn from those experiences. Hence the need to open up to variation within the group of cases that do not the highest expectations, because that is the only way we can learn from these differences.

The peace-in-between

If we accept that the peace we are trying to build is more than merely the absence of war, but instead is understood to contain elements of justice and equality, sustainability, etc... it becomes clear that most post-war situations are in a state of neither war nor peace. The reality of post-war countries is instead somewhere in between, and we are not yet sure what to call this state. More important than the designation, however, is the question of what dimension or dimensions this in-between state is based. All states of war are not alike, and all states of peace are not alike, and so the in-between – which is also not similar to all cases – cannot be fruitfully conceived of as a singular dimension between two opposites. So, how, on what basis, do we argue that one in-between situation is closer to a state of peace than another? Or phrased more concretely, in the immediate to medium-term, what aspects of a post-war situation need addressing in order to both maintain what aspects of (negative) peace are already achieved and support the further development of that situation toward a state of (positive) peace?

² These numbers are compiled by Call & Cook (2003), who admit (p. 234) that “[t]he majority of these regimes represented clear improvements over their immediate predecessors but failed to meet the high expectations of international observers or local populations.” In light of the fact that armed conflict was still ongoing in five of the thirteen countries in 2002, and that it had ended less than five years earlier in another six, one is tempted to respond that these expectations might have been a tad too high. The most extreme case is Afghanistan, which experienced civil war every single year from 1978–2001, and was then classified as authoritarian in 2002 (see Diamond 2002, 30-31), the same year as the UN mission was established. I find it highly questionable to use that example to support the argument that “the prevailing ‘democratic reconstruction model’ has proven problematic”(Call & Cook 2003, 233).

Even if we expect that it will take decades for a post-war society to reach a self-sustaining peaceful regime, it would be very unfortunate if we defined peace in such a way as to prevent any judgment of the effects of peacebuilding until one or two generations after the end of the war. There is clearly a need for a standard (or several) of evaluation even in the short- to mid-term.

In many situations, large-scale violence has ended, meeting a narrow definition of success, but still exhibiting shortcomings in terms of more elaborate, long-term conceptualizations of peace. Höglund & Söderberg Kovacs (2010) transform the classical conflict triangle into a peace triangle to illustrate the diversity of peace beyond the absence of war by categorizing post-war societies along the three dimensions of issues, behavior, and attitudes.

On the issues dimension Höglund & Söderberg Kovacs identify three types of peace: unresolved peace, where key issues are left unresolved; restored peace, where peace is restored but the underlying causes of conflict are left unattended; and contested peace, where the peace-settlement generates new conflicts. On the behavior dimension, they describe partial peace, where one or more parties continue to use armed force, but where the peace still holds in some respects; regional peace, where residual violence occurs in certain parts of the country; and insecure peace, where the end of the war is followed by widespread criminal violence, often exacerbated by the ready availability of arms. The attitudes dimension, finally, consists of polarized peace, where conflict attitudes remain polarized despite a peace settlement; unjust peace, characterized by impunity and the absence of reconciliation; and fearful peace, where large-scale violence has been replaced by political control and repression.

This highlights the need for contextualization. If different post-war situations are understood to display different weaknesses, then different aspects of the emerging peace need to be addressed. A “no war, no peace” situation in which key issues are left unresolved is very different from one where residual violence occurs in parts of the country, or one characterized by impunity and the absence of reconciliation, and they call for different types of assistance.

A similar conclusion can be drawn from two studies by Doyle & Sambanis (2000; 2006). In their analysis of 121 peacebuilding processes after civil war, 1945–1999, they employ two measures of peace: (1) sovereign/lenient peace measured as the absence of direct violence, and (2) participatory/strict peace, which is basically sovereign peace plus a minimum level of political openness. Most important in the present context, is their finding that the two types, or degrees, of peace are related to different independent variables:

We find that higher order, or democratic, peacebuilding is more successful after nonidentity wars, after long and not very costly wars, in countries with relatively high development levels, and when UN peace operations and substantial financial assistance are available. Lower order peacebuilding – an end to the violence – is more dependent on muscular third-party intervention and on low hostility levels rather than on the breadth of local capacities. (Doyle & Sambanis 2000, 795)

The finding that higher order peacebuilding is strengthened by other types of measures than simply more of what is needed for lower order peacebuilding constitutes, in combination with the array of categories of peace beyond the absence of war, a strong argument against “template-style peace implementation”, to borrow Richmond’s expression. Peacebuilding needs to be developed and adjusted according to context. At the same time, however, we should not have to invent the wheel every time. We can and should learn from every case, whether successful or not, whether the major lessons concern what works or what does not work.

A concrete example of a conceptualization of the peace-in-between is the idea of *legitimate peace*, proposed by Themnér & Ohlson (2014, 73-74), who argue that midterm visions of peace can be fruitfully understood in terms of vertical and horizontal legitimacy, concepts they borrow from Holsti (1996). Vertical legitimacy refers to the relationship between the state and its citizens, whether the population perceives that has the right to adopt and implement laws that affect them, and horizontal legitimacy refers to the relationship between individuals and groups within the state, popular perceptions of who belongs to the demos.

Legitimate peace, they claim, can serve as a stepping stone for peacebuilders, for three reasons (Themnér & Ohlson 2014, 75-76): First, horizontal legitimacy is much like social capital, which has been shown to be correlated with both economic development and democracy. Second, vertical legitimacy stresses agency rather than structures in the understanding of governance, which makes that concept more dynamic and less prescriptive, lessening the risk of Western liberal bias. Third, because it is operationalized in terms of relative improvement in vertical and horizontal legitimacy, legitimate peace is both achievable and measurable in the midterm.

Refining the Measure of Failure

The approach I propose in this paper is inspired by the need, noted above, to distinguish between non-successful cases. Treating all non-successful cases as a homogenous group of failures obscures a lot of variation within this group, thereby preventing that variation from informing analysis and policy.

The mere absence of (a specified level of) armed conflict (the easiest definition to measure) has been used in many studies, with variations in the required duration of that absence. According to Walter (Walter 2002) a five-year cut-off point used to be the most common, though both shorter (Ohlson 1998, two months) and longer (Nordquist 1992, years) periods have been used, as well as more than one cut-off point (Doyle & Sambanis 2000; Sambanis 2006). Some studies have refrained from using any predetermined cut-off point, and simply measured the number of months it took before armed conflict recurred (Fortna 2003; Jarstad & Nilsson 2008; Werner 1999). There have also been attempts at distinguishing between various degrees of peace. Here, certain standards – such as a minimum level of democracy or respect for human rights – serve as qualifiers of the required peace (Downs & Stedman 2002; Doyle & Sambanis 2006; Johansson 2010).

Despite all these theoretical and methodological variations of the concept of sustainable peace, the durable absence of direct violence remains a standard minimum measure in systematic studies of peace after armed conflict. In other words, the recurrence of armed conflict means that peace has failed, irrespective of whatever other qualities were part of the conceptualization of peace used in the particular study, and – which is what I want to focus on here – irrespective of the duration and severity of the recurring conflict. This, I believe, is problematic.

For illustration, consider the cases of Chechnya and Tripura. According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (2014), the armed conflict in Chechnya was terminated in August 1996, through the signing of the Khasavyurt Accords. Did this termination turn out to be successful? No, in August 1999, the conflict broke out again, with the Russian army launched an offensive against Chechen rebels in response to repeated incursions into Dagestan. Fighting soon resumed also in Chechnya. More than 10,000 people were over the subsequent eight years, and that figure includes only battle-related deaths.

The armed conflict in Tripura is coded as terminated by the end of 2004, because of low activity. Did this termination turn out to be successful? No, continuing low-intensity violence continued, and as it increased in late 2006, brought the number of battle-related deaths to 27, just over the threshold of 25 used by the UCDP. In 2007, violence again decreased to below that threshold, and the conflict has remained in active since.

According to conventional research practice both conflict terminations failed – period. In fact, if anything, the termination of the Chechen conflict would be considered the more successful one because it lasted longer before armed conflict resumed. While these are not examples of peacebuilding operations, they serve to illustrate the wide difference in actual outcomes that are obscured by simply equating the recurrence of armed conflict with failure, and leave it at that.

Once we distinguishing between different types and degrees (if you will) of failure, we are able to start asking highly relevant questions, such as Why is it that some conflict recurrences are limited and others escalate to full-scale war? What is it that makes a post-war society able to take a limited setback, absorb it, and get the development of peace back on track again? What does that capability consist of? And what can we do to strengthen that capability in a post-war society?

Resilience and Adaptive Cycles Theory

These questions lead to the concept of resilience, the ability to bounce back from challenges and disturbances, or more formally defined as “the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and still retain its basic function and structure” (Walker & Salt 2006, xiii).

The first thing to note about resilience is that a resilient system is not the same as an efficient system. On the contrary, system optimization tends to decrease resilience. For example, the short-term suppression of forest fires to ensure high timber output may lead to the accumulation of fuel for larger fires at a later time (Anderies, Janssen & Ostrom 2004; Folke, Colding & Berkes 2003). Relatedly, the market economic mantra of reducing fixed costs may induce manufacturers to minimize storage costs by having materials delivered just when they are needed, making them highly vulnerable to supply shortages (Walker & Salt 2006).

Further, resilience should not be mistaken for an extended version of stability, as the ability to remain stable in the face of change. On the contrary, resilience thinking implies the inevitability of change, and the need to adapt to that change. Rather than attempting to prevent disturbances, resilience thinking encourages us to prepare for them; one of the basic commands of resilience thinking is that instead of assuming stability and trying to explain change, we (humans in general; analysts of social and ecological systems in particular) should assume change and try to explain stability (Berkes, Colding & Folke 2003, 2).

The concept of resilience has entered policy and research on peacebuilding and development over the past several years, but the implications of resilience thinking remain to be fully appreciated. As Chandler (2014, 3) points out,

The key aspects that define resilience approaches to policy-making are methodological assumptions about the nature of the world, the complex problem of governance, and the policy processes suitable to governing this complexity. It is thus quite possible to chart a rise in resilience-thinking as a governing rationality without mentioning the word “resilience” and, equally, to see the word “resilience” crop up many times in a policy paper without this being evidence that a clear conceptualisation of resilience forms the basis of understanding.

An important foundation of resilience thinking is adaptive cycles theory, the notion that systems do not merely change, but that they go through adaptive cycles. Four distinct phases together form a forward loop of organization and growth, and a backward loop of destruction and renewal. Often, the forward loop is of much longer duration than the backward loop, resulting in long periods of increasing growth and stability, which in time become more efficient but simultaneously less resilient, until the system is thrust into the backward loop, which can take many forms, before a new forward loop is entered.

Adaptive cycles theory constitutes the basis for the argument presented in this paper, and the place where I begin to develop the thoughts outlined so far. The reason why adaptive cycles theory is relevant is because, as described in further detail below, resilience takes on a very different meaning depending on whether it is used to describe the capacity to maintain stability, or the capacity to adapt to change.

Adaptive Cycle Theory

Adaptive cycle theory has been developed primarily within the domains of ecology and resource management. Realizing that ecological systems are better understood as integrated with social systems, researchers have for the past few decades developed theories on social–ecological systems. Examples include research on different types of social–ecological networks (Anderies et al. 2004) and the management of collective resources when confronted with property rights changes (Adger 2000). The seminal work on adaptive cycles in social–ecological systems is *Panarchy* (2002) by Gunderson & Holling, who in the title of their work seek to combine the image of unpredictable change (depicted by Pan, the Greek god of the wild), with the notion of hierarchies across scales.

The adaptive cycle can be illustrated as a system's progression through time along a loop in the shape of an infinity sign (see e.g. Holling & Gunderson 2002, 34). It changes along a horizontal axis representing connectedness and a vertical axis representing potential, and it progresses through four phases: exploitation (r), conservation (K), release (Ω), and reorganization (α).

In the exploitation phase, connectedness and potential are low. Low connectedness means that the species/actors of the system are comparatively independent in relation to each other, and relatively more affected by external variability. Low potential means that resources are scarce. This is the time of “the risk takers, the pioneers, the opportunists” (Holling & Gunderson 2002, 43). As the system moves into the conservation phase, both connectedness and potential increase. Relations between system components become more established, making the system more internally coherent and less vulnerable to external variability. The accumulation of resources – nutrients, managerial skills, financial capital,

physical structures – is fostered through increasing efficiency in terms of energy use, specialization, and the elimination of redundancy.

Together, these two phases represent the traditional view of ecosystem succession, “a familiar, slow, fairly predictable pattern of growth” (Holling & Gunderson 2002; quotation from Scheffer 2009, 76). However, in the adaptive cycle theory, they form *forward loop*, which is this is only half the story – or half the cycle. The theory adds two more phases, release and reorganization, which constitute an often rapid and unpredictable *back loop*.

As noted above, there is a tension, or a contradiction between efficiency and resilience. Preventing small-scale forest fires to protect output increases the risk that any future fire will be all the more devastating; discarding costs for storage leaves no margin even for brief supply shortages. Increasing efficiency by eliminating redundancy, means getting rid of safety margins. Increasing efficiency becomes increasing rigidity, and with “extreme and growing rigidity, all systems become accidents waiting to happen” (Holling & Gunderson 2002, 45).

During the back loop, “[a]ccumulated resources are released from their bound, sequestered, and controlled state, connections are broken, and feedback regulatory controls weaken”. (Holling & Gunderson 2002, 45). The first phase of the back loop is the release phase, where connectedness remains high, and destabilizing feedbacks contribute to the rapid exhaustion of resources. What this means is not that resources vanish, but that they become unavailable to the system in its current state. As the system proceeds into the reorganization phase, connectedness decreases making remaining resources available again (increasing potential), to new (combinations of) agents and entities. As some agents begin to dominate, the system continues into the exploitation phase, and the beginning of a new forward loop.

For an ecological example, think of the long-term dynamics of a forest. Slow succession allows it to develop from pioneer species (r) to climax phase with large trees and well-adapted undergrowth species (K) until a major disturbance such as fire or pest (ω) destroys it. [...] Eventually, the disturbance releases accumulated nutrients, allows light to reach the bottom, and triggers a phase of reorganization into the start of a new cycle (α). (Scheffer 2009, 76)

The forward loop is about growth and accumulation, it is characterized by increasing predictability, and is usually of longer duration than the back loop, which is often a short, unpredictable time for invention and restructuring. The result is episodic upheaval and change.

The second feature of panarchy is that adaptive systems are nested to each other across scales, in space and in time. A critical change in one cycle can cascade through the

“Revolt” connection up to a larger and slower cycle; and through the “Remember” connection, the renewal phase of one cycle draws upon the potential accumulated in an even larger and slower cycle. Examples of the three speeds may include (1) operational rules, (2) collective choice rules, and (3) constitutional rules, or (1) local knowledge, (2) management practice, and (3) worldview (Holling, Gunderson & Peterson 2002, 75). In other words,

Each level operates at its own pace, protected by slower, larger levels but invigorated by faster, smaller cycles. The panarchy is therefore both creative and conservative through the dynamic balance between change and memory, and between disturbance and diversity. (Berkes et al. 2003, 19)

When we start thinking about it, we can see adaptive cycles all around us. They can take the form of authoritarian societies exerting ever stronger means of control and coercion, limiting their options in order to increase the efficiency of the prevailing model, but eventually – and suddenly – being overturned when entering the phase of creative destruction. The fall of the Communism in Eastern Europe and the USSR. Glasnost was too little, too late.

Or we can see them in financial markets, where a certain type of behavior is encouraged and rewarded, again limiting the options, creating bubbles that eventually burst. In fact, adaptive cycle theory was first presented by Schumpeter, an economist, to describe exactly this type of market fluctuations. He argued (Schumpeter 1950, 83) that the “process of Creative Destruction is the essential fact about capitalism.” Also,

Those revolutions [of the economic structure from within] are not strictly incessant; they occur in discrete rushes which are separated from each other by spans of comparative quiet. The process as a whole works incessantly however, in the sense that there always is either revolution or absorption of the results of revolution, both together forming what are known as business cycles. (Schumpeter 1950, 83)

In other words, while novelty is suppressed during the more rigid phases when growth has resulted in established structures that leave little room for change, crises open windows of opportunity for change and novelty (Scheffer 2009, 76-77). It is also possible to intentionally induce such crises in order to create windows of opportunity and renewal. I will expand on this below.

Resilience

The previous section outlined the theory of adaptive cycles, and described the progression of a system through the four phases of exploitation, conservation, release and reorganization. This was illustrated in figure 1, with the system taking on different degrees of connectedness

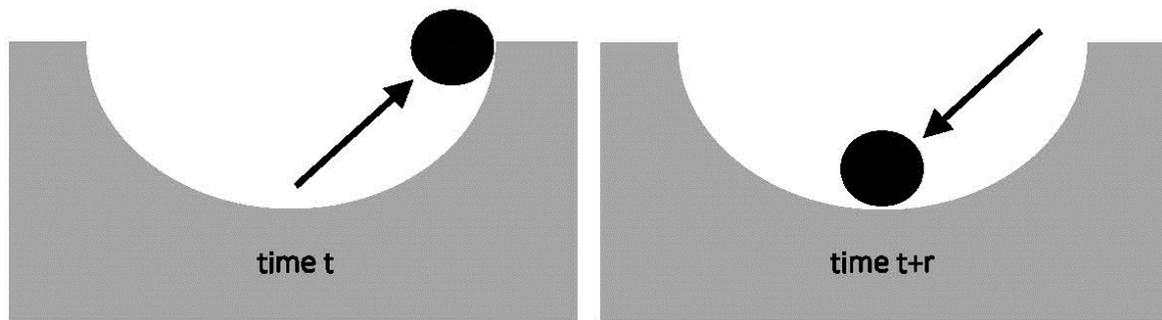
and potential as it moved from one phase to another. Now, what are the implications of adding the notion of resilience to the adaptive cycle?

Adding resilience to the adaptive cycle does not mean defining a fixed level of resilience of a certain system as it moves through the adaptive cycle. Instead, resilience constitutes a third dimension of the cycle, in addition to connectedness and potential, and as the system moves through the different phases of the cycle, all three dimensions will vary. In short, resilience expands during the back loop, is strongest during the change from reorganization to exploitation, and decreases as the conservation phase becomes more rigid.

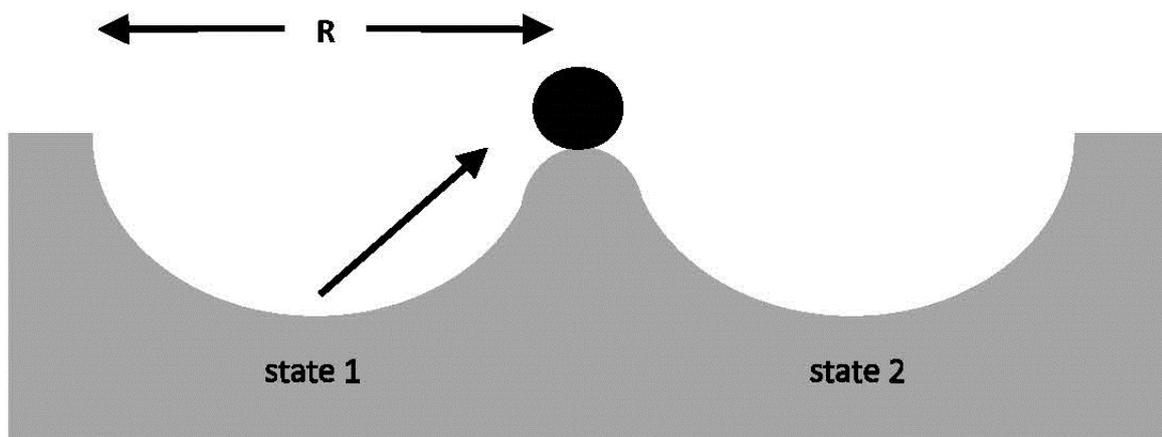
This will be developed further below, but let us first have a look at the concept of resilience as such. As noted above, resilience is usually conceptualized either as the time it takes to return to equilibrium, or as the amount of disturbance that can be absorbed before the system changes from one equilibrium to another. The former is referred to as engineering resilience, and the latter as ecological resilience. The labels largely correspond to how the concept is understood in the respective fields of research, but their use is not limited to these particular fields.

The distinction between them is more fundamental than one might first think. Being conceived of as the time it takes for a system to return to its original state after being disturbed, engineering resilience is based on the assumption of a single equilibrium, to which the system sooner or later needs return in order to function. Conversely, ecological resilience is based on the assumption of several equilibria, and perceives of resilience as the amount of disturbance a system can take without being pushed across a threshold between one equilibrium and another (see e.g. Gunderson 2003, 34-35). (Holling & Gunderson 2002, 27-28)

Equilibrium refers here not to a stable state where nothing changes, but to a situation where the feedbacks of the system reinforce each other, so that it maintains basically the same components and functions. Several other terms are used to describe this state, such as stability domain, basin of attraction, or regime. The term "basin of attraction" is related to a common way of visualizing resilience as a ball in a bowl. A ball (the system) in a wide bowl with low edges (the basin of attraction) is less resilient than a ball in a deep bowl with steep edges. Resilience then refers to the size of the valley or basin of attraction around a state that corresponds to the maximum perturbation that can be taken without causing a shift into an alternative stable state (Scheffer 2009, 22).



A. Engineering resilience (r).



B. Ecological resilience (R).

Figure 1: Engineering vs. ecological resilience (adapted from Gunderson 2003, 35).

The idea of alternative stable states can be illustrated with a lake where nutrients, algae etc... causing the lake to go from a clear state to a turbid state. In this way, the lake system moves from one stable state to another, where new feedbacks keep it in the new state.

A system that moves from one stable state to another crosses a threshold. Accepting the possibility of alternative stable states therefore require us to be concerned with threshold effects. Threshold effects occur in non-linear relationships when a cause (or condition, or independent variable) goes beyond a certain level, resulting in a jump in the effect (or outcome, or dependent variable). Some threshold effects are reversible, such as the electoral thresholds used in many countries. Clearing the Swedish threshold of 4% with a narrow margin gives a party at least 14 seats in the Riksdag. A party therefore cannot have fewer than 14 representatives in the Riksdag. And if the party receives fewer than 4% in the next election, it loses all its seats.

More relevant in the context of ecological resilience, however, are non-reversible thresholds. If a threshold effect is non-reversible, once the threshold is passed it does not help to adjust the causal variable back to a previous value. Instead, in order to reverse the

effect, a substantially larger change is needed in the cause; indeed, changing the value of the cause may be futile. For example, if you sit in a canoe and slowly lean to one side, the canoe will remain stable for some time, but once you lean that final inch, it turns over and you find yourself under water. Leaning back one inch (or even ten inches) will not set the canoe straight again. It has moved into a new equilibrium, which can be highly stable in its own right.

Threshold effects are not new to peace research. According to Kaufmann (1996), the solution to ethnic civil wars are unrelated to their causes. The war itself inevitably destroys any trust that may have existed between different groups before the war, meaning that there is no going back to the pre-war situation. Expressed in “resilience terminology” the argument is that once the threshold of war has been passed, this has such devastating effects on the attitude of ethnic groups toward each other, meaning that ending the war (i.e. crossing the threshold in the opposite direction) will not be enough to bring about a reversal of the effects of the initial crossing of the threshold.

In some types of systems it is possible to define these thresholds rather accurately in advance, at least temporarily, but it is very difficult to do so in social systems. In addition, the “stability landscape,” made up of alternative basins of attraction in different shapes and sizes with thresholds between them, is not stable, but changes over time with slow moving variables – in larger and slower cycles in the panarchy.

One might see the *forward loop* in the Holling cycle as a process of digging a deep basin of attraction. The fact that the basin is deep corresponds to a strong performance. However, it also keeps the system as it is in place in a rigid way. Slow larger-scale developments inevitably change the overall stability landscape in such a way that this basin of attraction ends up being a tiny valley in some scary high place. Eventually, a large catastrophic transformation out of this situation is inevitable. If the self-dug stability basin had been less deep, changes in the stability landscape might have led to earlier adaptation and resettlement into another place. (Scheffer 2009, 78)

An important implication of the idea of thresholds and changing stability landscapes is that resilience – ecological resilience – is not a positive thing in its own right. Once a threshold is crossed – once the lake becomes turbid or methane is being released from thawing tundra – it can be difficult to change the system back into a more positive state again. “Resilience can be the enemy of adaptive change.” (Holling & Gunderson 2002, 31-32) This means that sometimes we may want to strengthen the resilience of a system, and sometimes we may want to weaken it. Either way, it is important to understand what supports and what undermines resilience.

There is an important distinction in this regard between specified resilience and general resilience. Specified resilience refers to the resilience of specific parts of a system to specific

disturbance. Assessing specified resilience, therefore, means identifying “known and possible thresholds between alternate states (or regimes) the system can be in.” (Walker & Salt 2012, 68) General resilience, in contrast, is “the capacity of a system that allows it to absorb disturbances of all kinds, including novel, unforeseen ones, so that all parts of the system keep functioning as they were.” (Walker & Salt 2012, 90)

While the development of both specified and general resilience will be essential to the individual case of peacebuilding, what I propose to focus on in this paper is three crucial features of general resilience: diversity, modularity and tightness of feedbacks (Walker & Salt 2006, 121).

Diversity is a question of variety in the number of people and institutions that perform particular tasks in society. It is about flexibility and keeping your options open. Scheffer (2009, 91-93) describes the difference between complementarity (functional diversity), which refers to species’ functional roles in the system, and insurance (response diversity), which refers to the way species respond to stressors. The contradiction between efficiency and resilience, mentioned above, is closely related to the question of diversity. Resilience instead depends to some extent on redundancy (cf. Folke et al. 2003, 360).

Modularity is about how the different components of a system are connected. A modular system is one that contains subgroups with strong internal connections, but with weak connections between subgroups. Modularity increases the resilience of the system by most subgroups being able to continue to function even when others fail. Conversely, in a non-modular system where all components are highly interconnected failure spreads quickly.

Tightness of feedback refers to the way change in one part of the system is relayed to other parts of the system. The sooner and clearer a change in one part of the system is perceived in other parts, the more likely that the system can adjust in time to avoid crossing a threshold. Globalization and centralized governance tend to create longer, weaker feedbacks.

The Peace-in-Between: Allowing Failure, and Failing Better

What does all of this tell us about peacebuilding, and about the evaluation of peace operations in the medium term?

Most importantly, resilient peace is not a state or a situation, it is not about building a particular type of society, according to a liberal market democracy template – or any other template. Building resilient peace is not about getting closer and closer to an ideal social system, over time meeting more and more of a range of positive-peace-criteria, and being

done when all the boxes are ticked. Instead, resilient peace is a continuously ongoing process, and building resilient peace is therefore about strengthening the ability to manage a continuously evolving and changing social system in ways that avoid, as far as possible, the use of violence as a means of advancing political goals. It is about assisting a society to develop the capacity and skills (materially and intellectually) to avoid a major breakdown of the conservation phase, and to do that through the timely inducement of small-scale disturbance and renewal during the forward loop.

Inducing small-scale disturbance can serve both as a safety vent, to address problems early on rather than suppressing them until they become more serious, and as a type of social stress inoculation, improving the ability to react constructively to later, larger disturbances.

Conserving the elements we have is not the goal for a search for what is enduring. Otherwise, we would still be blacksmiths and buggy-whip makers. The challenge, rather, is to conserve the ability to adapt to change, to be able to respond in a flexible way to uncertainty and surprises. And even to create the kind of surprises that open opportunity. (Holling & Gunderson 2002, 32)

Crisis creates opportunity and change. According to Milton Friedman (1982, ix), “[o]nly a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around.” The way Friedman’s argument was realized through induced crises has been described by Naomi Klein in *The Shock Doctrine* (2007), but while it is difficult to sympathize with that practice it illustrated the potential of the underlying argument: crisis creates opportunity and change, and crisis can be induced. Regular democratic elections can be seen as a more benign safety vent for democratic societies.

Modern democratic societies [- -] have invented ways to diffuse large episodes of creative destruction by creating smaller cycles of renewal and change through periodic political elections. So long as there is a literate and attentive citizenry, that invention demonstrates that the painful lessons from episodic collapses of whole societal panarchies might be transferred to faster learning at smaller scales. (Holling et al. 2002, 95)

A related line of argument concerns the issue raised above about the understanding of failure. The implication from resilience thinking in this regard is that we should not try to avoid failure at all cost – instead we should build our capability to come back from failure. “In a complex and fluid reality, failing better is seen to be a much more realistic goal than narrow short-term understandings of policy ‘success’.” (Chandler 2014, 12) While we are not used to

thinking this way about society, or about the recurrence of armed conflict, we would recognize the principle from a child learning to ride a bike. The parent who lets his child try, and fall, be comforted and try again, will soon see his child riding without help. The parent who prevents every fall by holding on to the bike, effectively keeping the balance instead of letting the child do that, will spend a long time running behind a small bike.

In order to apply resilience thinking to peacebuilding, we need to conceive of peace and the peaceful, non-violent society as an adaptive system, and in order to do that we need to know (or, at this stage, at least have an idea about) what that system consists of, what its components are and how they are related to each other. There is no obvious answer, as Scheffer (2009, 260-261) cautions:

There is a systematic correlation between uncertainty and scale. The larger and more important the system, the less certain we are about possible thresholds and mechanisms behind transitions [...] Human societies are certainly among the most challenging systems when it comes to understanding and predicting their dynamics.

Since the theoretical approach advanced in this paper is new to peace and conflict studies, I propose we turn to more familiar territory to define the peace system, namely the conflict triangle. The three corners of the conflict triangle represent attitudes, behavior and conflict/issue of contention, and the idea is that hostile attitudes, conflictual behavior and disagreement over salient issues tend to reinforce each other. Attempts at ending violent conflict can aim at any one or more of the three corners or the triangle, the components of the system.

These same aspects can be used to describe a peaceful society, or a society in a state between war and peace (as Höglund & Söderberg Kovacs do in their delineation of peace beyond the absence of war, referred to above). A peaceful society can be conceived of as being characterized by friendly attitudes and peaceful behavior. The third corner of the triangle is less straightforward, but for the time being I'm not developing this point beyond the assumption that there will be disagreements in a peaceful society, too, we just do not use violence to settle our differences.

So, what do the three features of general resilience – diversity, modularity, and tightness of feedbacks – imply for the ability to retain friendly attitudes and peaceful behavior in a society, so that any issues of contention do not lead to hostility and violence that risks escalating to armed conflict?

The need for diversity challenges the prevailing call for efficiency. Some amount of redundancy, over-capacity, is beneficial to resilience (Low et al. 2003). This leads to a diversity which allows the system to maintain various functions even in the face of challenges

that harm or undermine the ability of some of the system components to fulfil those particular functions. In a post-war context, examples of such functions would include the support of a safe environment where people can go to work and children go to school; the (re)establishment of sustainable livelihoods, whereby people are able to support themselves; the making of decisions, at appropriate levels, about how to organize governance. Decision making must be allowed to take time.

The need for modularity challenges the model of a central government making most decisions for large countries. Local government, subsidiarity. Strengthening the self-sufficiency of all parts of a country, if possible, in terms of energy and food production. If one part is developed at the expense of others, even if income can be spread, it undermines modularity and hence resilience.

The need for tightness of feedbacks challenges top down peace implementation by calling for attention to be paid to what happens at different levels of the social structure, and for responding and adapting to warning signals rather than silencing protest in the name of stability.

I'm not sure this is the best way to relate the features of general resilience to the system of a peaceful society, but at least it might lead to some interesting follow-up questions.

Table 1: Relating aspects of resilience with aspects of peace and conflict.

	diversity	modularity	tightness of feedbacks
attitudes	freedom of expression and media	alternatives to mainstream, national media	
behavior	deliberation participation redundancy	self-sufficiency contextualization	communication listening
conflict	overlapping majorities		

Not all of these expressions are easily manipulable. Often, contradictory forces will be at play, and the peacebuilders' job will be to strengthen the positive ones and reduce the salience or impact of the negative ones. Whereas in ecosystems, adaptive capacity is determined largely by the diversity of species, in social systems adaptive capacity reflects the degree to which a system is capable of reorganization, learning and adaptation (Scheffer 2009, 103).

Conclusions

As noted by Walker & Salt, resilience thinking embraces change, so the first implication of resilience thinking is that peacebuilding cannot be about “template-style peace implementation.” There can be no one blueprint of society that peacebuilders follow; building peace is not about creating a stable state, it’s about nurturing the capability to adapt.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that social systems are more adaptive than most – because in addition to other characteristics of complex systems, social systems also involve learning and innovation – social science has traditionally drawn more on non-adaptive physical analogies to understand the behavior of complex systems, than on adaptive analogies from biology and ecology (Low et al. 2003, 103).

Ecological resilience is a more powerful analytical tool. In this frame, not only peace can become self-sustaining, but so can conflict. Violence begets violence. If we therefore argue that a social system can exist in a regime of primarily peaceful feedbacks, or in a regime of primarily conflictual feedbacks – and, consequently, that conflict can be resilient to attempts at peacemaking – then the same basic perception of social dynamics can be used to understand not only peace, but both peace and conflict.

In some ways, the recurrence of the use of force, however minor, is always a failure. However, in terms of how this recurrence of the use of force informs our understanding of what makes peace more or less durable, or sustainable, there is every reason to make our analytical tools more sensitive to variations in for example the intensity and durability of that recurrence of the use of force.

When armed conflict recurs, it can do so in highly different ways, with highly different consequences, but these differences are largely overlooked by current peace and conflict research methodology. Why did the renewed armed conflict in Chechnya escalate to full-scale war, and why didn’t the renewed armed conflict in Tripura? These are questions for case studies. However, by placing these two examples of recurring armed conflict in the same category of “failure”, quantitative research uses them to implicate the circumstances of each as being related to non-durable peace.

Finally, it is easy to assume that the more ambitious the objectives of peacebuilding, the more difficult to achieve them, but this is not necessarily the case. I’m not suggesting that the relationship is the inverse, but from a systems theoretical perspective, a determined and focused effort to strengthen one or a few aspects of the system may in fact be rather futile. If you want to make your house warmer, you will get better results if you go for more efficient heating *and* better insulation *and* double glazing, than if you go for triple glazing only. Similarly, aiming for representative governance *and* addressing root causes of social exclusion *and* strengthening legitimate distribution of resources may be a more effective way

of avoiding the recurrence of armed conflict than a total focus on ever so elaborate anti-terrorism measures.

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