

Social Integration and Conflict Prevention: The Role of Discursive Engagement

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Abstract

Social integration ensures that all groups of people have fair and reasonable stake in the affairs of a defined society irrespective of one's social categorization such as ethnicity, gender, and age. It facilitates meaningful participation in the mainstream activities as well as access to social and economic opportunities. A society that aspires to higher socio-economic height should therefore make conscious and systematic efforts in ensuring social integration. Superficially, however, most societies currently experiencing conflicts exhibit trappings of social integration, yet the reality depicts the contrary with extreme ethnocentrism featuring prominently in such societies.

Conflict though inevitable, strategies have to be established to prevent its frequent occurrence. This paper argues that one strategy to prevent conflicts is to ensure authentic social integration in society. Authentic social integration is therefore proposed as a precursor to conflict prevention. Further, the paper makes a case for discursive engagement based on Habermas' communicative rationality theory as a conduit in bringing about authentic social integration. The conviction is that discursive engagement holds a stronger promise for societal harmony than strategic engagement based on one-sided communicative rationality, which directly and/or indirectly has been playing a major part in triggering off conflicts in Ghana.

The paper recommends that discursive engagement with its principles of responsibility, self-discipline, respect, cooperation, and struggle, should inform social interaction among individuals and groups in order to encourage consensus-formation aimed at building solidarity, and individual and collective empowerment. The proposed engagement, it is suggested, should be premised upon empathetic relationship as an antecedent to conflict prevention.

Keywords: Social Integration, Conflict Prevention, and Discursive Engagement.

1. Introduction

Social integration ensures that all groups of people have fair and reasonable stake in the affairs of a defined society irrespective of one's social categorization such as ethnicity, gender, and age. Social integration serves as a precursor for poverty reduction and conflict prevention since it facilitates meaningful participation in the mainstream activities as well as access to social and economic opportunities. A society that aspires to higher socio-economic height should therefore make conscious and systematic efforts in ensuring social integration.

Talcott Parsons has long established social integration as a critical conduit for effective functioning of social systems alongside adaptation, goal-setting, and latency. These four prerequisites for effective functioning of a social system have commonly been referred to as the AGIL taxonomy. Talcott Parsons believed that a well functioning system must maintain solidarity within it as well as have the different units in society work together in harmony for the ultimate good of the system (Ravelli, 2010). A well functioning system must therefore coordinate and adjust to the needs and aspirations of the various subgroups in society.

Cosmetically however, most societies currently experiencing conflicts exhibit trappings of social integration, yet the reality depicts the contrary with extreme ethnocentrism featuring prominently in such societies. Ethnocentrism has created "we versus them" attitude paving way for tension among ethnic groups with antagonism towards each other the unfortunate outcome. Meaningful social interaction at the micro sociological level is thus significantly impeded. Antagonism easily breeds conflicts since group find ways and means to advance their collective interest at the expense of the ultimate good of the larger society. Many negative labels have been assigned on the minority ethnic groups by the dominant ones. Such negative labels through socialization are internalized by the minority groups leading to negative self fulfilment and marginalization.

The interpretation from the social mirror which is always negative about the minority ethnic groups becomes actualized by the groups for lack of meaningful social integration to bail them out. Resocialization through the embracement of cultural relativism is obviously the answer to the canker of ethnocentrism to ensure meaning social integration in the society as a way of preventing conflicts emanating from ethnocentrism in the country. The practice of ethnocentrism rather than cultural relativism inspires most conflicts particularly ethnic-based ones.

The case of Ghana is no exception. Most conflicts in Ghana have occurred among minority ethnic groups in mainly the relatively deprived regions of the country namely the Volta and the Northern regions. These minority ethnic groups are on the fringes of the Ghanaian society and as such occupy the lowest stratum within the social stratification system. They are thus more likely to experience poverty leading to economic, political, motivation, and legitimation crisis, which easily combine to trigger off conflicts.

Clearly abysmal social integration amounts to social exclusion, which also provides the platform for poverty and marginalization primarily among groups of people in the lower stratum within the social stratification system. It is undeniable the fact that poverty significantly foments conflicts on many fronts. Poverty reduction therefore becomes a surest route to conflict prevention in Ghana. This certainly looks easy to be done theoretically, but it is an uphill task in reality. That said, ensuring real social integration through effective linkage between the system and the lifeworld of the people will go far in reducing poverty significantly. The system and the lifeworld interaction are elaborated upon further in the next section.

2. The Theory of Communicative Rationality and the Possibility of Conflict Prevention

Inasmuch as conflict in entirety cannot be ruled out efforts need to be made in ensuring that they are significantly prevented for the good of society. This, however, is difficult because authentic social integration remains elusive mainly because of the one-sided rationalization of society, where the system has overwhelmingly colonized the lifeworld of the people, rather than informing themselves. The lifeworld as used in this context connotes the civil society and its role within the public sphere. The political system needs the articulation of interests in the public sphere to put different concerns on the political agenda.

However, this function cannot be left entirely to established institutions such as political parties spearheading the affairs of the system. Marginalized groups in particular need to organize and find a way to articulate their interests, thus given them a "voice" as a critical step towards social integration and participation in the mainstream of affairs of the society. This is necessary because political parties and parliaments need informed public opinion beyond the established power structures defining the system for effective and functional co-existence between the system and the lifeworld or the civil society (Habermas, 1987). This is indeed theoretical in nature.

The reality, however, is that the system marked by money and power driving the economic and the political spheres respectively define the discourse in communicative action. Many are thus rendered communicatively incompetent and marginalized because their lifeworld is defined and influenced by money and power rather than common values entrenched by cultural reproduction. Many are therefore left on the fringes of society for no fault of theirs but systemically caught in the net.

That said, it is worth mentioning that the fact that the system, defined and driven by money and power, has colonized the lifeworld and for that matter cultural reproduction and identity of the civil society does not signify that the lifeworld of the civil society is flawless and can be exonerated from the contemporary political, economic, motivation, and legitimation crisis. Since the system and the lifeworld inform each other, it is neither here nor there to rigidly distinguish them as if they constitute distinct elements. Such rigid distinction between the system and the lifeworld as captured by Habermas as the system colonization of the lifeworld constitutes a major lapse with Habermas' critical theory of communicative rationality. Although Habermas did an excellent and elaborate work with his analysis of the system and its driving forces - money and power - and its adverse social impact on the lifeworld of the civil society; he failed to significantly pay recourse to the role and contribution of the civil society towards its own colonization by the system.

The civil society has been shooting itself in the foot always by overly patronizing the system without holding it accountable for its actions and inactions. Political dogmatism in the name of economic self gratification has rendered the civil society as a "rag" - used and dumped - in the development dispensation of the society. Such political dogmatism has permeated all facets of the civil society especially the elites - political representatives, academics, and technocrats among others - responsible to engineer the civil society to partner effectively and efficiently with the system for overall social integration and development.

Values, hitherto, serving as the hallmark of the lifeworld of the civil society have been thrown to the dogs. Discursive engagement has changed to strategic engagement; truth to lies; respect to insults; good name to riches by foul means; vital symbolic legacy replaced with ill-gotten material legacy among many other values are now embedded in the Ghanaian civil society. Clearly until civil society lives up to its name as a civil society and go back for the old and vital Ghanaian values - "Sankofa", which means "to go back for it" in the Ghanaian Akan language - meaningful co-existence between the system and the lifeworld will remain a mirage with social exclusion and conflicts being the unfortunate outcomes. It is therefore not a coincidence that many authors assess the involvement of Africa's civil society in the affairs of the system running the democratic process as very

limited, because it has been itself fragmented and the links between different civil society organizations to the formal political system are rather weak (Pinkney 2003). As a result the civil society is unable to hold the system socially accountable in its engagement with it. The system is thus not kept in check by the civil society.

At this point it is worth to cogently discuss the crisis that emerges out of the system colonization of the lifeworld of the civil society. According to the theory of communicative rationality the system colonization of the lifeworld emanates from, and perpetuated by, one sided communicative rationality in society. The one sided rationality comes about where views and voices of the civil society especially those on the fringes of society are ignored because they are deemed as irrelevant. This situation breeds social exclusion, which further exposes the civil society to political, economic, motivation, and legitimation crisis.

Political crisis primarily stems out of the use of power to colonize the lifeworld by the system. Power, it must be noted is very defining and when abused can trigger off so many political problems such as the system's use of strategic rather than discursive engagement; the system's inability to marshal and harness available resources to advance the social well being of the people; the system's inability to carve out clear goals and attainment strategies for the good of the society; the system's failure to ensure effective social integration based on the principle of latency which guarantees that social controls are in place to support and sustain the social integration. All these problems feature prominently directly and indirectly in contemporary conflict cases that abound in Ghana.

Political crisis further degenerates into economic crisis, also driven by money. Abuse of power deprives the society with the right strategies and plans towards economic growth and development. Many especially the poor are therefore unable to participate meaningfully in society, thus further pushing them down the social stratification system. Failure of the system to carve out a clear development map creates economic crisis which in turn breeds tension and anomie which constitute major precursors to conflict.

Both political and economic crisis then combine to nurture motivation crisis. This type of crisis creeps in where the political system fails to engineer economic growth and development. As a result of this, the civil society becomes disoriented in further making any meaningful contribution towards its development and that of the macro society. As motivation crisis deepens the civil society gives up respect for the system and finally start questioning the legitimacy of the system. This brings about legitimation crisis where the system is overly disregarded by the civil society especially those on the fringes. And the fact that these groups of people lack the voice that could be heard they take the law into their own hands at the least opportunity and vent their anger on other groups at the least provocation.

The four types of crisis well elaborated upon in the theory of communicative rationality as a result of one sided rationalization of society can be seen as a continuum or a cycle, since one crisis feeds into the other in the sequence of political - economic - motivation - legitimation crisis. Clearly the one-sided rationalization of society which is very strategic has to be dealt with and removed to pave way for effective communicative rationality based on discursive engagement which has the capability to facilitate social integration. This is critical granted the fact that lack of access to resources and poverty emanating from social exclusion are evidently the bedrock of many of the conflicts in the country and other spots in Africa.

3. The Tenets of Discursive Engagement

Discursive engagement presupposes that successful discourse entails more than external limits on action (Chambers, 1995). It demands from participants the need to adopt particular and concrete attitudes towards each other. Such attitudes become feasible when an ethic of care which ensures open-minded relation to others is adhered to rather than ethic of justice which stresses conventional discourse of utter conformity to authority even in the wake of dissent. This invariably limits the expression of the self (Chambers, 1995). The limitation of the expression of the self easily leads to motivation and eventually legitimation crisis. The apathy emanating from these crisis breeds contempt thus sewing seed for antagonism and conflicts.

The discursive engagement in spite of its explicit promises has been met with criticisms in a discursive experiment. In one such experiment, many women participants initially were hesitant about adopting discursive engagement. They rather preferred more familiar engagement rooted in the mainstream procedures. They opined that consensus-formation based on discursive engagement was too demanding and questioned its feasibility (Perigrine et. al, 1990). So whereas the arguments in support of mainstream procedures has been placed on efficiency, practicality, and expediency; that of consensus-formation is premised upon advancing the goals of personal growth (self-fulfilment), solidarity, individual and collective empowerment (Resource Handbook, 1983). In the end, the experiment showed that the internal goods gained from the experience of discursive engagement were deemed more important and helpful and in spite of the initial misgivings expressed by the participants, a

compromise was reached that decisions should be reached by consensus (Chambers, 1995). Such consensus-formation with its promises thrives on the institutionalization of some ground rules in discursive engagement. These rules - responsibility, self discipline, respect, cooperation, and struggle - are requirements to facilitate feasible and efficient discursive engagement.

The requirement of responsibility demands that participants in engagement discourse should be at liberty and unrestrained from expressing their opinions, participate fully in the discussion and the implementation of the outcome of the discussion. The implication here is that a real engagement is feasible where all the participants in the discourse are placed on the same pedestal to facilitate open and frank discussion for the good of all the participants in the discourse. If this principle of responsibility is realised the participants are more likely to implement the outcome of the discussion and own the project.

For participants in discourse to be responsible also implies that participants exhibit a high sense of self-discipline and own the outcome of the discussion. Self-discipline connotes tolerance and offers all participants the free will to voice out their views believing that there are no obstacles to adversely affect free-flow discourse. The best opinions are thus freely expressed because of the high sense of self-discipline, which facilitates effective and unconstrained communication for the good of the participants and the projects they represent. In main, self-discipline facilitates effective communication because it beholds participants to put aside the desire "to get one's way" in discourse.

Respect is also one of the requirements which expect participants to handle fellow participants with dignity to ensure effective communication aimed at meaningful decision-making paramount for the good of all the participants in the discourse. This requirement further expects all participants to trust that other participants have the capability to make a responsible contribution towards the overall outcome of the discourse.

The other requirement for effective communication - cooperation- demands that participants look out for areas of agreement and common grounds and build on them with the view of reaching a consensus. This implies that effective communication should be devoid of competition based on right-wrong, win-lose discourse. This requirement if well enforced in discourse will free participants of their strong stance based on pre-conceived rationalization, thus compelling them to be engaged in discursive interaction free of biases and naivety.

Struggle - the last but not the least requirement for discursive engagement - obligates that participants should aim at discursive engagement that does not perceive disagreement as a negative factor in communication but rather as a positive learning experience capable of enhancing discursive engagement. Disagreement in communication is inevitable but needs to be approached with open-mindedness to revisits participants stance in the wake of arguments and opinions being expressed by others. Struggle in communication is therefore normal but must be seen as a positive input in discursive engagement aimed at reaching a consensus devoid of "hard" and strategic stance. These requirements can be internalized and practiced through socialization and resocialization. This implies that the need to start the journey of consensus-formation through discursive engagement should be now since the journey can be very long.

It is strongly believed that effective discursive engagement is feasible where participants in communication are encouraged to adhere to the principles of responsibility, self-discipline, respect, cooperation, and struggle. Embracing these principles in discursive engagement has the potential to counteract the one-sided strategic communication presently informing social interaction. Effective discursive engagement, therefore, becomes a conduit to ensure social integration, which in turn can minimize dissent and conflicts emanating out of the exclusion of civil society from participating in the mainstream of society. Further it can facilitate a functional civil society capable of empowering itself with the objective of holding the system socially, economically, and politically accountable.

The major barrier, however, to discursive engagement in liberal democracies usually comes from political apathy rather than consensus suppression (Chambers, 1995). It can be argued though that it is largely consensus suppression that breeds political apathy (Meehan, 1995). Both are therefore not mutually exclusive. This is typically the case in most developing countries with entrenched one-sided discursive engagement or communicative rationality based mainly on strategic engagement.

4. Obstacles to Discursive Engagement as Conduit in Ensuring Social Integration

Theoretically, a grip on discursive engagement looks a feasible conduit in ensuring social integration yet, there are many bumps on the way. These bumps need to be unearthed to pre-empt a discussion later on how discursive engagement can be embraced to advance the course of social integration as a precursor to conflict prevention. The sociological literature on obstacles to effective social integration is more rooted in the Marxist and, of course, the Neo-Marxist perspectives.

Karl Marx's classical exposition to the culture of false consciousness informing the acceptance of

elitism by the proletariats is critical in this discussion. The discourse informing the interaction between the elites and the proletariats have been, and is still being, driven by the culture of the elitists always being right versus the proletariats always being wrong or being empty barrel. This falsehood-based social construction defines the interaction between the elites (politicians, academics, technocrats) and the voiceless proletariats. Conflict prevention surely becomes illusive in a society of one-sided rationalization based on dominance rather than inclusiveness. This illusiveness, however, is complicated by conscious effort made by the elites to downgrade and exclude the proletariats through dubious strategic ways.

The Neo-Marxists orientation explicates this better. Wright (1997) established three key principles - interdependency, exclusionary, and appropriation - as the channels for social exclusion. The first principle for social exclusion, he identified as the interdependency principle where the system or the status quo is structured to advance the interest of the elites at the expense of the masses who are made to internalize their social status as being there to serve the interest of the elites. The interdependency principle also thrives on the exclusionary principle where the masses are excluded from authentic participation in mainstream social functioning for lack of communicative competence. This paves the way for the appropriation principle to be effected where the elites appropriate most of society's resources to themselves (Wright, 1997).

Wright's analysis paints a gloomy picture in preventing or averting conflict in contemporary society. This is because the more people are caught on the fringes of society the more difficult it becomes to prevent conflict. Since those on the fringes lack the means to socially participate meaningfully in the mainstream, they are more than likely to resort to conflict rather than dialogue to address their concerns.

5. Conclusion and Way Forward

In main the way forward to conflict prevention in Ghana is to ensure authentic social integration embraced and practiced by both the system functionaries and the civil society in the country. Such intervention and cultural change demand attitudinal change, which of course will not unfold as a "product" but as a "process". In other words authentic or real social integration can only become attainable with time. But of course, the best time to start should be now. The next issue worthy of a discussion is who to initiate the change. Given the power at the disposal of the system functionaries in the country they surely are better positioned to initiate the change process by ensuring fair application of the power at their disposal to offer opportunities to all in participating meaningfully in the mainstream irrespective of one's social categorization such as ethnicity, party, or religion.

The initiators of the cultural change should first accept and practice the five rules informing discursive engagement namely - responsibility, self-discipline, respect, cooperation, and struggle - in all their actions and interactions with the civil society. Counteracting one-sided communicative rationality through social integration will give a "voice" to the civil society, which can be exercised in such a way that differences which are ubiquitous among people can be resolved through discursive engagement rather than resorting to conflict with all its horrendous consequences.

Further, the civil society has an important role to play in nurturing and sustaining the new "voice" offered them through the use of discursive engagement by always holding the system functionaries socially accountable for their actions and inactions by constructively keeping the system on its toes rather than "rubber-stamping" the system out of greed and personal indulgence. The civil society in its dealing with the system, however, should also practice the five rules informing the discursive engagement in attaining reciprocal interaction geared towards the social good of all individuals and groups, and also to improve upon the system's effectiveness and responsiveness.

For the civil society to do so implies that individuals and groups making up the civil society be socialized to embrace and practice as well the rules of discursive engagement among its constituents as a conduit of practicing the culture of tolerance and peace. The drive or initiative to socialize the civil society along the lines of culture of tolerance and peace should be well embedded within the society. This is critical because empirical evidence shows that such socialization initiative is effective only when it reaches a large number of people (Anderson and Olson 2003; Paffenholz 2003).

Undoubtedly the civil society is very powerful as depicted in the literature. Its roles are highly diverse, complex and, above all, contentious. Indeed all manner of people and factions such as politicians, academics, social agents, and even technocrats steering the system see civil society as a solution to social, economic and political problems that they advertently or/inadvertently create (Edwards, 2004). The responsibilities of the civil society are therefore shrouded in obscurity. It is therefore not coincident that some people attribute the recent popularity of the civil society to its obscurity in terms of responsibilities. This notwithstanding the civil society should be more proactive in its engagement with the system in order to have the system in check always. The civil society should not be so compromising and quick in endorsing stance taken by the system. Endorsement should be given only when the social good is being enforced.

Institutionalization of some ground rules in discursive engagement therefore becomes necessary. These rules - responsibility, self discipline, respect, cooperation, and struggle - are requirements to facilitate feasible and efficient discursive engagement geared towards consensus-formation or efficient co-existence between the system and the lifeworld of the people or the civil society. Individuals in the civil society should therefore be socialized to accept and practice these rules for the ultimate good of the society. The way forward for the country is to nurture meaningful discursive engagement in ensuring social integration as a precursor to conflict prevention and overall development.

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