

Beijing- Humboldt-Forum “Resources of social cohesion - the role of conflict”

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Society is kept together by a variety of things: a common language, a shared history or religion, participation on prosperity and, of course, a political order. A political order that's grounded in shared norms and expectations. Meanwhile, rapid technical innovations, increased globalization and migration are factors that constantly work towards a transformation and – as a by-product - often towards a fragmentation of society. So to keep our societies together, we have to work out what unites us and what divides us, and how to deal with those two forces.

The most basic reason, why political conflict develops, was summed up well by Harold Lasswell: we constantly have to figure out, “who gets what, when, and how”. This fact indeed is the reason, why we, as humans, developed larger political structures - states and empires - in the first place. Small family- and clan-based decision-making only goes so far. So when human population started to grow, we needed a relatively permanent system of organizing conflict through institutionalized control and administration, we needed a specialized class of people organizing politics. Therefore, political thought in any culture has always sought to find answers on how to civilize conflicts. And the more changes, the more we have to find new rules and regulations. At the same time, we are called to think about those resources that keep our societies together, while encountering the challenges of our times.

Usually Chinese and western political traditions seem to contradict each other in many ways, including how they organize conflict. Although the differences are striking, there also are some interesting parallels which I will talk about in a minute. Since both China and Western Europe are facing similar problems – globalization, new technologies, migration, international politics – it will be beneficial to know a variety of solutions to common problems, if we want to foster

political progress and human development. This presentation wants to offer insights into some answers Chinese and Western political thought have developed in their attempts to organize conflict. For the comparison, I chose to concentrate on those classical texts that are still influential today and that offer a range of answers. Without a doubt there would be many more thinkers that I cannot cover in my short 20 minutes here at our panel. But let's get started.

Western political thought has dealt with two distinctively different ways of thinking about conflict among the 'demos' - the people in a society - for the last 200 years. The first line of thought aligns with the European enlightenment and the French revolution of 1789 and is connected to names like Jean Jaques Rousseau. This era signifies the end of European absolutism and the subsequent enlightenment, which paved the way for the political order and the culture Europe has today.

Continental political thought assumed an idea of identity of rulers and the ruled. Through a vision of a social contract everybody gives his or her person and power to society. Every individual becomes part of a new entity, a collective organism with a combined will, a combined life, a combined identity. This is what we call a sovereign democratic state with citizens instead of a feudal monarchy with its subjects. It creates an end of the power of people over other people.

With that end of power and suppression, true human nature could manifest itself again, which is characterized by love, compassion and capability towards self-perfection. In this sense, Rousseau's "Discours" not only entail a political program, but also a pedagogical program. A political person is only complete as a virtuous person. Here we have strong parallels to Chinese political thought.

Political representation in this world view, is seen as a morally superior avant-garde, whose sole purpose is to express the will of the people. This virtuous elite is able to express the general will, based on their advanced philosophical-rational awareness. The 'volonté generale', as brought to life in the national assembly, is considered to be inerrant. Per definition the general will cannot pursue anything that doesn't benefit the common good and is always oriented towards the collective good. Individual privileges or disadvantages are irrelevant; they simply are out of the focus of the volonté generalé.

However, individuals can develop private particular interests that stand in opposition to the public interests. The on-going conflicts and fighting among private interests made the social contract necessary in the first place. The state in Rousseau's work therefore gets certain powers. These powers against individuals include the power over their possessions, over land and even life and death. They are meant to prevent large numbers of selfish individual interests, the so called "volonté de tous", from taking over. Accordingly, in such a perspective open political conflict and oppositional behavior are considered dangerous and outright wrong, because they directly oppose the will of the people. Political conflict and opposition also destabilize the unity of the ruling and the ruled. Therefore, they need to be fought, using state powers.

To make sure however, that state powers are used in a positive way, we need a political leadership that is virtuous and equipped with high rational awareness. An unfit political leader will be deceived; he will mistake the combined selfish interests of influential masses for the general will.

For the purpose of better politics, Rousseau gave some advice on how the conflict of selfish interests should be transformed into a common good. Rousseau writes: "If, when the people,

being furnished with adequate information, held its deliberations, the citizens had no communication one with another, the grand total of the small differences would always give the general will, and the decision would always be good.” (Social Contract, Book 2, part 3) So information, deliberation, no mobilization. This procedure is meant to take away the extremes, leaving the sum of smaller differences of the wills of all the people that together make up society.

Simultaneously to the French revolution, on the newly conquered American continent, another tradition of thinking about the ‘demos’ developed. It showed a different path to how conflicts are handled. Generally, the thinkers of the American revolution were far less visionary in their political thinking than their French and British counterparts at the time. Their large influence however lies in the fact, that the specific circumstances of the colonies and the young USA allowed them to directly implement new ideas into reality.

The federalists felt, that expectations of social cohesion should be kept relatively low. Humans, so John Adams, need outside pressure to behave ethically. Underneath men’s morals lie human passions, for example egoism and selfishness, which usually comes out in economic aggression and conflicts about the distribution of goods and possessions. Alexander Hamilton writes in Federalist Paper 15 “Why has government been instituted at all? Because the passions of men will not conform to the dictates of reason and justice, without constraint.”

So the diagnosis of the Federalists on why conflicts develop is the same as Rousseau’s. Private interests mobilize in society. Factions are created and conflicts ensue among different factions. Now there’s two options, on how to deal with conflict: 1. remove the cause or 2. controlling its effects. When Hamilton pondered the consequences of removing sources of conflicts, he clearly pointed out that there are only two unpleasant ways for this to happen in a

democracy “the one, by destroying the liberty which is essential to its existence; the other, by giving to every citizen the same opinions, the same passions, and the same interests.” (AH, Fed paper 10). The second solution was seen as impossible to implement.

Therefore, since the causes of conflict couldn't be removed, the Federalists turned to controlling its effects. Pragmatic negotiations and compromise played out by elected representatives was seen as more likely to produce beneficial outcomes than trusting an abstract ideal of rationality and the will of the people. They stressed, that the notion of a general will would eventually only lead to democracy as an instrument of tyranny. A good political order, therefore, would be one, that reconciles different interests by providing an institutionalized system of checks and balances.

So the answer is pluralism. Pluralism thrives on political conflict. Hamilton writes: “The regulation of these various and interfering interests forms the principal task of modern legislation, and involves the spirit of party and faction in the necessary and ordinary operations of the government.” (AH, fed paper 10) Conflict within the boundaries of the political order is fostered and seen as an opportunity for learning, especially in the wake of new political challenges. Instead of societal harmony, a practiced tolerance of heterogeneity is encouraged.

Nowadays Germany and the other western countries predominantly follow this pragmatic representative model of pluralist societies. In its practical application however, it shows that there is a fine line, between said approval for competitive pluralism due to its beneficial outcomes on the one hand and, on the other hand, dissatisfaction, fatigue and often feelings of loss due to constant revisions and unexpected turns in decision-making processes.

Building a political order on conflict, is very demanding. It demands that citizens shape it in a positive, constructive way or at least endure the fighting. It also demands that the political

leadership negotiates interests in a way that maintains social cohesion. Pluralism always has the risk of raising the results of the “parallelogram of political forces” as Ernst Fraenkel put it, to the rank of public interests, whereas in reality it might only represent the most assertive political parties.

Especially in recent years we have seen that pluralism can turn to polarization. Instead of positive conflict, which creates learning and better outcomes, we have fairly noticeable destructive forces within society and against the state. One reason for that is, that it is much harder to define a common public interest, that also needs to be based on shared value system. Especially in Germany we still need to discuss, what that shared value system actually entails. This discussion is not an easy task, given the breaks and turns in our cultural history. There’s much less continuation than in China’s cultural history as you know.

Chinese political thought – of course – is rooted in a far longer tradition than could possibly be discussed in such a short time. It is interesting, that the warring states period of 481-221 BC not only was a time of conflict, rebellion and chaos in Chinese history ,but also spawned the golden age of the Hundred Schools of Thought, with truly extraordinary thinkers like Confucius, Laotse, Master Han Fei, Mozi or a bit earlier Sunzi. They all were united in the quest to give answers in how to organize politics in a peaceful, orderly and moral way.

Over two thousand years before the French dreamed up a political elite with superior rationality, Confucius already discussed the concept of sage, rational kings leading the land through extensive rites and based on moral and social virtues. Philosophical-rational awareness was also extended to much larger segments of society, including the middle-class, as long as they possessed appropriate virtue. Whereas the French thinkers had a very revolutionary, future oriented approach, Confucius shows, that to deal with the constant changes in the world, one

should always look back towards the cultural heritage of the forefathers and learn from the past. Benevolence, righteousness, knowledge, integrity and following proper rites are the five elements of proper self-cultivation which forms the basis of social relations. It is every individual that makes up the collective organism of the state, therefore permanent work on one's virtue is the ultimate purpose in life. This thought, gives a lot of power to the individual to shape their own path.

When the Han dynasty implemented those principles into a political order, it is not surprising, that the intended goal was not conflict, but universal harmony by having all segments of society work towards a common good with peace and benevolence. The more virtuous the ruler and his people, the easier it would be to avoid division, chaos, and endless wars.

There is one important fact, that Western political thought should learn from the Confucian ideal of harmony. Harmony in society does not mean uniformity, conformity or egalitarianism. This is often misunderstood in the West. As Confucius wrote in Analects, 13:23: "The noble-person searches for harmony without uniformity, but the petty-person searches for uniformity without harmony". In this perspective, diversity in society – as long as it carries on the established order of different roles for different people – does not create conflict.

Instead a good political order is characterized by peaceful co-existence and coping with differences. That's because differences are the result of a natural inequality of people, of their differing talents and capacities. The result of that world-view, is a harmonious, hierarchical structured society. Similar to what Rousseau suggested, Confucius also stressed, that a middle-ground, the rejection of extreme thoughts and actions leads to a good order. In conflicts it is therefore important to have empathy for the opponent and to not claim the ultimate truth

for oneself. A virtuous person surrounded by equally virtuous people would react properly in conflicts.

Legalism on the other hand, doubted, that conflicts could be solved simply by trusting in the superior virtue. People aren't necessarily good, they can be combative, selfish and deceitful. Therefore, a good political order needed additional instruments through which the sage king could govern. As Han Fei Zi stressed: "A wise should not try to make men good, but only to restrain them from doing evil". To end conflict, a ruler needs to make very clear what is allowed and what is forbidden.

Whereas the Federalists turned to organizing the political process, the Legalists turned to rule of law and bureaucracy. In the words of Guanzi: "Some men make laws, some follow laws and some obey laws". The strategic goal of channeling politics through an administration, was to give the ruler advanced problem solving abilities in challenging times. The administration allows him to govern effectively, increase military capacity and to provide goods for the people. Those results of a good legal system would already decrease chances of societal conflict, because people are happier with what they are getting from the state.

In those cases, where conflict was inevitable, it would provide institutions and impersonal norms and regulations to solve the dispute. Thus, conflict regulation shifts from the personal level to an institutional level. It shifts from decent behavior to jurisprudence, whose job is conflict prevention and conflict settlement. The reliability and predictability is much higher in a formalized and institutionalized setting. Having a clear anticipation of how a political order is going to react, leads to less conflict and faster solutions. The Legalists taught us this 2200 years ago, and it still proves true today.

Now what can we learn from those 4 examples? As this short look at classical text shows, the regulation of conflict is very closely tied, to how we define, what the common good of a polity is. One way of thought assigns the individual a certain higher purpose and goal in life. I call this a substantial-monistic notion of the common good, which leads to more emphasis on avoiding and erasing potentials for conflict. Rousseau and Confucius fall into that category.

The other way of thinking argues, that different goals in different parts of society are inevitable and therefore have to be organized in a way to allow peaceful co-existence. This I call a formal-pluralistic notion of the common good. The Federalists and Legalists are on this side.

Both the goals and the instruments of conflict solution deviate from the decision between those two options. To sum it up in the words of Plato in his 'Republic': "Is it more expedient to be ruled by the best man, or by the best law?" always was, and still seems to be a pertinent question in how we deal with conflicts. Both the West and China have oscillated between those two solutions in their practical politics.

In the end however we need to be aware, that political conflict and the ideas how this conflict is organized in a polity are just one puzzle piece, in creating social cohesion. We also need to take into account the processes of socialization into any given society and political system, as well as the mechanisms of social control. And finally we need an overarching framework of values and norms, ideas of transcendence so to say, that strengthen cohesion beyond politics, even in the face of all our differences.