

10 QUESTIONS ON PEACE MEDIATION INTERVIEW WITH HERBERT C. KELMAN



10 QUESTIONS ON PEACE MEDIATION LESSONS LEARNED AND SHARED EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL MEDIATORS

10 QUESTIONS ON PEACE MEDIATION IS AN INTERVIEW SERIES CONDUCTED BY THE CENTER FOR PEACE MEDIATION DISCUSSING DEVELOPMENTS IN PEACE MEDIATION WITH INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION SCHOLARS.

MEETING WITH EMINENT ACADEMICS AND PRACTITIONERS, THE SERIES AIMS TO DRAW LESSONS LEARNED FROM PAST AND ONGOING MEDIATION PROCESSES. THEREBY, THE SERIES FOCUSES ON ANALYTICAL CONCLUSIONS AND PERSONAL EXPERIENCES TO ENHANCE MEDIATION PRACTICE.

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The Center for Peace Mediation, institutionally integrated at the European University Viadrina and the Humboldt-Viadrina School of Governance, combines theory and practice of international peace mediation.

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INTERVIEW WITH HERBERT C. KELMAN

For more than 30 years, Harvard University scholar Herbert C. Kelman has been working with Israelis and Palestinians to build peace in the Middle East. In the 1970s, Kelman developed the so called *interactive problem solving workshop method*, an unofficial third-party approach to the resolution of international and ethnic conflicts, anchored in social-psychological theory following a scholar-practitioner model. Throughout his career, Herbert C. Kelman sought to apply psychological theory to major social issues, stressing the moral dimension as the center of his work.

Herbert C. Kelman is Richard Clarke Cabot Professor of Social Ethics, Emeritus, at Harvard University, and was for ten years the director of the Program on International Conflict Analysis and Resolution (PICAR) at Harvard's Weatherhead Center for International Affairs.

This interview was conducted on the occasion of the awarding of the Socrates prize to Herbert C. Kelman in April 2009 in Berlin. The award, granted by the German institution Centrale für Mediation, honours eminent mediators, who contributed with their outstanding work to the enhancements of mediation science and practice.

1. PERSONAL MOTIVATION AND BACKGROUND. *Prof. Kelman, during the Second World War, as a young child at the age of twelve, you and your family fled as refugees from Vienna, over Belgium to New York. Later on you studied psychology, and worked for your PhD with Carl Hovland in the early days of the attitude change project at Yale University. Looking back at the roots of your distinguished career, what was your personal interest in your work on conflict resolution and peace mediation?*

Well, I have always been interested in peace. And I felt that the field of social psychology would be a good area in which I can pursue my interest in peace and justice within some kind of scholarly framework. And I think that my interest goes back to the fact that I experienced discrimination, prejudice, racial hatred and anti-Semitism as a child. My mother lost two brothers in World-War One, my father was a soldier and a social democrat. Starting at the age of eleven my sister and I joined the Zionist movement. And at the age of eighteen after the Second World War, I became quite active both in the anti-war movement and the race relations/civil-rights movement. So this kind of social activism particularly with respect to issues of peace and justice is where I came from.

Given that conflicts appear all over again, what has been your motivation to continue working on conflict resolution science against all obstacles?

I never had the illusion that these deep-rooted conflicts can be solved easily and permanently. From my experience of campaigning in the civil-rights movement in Baltimore against segregation I learned that you have to be patient, you keep working, and it takes time, and there might be setbacks. Don't lose your patience, that's what it is. Change is difficult, given institutionalized patterns that take a lot of effort to change. You have to work slowly, and in the case of Baltimore, which was a completely segregated city in terms of public facilities, housing, and schools, you work on one shop at the time. In this regard, I would describe myself as a strategic optimist, and I am distinguishing it from being a naïve optimist, who would say that everything and the world is good. I see optimism rather as a strategy; and if you maintain this sense of possibility, then you keep looking for where the points of entry are, where there are things you can do in order to move forward. And while doing it, you create positive self-fulfilling prophecies.

“I NEVER HAD THE ILLUSION THAT THESE DEEP-ROOTED CONFLICTS CAN BE SOLVED EASILY AND PERMANENTLY.”



2. BRINGING TWO SIDES TOGETHER.

You are known for an off-the-record meeting between members of the PLO and Israeli politicians and academics in 1989, an effort to bring the two sides closer on important issues. Elaborating on that experience, could you describe the largest obstacle you had to overcome to make both sides talk to each other, and how did you achieve it?

A great advantage of being with the Center for International Affairs is that you get to know people from various parts of the world, who come there as visiting scholars, and I was able to form close friendships. One of these people in particular, who was very important in my Israeli-Palestinian work was a man named Walid Khalidi, a leading Palestinian intellectual, whom I first got to know when he was a fellow at the Center for a year. I got his perspective on what was happening, and what the issues were at different levels, and he got to know me, and where I came from.

So that's one aspect, another thing is, that in Israel there was a law that did not allow Israelis to meet with PLO officials except in a public setting. So, an academic context, where a third party was present, was alright. Thus, there has to be a place where both parties are comfortable. And for me it

was the academic setting, which helped. In the end, both parties were coming into an activity sponsored by the Center for International Affairs to work with scholars, who were interested in international relations and international conflict, and they could see themselves as helping them in their research without being interpreted as engaging in negotiations. That academic context gave a kind of a rationale for their participation, a permission if you will, which of course also makes the trust in the third party a very important feature.

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3. SUCCESS AND FAILURE OF PEACE MEDIATION PRACTICE.

As various current peace processes in Africa, the Middle East, and elsewhere show, there are many attempts to mediate peace, but only a few of them succeed in bringing permanent peace. Given your broad experience in international conflict resolution, what do you think are the main pitfalls which cause mediation attempts to fail?

The reason why it is very hard to answer that is because what I do is informal mediation, and the expected product is not a peace agreement. So the fact that you don't come up with an agreement isn't a sign of failure because this is not what we are aiming for. It would be a failure if people didn't develop some new ideas or a

new sense of possibility. As an example, I thought about this in connection with one workshop we held in the nineteen-eighties. Some of the people there were eager to come to some kind of agreement, and they were disappointed because they couldn't reach an agreement. Around the same time we had another workshop just for Israeli and Palestinian women, and they didn't come up with an agreement any more than the other group, because the time wasn't right for a number of reasons. And yet the



women were less disappointed, and our interpretation is, that for the women, by and large, forming relationships was as important as coming to a formal agreement on the issues. So in my efforts, a mediation would fail if the people came away either saying that reaching an agreement with the other side is even harder than they thought, that they are even further apart, with reduced hope; or if they came away without any kind of empathy for the concerns of the other side, or without any greater

understanding of the other side's perspective. So if there is no new learning, or if the new learning is entirely negative, that would be a failure.

4. SCHOLAR-PRACTITIONER

RELATIONSHIP. *Describing the scholar-practitioner model, you wrote that this is a form of practice based on theoretical concepts anchored in social-psychological analysis, which involves a continuing interaction between practice, on the one hand, and*



theory development and empirical research, on the other. In this regard, how would you like to see the relationship between foreign services and academic institutions in conflict resolution?

The value of the academic setting is precisely that it provides an unofficial context where people are freer to think and develop ideas. Of course this has to happen in official negotiations too—things have to be learned—but they are less likely to happen in official negotiations because people are

inhibited. In good negotiations people learn from each other, but in formal settings this is more difficult, because each person is acting in a representative role.

With this in mind, what are the three major lessons practicing diplomats should learn from academic theories?

First, when you want to reach an agreement, the measure of success is not how much you have won at the expense of the other; such an agreement is not going to last. What you need is to come up with a win-win solution. You need in fact to be concerned about what the other side gets out of it. I think a good diplomat understands that, but the setting makes it hard, given that you are an advocate for your party. So the unofficial context makes it easier—not necessarily easy—to do joint thinking. And that is the important lesson: unless both sides come out winning, you don't have a stable agreement.

A second thing is to gain an understanding of the political context in which the other side operates. It is very hard for parties in conflict to be aware of the constraints of the other because they are focusing on their own constraints; so they tend to think of the other as an unconstrained actor. I think learning about the constraints of the other side and the system within

which the other operates is an important part of crafting an agreement that will be lasting.

Lastly, another element I would bring into the picture is learning to differentiate the other side. You have to become aware of the different trends and tendencies on the other side, just as you are aware of the tendencies on your own side, in order to know what you have to address at which levels, and what you have to deal with within the other side.

“WHEN YOU WANT TO REACH AN AGREEMENT, THE MEASURE OF SUCCESS IS A WIN-WIN SOLUTION.”

5. NON-MEDIATIVE CASE. *Do you remember any case, where you acted non-mediatively against your own rules, and what did you learn from it?*

Well... (*laughs*) I remember one very minor incident in a workshop, when I needed to go to the men's room badly, so I was eager to end the session. At this moment, somebody made an important statement that needed an opportunity for the other side to respond. Instead, I looked at my watch, and said it's time for a break. Fortunately, I always have one or more partners. In this case, my partner properly intervened to give the other side at least an initial chance to make a response. So there, I was very well aware of the fact that I was saved by my colleague from a big error, which I wouldn't have made if I hadn't been

under this urgent pressure. What I learned, to put it simply, was that our personal needs may cause us to act in ways that are contrary to the third party role. The big lesson was to reinforce the importance of having partners—of having a third-party team. That, I think, is generally true, because there are so many things happening at any one moment.

6. ETHICS IN PEACE MEDIATION. *You have spoken out courageously and*



the inside. I suppose that for certain extreme cases, there might be a need for external control, but I would like to go as far as possible to leave the control to professional organizations.

As for the principles to be covered, I think one of the largest issues is confidentiality, but there are also issues of cultural sensitivity, for example. Also qualifications and training, however you measure that. The whole discussion reminds me of the debate we had about the establishment of



systematically on ethical issues in psychological research, including deception, manipulation of human behaviour, exploitation of powerless populations, and the social uses of psychological knowledge. Concerning peace mediation, do you think we need a code of conduct for international peace mediators?

I certainly think we need some kind of code of conduct. I would prefer it to be done by the mediators themselves, by people who are not controlling the behaviour from the outside, but from

rules for the treatment of human subjects. Certain treatments have consequences for people so you cannot really avoid intervention by public institutions, but I would much rather see standards controlled by the members of the profession. And everything I am saying is based on the proposition that mediators are not pretending to be doing something other than what they are doing. So, to give a personal example, when I was meeting with Arafat or Israeli officials, I was very clear about who I was and what I was doing, and did not pretend to do any-

thing else. There have been, for instance, some times when I felt that people I was meeting with somehow wanted to believe that I represented official agencies, but if ever I feel there is any ambiguity about that, I say clearly that I do not represent anybody, except myself. So I think, whatever mediators do should be within their own role.

7. PSYCHOLOGY AND INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION.

Although that might be provocative, it is sometimes said that rather than consulting a mediator, disputing parties should instead consult a psychiatrist. What do you think about that assumption, do you agree with it?

No, very sharply, the medical model is not appropriate. The notion that we deal with individuals who have psychological problems, which have to be dealt with through some kind of therapeutic intervention, is one that I reject. This also goes for anthropomorphizing states, societies, groups or systems, treating them as troubled individuals; I think these are inappropriate and misleading assumptions. The contribution of psychology, particularly social psychology, to conflict resolution is not in diagnosis and therapy, but in illuminating the psychological

processes—in individuals, groups, and societies and interaction between them—that generate, escalate, and perpetuate destructive conflict and that must be reversed in order to make conflict resolution possible.

8. MEDIATION AS A PROFESSION.

Seeing that mediation is growing as a field of different dimensions, what do you think mediation needs to become a profession, and be accepted as such?

That's an interesting question. In my own work, I have never said to people I am coming to you as a professional conflict-resolver. I describe myself as a professor and a social psychologist; those are my professions, my institutional bases. And of course, these impose certain constraints on me. I have never described myself as a

mediator, but I would describe myself as a specialist in conflict resolution. I was never formally trained in this field, that's the truth. I can't point to certain courses I have taken or exams I have passed. And the same holds for all of the early practitioners in this field, and yet we made some contributions. I would not like to see rules that inhibit innovative contributions. But it should also be pointed out that we didn't operate outside certain institutional standards. So I think we need a kind of balance; when people offer their

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services as mediators, there has to be some clear basis for what their training is and what the standards are for the area in which they perform.

9. MEDIATION SKILLS AND COMPETENCES. *Imagine you could start all over again, what would you do and which discipline would you study to gain the most important skills for becoming a good peace mediator?*

One of the things I did not have in my training is a comparative perspective on the role of mediators in other contexts. I did have exposure to the role of psychotherapist, although I was not trained as a clinician. But there are other kinds of roles, like a formal arbitrator, somebody working within a legal framework, or labour-management negotiations, which would provide comparative perspectives.

In general, I am inclined to be cautious about formulating rules and procedures that are applicable to the entire range of arenas of practice. I think mediation in an international context is quite different from family mediation, or mediation in a labour-management context. I think context makes a great deal of difference, and one cannot automatically apply concepts from one setting to another.

However, some familiarity with the range of arenas of practice is of great value. For peace mediation, it is also important to have a background in international relations theory. That was always my advice to my students, who were mostly in social psychology.

10. CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS: *Finally, what do you think are the main key undiscovered areas for conflict resolution in the 21st century, on which academics urgently should do more research?*

I think one area that can stand a lot of extra work involves ways of bringing a conflict resolution approach into early education. There has been some thinking and experimentation, but I think a lot of basic work still needs to be done in this area.

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Another area that I think would benefit from further exploration involves ways in which the conflict parties can perform the third-party role themselves: in other words, members of the first and second party take on the facilitative role that is enacted by the third party in our model. Again, there have been experiments along these lines, but I would explore the possibility more fully and systematically.

Prof. Kelman, thank you very much for this interview.

SHORT AND BRIEF.

- ▲ *FAVOURITE BOOK ON CONFLICT RESOLUTION.*
“Conflict and Communication. The Use of Controlled Communication in International Relations” by John Burton (1969).
- ▲ *PEACE IS ...*
Good.
- ▲ *MEDIATION IS ...*
A tool.
- ▲ *PEACE CAN BE ONLY BROUGHT THROUGH...*
Respect and empathy for others.
- ▲ *ALL CONFLICTS CAN BE SOLVED...*
No, but conflict systems can be changed.
- ▲ *I WAS INSPIRED BY ...*
John Burton.
- ▲ *THE ISRAELIN-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT COULD BE SOLVED IF...*
There would be some charismatic leadership, and creative problem-solving.

RECOMMENDED READINGS.

- ▲ *Kelman, H. C. (Ed.) (1965): International behaviour. A social-psychological analysis. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.*
- ▲ *Kelman, H. C. (1983): Conversations with Arafat. A social-psychological perspective on the prospects for Israeli-Palestinian peace, in: American Psychologist 38, pp. 203-216.*
- ▲ *Kelman, H. C. (1997): Group processes in the resolution of international conflicts. Experiences from the Israeli-Palestinian case, in: American Psychologist 52, pp. 212-220.*
- ▲ *Kelman, H. C. (2001): The role of national identity in conflict resolution. Experiences from Israeli-Palestinian problem-solving workshops, in: R. D. Ashmore, L. Jussim, and D. Wilder (Eds.): Social identity, intergroup conflict, and conflict reduction. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 187-212.*



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