

## Book review

# *Mediation in political conflicts – Soft power or counter culture?*

Faget, Jacques 2011

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*Reviewed by Leonard Suransky\**

This book is essential reading for mediators employing alternative, non-conventional approaches in pursuit of peace, and containing conflict in our contracting global village. Its contributions range from historical initiatives by the likes of Pope Alexander VII in the 30 Years War, to mediators of some of the most intransigent modern geopolitical problems of our time in Africa, Central America and Northern Ireland.

Professor Jacques Faget, researcher and legal expert, aims to transcend the Realist, Western-biased, state-centred politics of a bygone age. He sets out to explore the effectiveness of a new 'soft power' mediation culture to solve global

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problems. He and his colleagues are declaring that their new paradigm is better placed to mediate the complex international challenges of our new century than traditional diplomatic or power politics.

Why soft power? Simply because these mediator practitioners enter the fray un-armed! The tools of their trade are persuasion rather than coercion, and expert knowledge of the conflict, to present the warring protagonists with innovative options, and with the authority of (mediator) experience and charisma, rather than economic or political fire-power.

Nevertheless Faget is very conscious that his soft mediation power may be no more than an ethnocentric wolf dressed in sheep's clothing, and he raises the question of whether this new mediation fad may only be another 'Western' cultural imposition. He quotes Hareide on the numerous Norwegian mediation initiatives, claiming that:

... the old missionaries preached God and salvation, the new missionaries preach peace and democracy. The old stayed for a long time with low pay and learnt the local languages. The young travel back and forth, have a high pay and speak English. What is similar is a well-developed sense for the macro theories about Good versus Evil ... Both have a gospel, even if they do not like to admit it, that someone from the West will save the Rest of the planet (Dag Hareide, Peace mediator – the new Norwegian missionary? 2003:19. Article published by the Norwegian Forum for Mediation and Conflict Management).

On the more positive side he suggests that international political mediation may be developing a 'new international code of ethics'. It encourages respect for the human rights and the autonomy of the 'other,' as an essential pre-requisite to building a participative, democratic outcome. The mediators must steep themselves in the cultural context they are tackling, and must also draw on local peacemaking wisdom and resources, a far cry from traditional negotiation. Then their more difficult task is to transmit their insights into the vying parties' consciousnesses. These methods aim to develop an understanding and appreciation of what it means to walk in the shoes of the 'other'. It enables the

contesting parties to air their frustrations and their sense of injustice or inequity to each other, as a precursor to seeking new common ground.

The contributors to the book are fully cognizant that the high politics of Realism is not about to evaporate, and that it must be treated with appropriate respect. Given this, Faget suggests that his two starting hypotheses are tested and somewhat validated by the ten articles in the book. He claims that:

1. Mediation initiatives and state strategies must complement one another.
2. And that the mediation initiatives from below may in time '*lead to blurring the frontiers between state and non-state actors...and the emergence of...a [viable] "industry" of democratic promotion*' (p. 198). He envisages a different order which acknowledges that '*legitimacy cannot be built on the sheer use of force*'.

This presages the emergence of a cadre of mediators, who are expert in different cultural contexts, and are independent from the ruling power mongers. They would bring their soft instruments to bear on complex conflicts with considerable success, instruments genuinely different from the traditional paternalistic, authoritarian, and arm-twisting diplomacy of yore.

I will now refer to two of the six case studies.

In chapter 8, Aurelien Colson and Alain Pekar Lempereur deal with their experiences of mediation in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, two central African states which have seen perhaps the most unspeakable violence in recent African times. Their work resonates beautifully with the *imbizo* culture of South Africa. They talk about how their task was 'to reconcile the irreconcilable'. This is not so unlike the first South African meetings in Dakar on the road to the negotiated Codesa settlement. Those first meetings took place between enemies with flashing eyes and racing hearts, and were meetings filled with apprehension, mistrust and even hatred. Of course, it is the name of the game that representatives at the beginning of negotiations are radically opposed to each other.

The mediator's task is to get each side to have their say about their deeply felt grievances and pain, and to listen (properly) to each other. The potential for interdependence of such a dialogue creates a new platform for a 'shared experience ... a shared reference point for the future ... between former enemies' (p. 167). If this can be achieved, then during the actual negotiations, a reconciliation process should be started to enable the former antagonists to plan *together* for a joint future. They quote Uri Savir, an Israeli Oslo Accord negotiator with the Palestinians, who warns that 'in reconciliation, some will see an opportunity for salvation, others for capitulation'. This imbalance is to be avoided at all costs.

Most importantly, Colson and Lempereur's reconciliation effort demands that ALL stakeholders must be a party to the negotiations. This includes even the most radical rejectionist groups, failing which a settlement may not hold. Inclusivity would involve women, professional groups, geographic as well as ethnic representatives, older as well as younger generations of leaders, and the full spectrum of opinion groups. This is the only way to ensure a credible process.

In chapter 9, Monika M. Sommer deals with the massacre of hundreds of Anywaa men in Gambella town in Ethiopia on the border of South Sudan. Her research underlines the enormous complexity of mediation, given its openness to requiring practitioners to steep themselves in indigenous cultural realities. She discovered that there were eight different ethnic groups in the vicinity of the conflict. Each actually had their own traditional processes for dealing with conflicts, often involving final ceremonies in which animals were sacrificed. Equally common were settlement penalties ranging from fines to the death penalty, and public processes which served to educate the community to prevent future conflicts or violence. Most of this happens outside of the formal state judicial structures, although sometimes there is a hybrid process.

I will mention two ceremonies to capture this micro specific research in a small obscure corner of Africa. The Anywaa ethnic group, when faced with a murder, set up a committee to establish the 'truth' about what actually happened. The goal is to reach consensus, consensus being an almost universal African cultural imperative to settle conflicts. In the more individualistic 'Western'

modalities consensus is not at all a natural part of our 'toolbox'. Africa has something to teach the 'West' here.

Once a widely accepted resolution is reached, a ceremony is held where an animal is sacrificed (biblical connotations), and a spear is blunted and bent! Not so dissimilarly the Haddiya community organise a ceremonial feast, but here the antagonists must walk through the blood of the sacrificed animal, and a money penalty is levied. All this must be done publicly to educate others in the community.

The Tigray and the Nuer add another powerful antidote to the resumption of atrocities, requiring intermarriage to secure a settlement. This peace-ensuring joining of families is not so distant from our 'civilised' ways, and is still a practice of European royalty and other world cultures. The intermarriage of significant individuals could be used to seal a deal between the vying tribes in our supposedly more 'modern' societies, such as the Protestant and Republican Catholic Northern Irish; Greek and Turkish Cypriots; and even Israeli Jews and Palestinians, if only their churches would allow them to step over each other's lintels!

This slim but very useful collection of essays has countless nuggets of wisdom for practitioners of mediation to end war and violence on our shrinking planet. It presents us with an alternative, more peaceful scenario coming from the constructivist, pluralist school of international relations theory. Unlike their more militant and security conscious counterparts, they hold that international civil society, and ordinary individual citizens, can at least supplement more traditional peacemaking efforts, and could become the modern casters of swords into ploughshares.