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# Engaging Provention: A Pressing Question of Need

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School for Conflict Analysis  
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## ABOUT THE SCHOOL

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The School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University [S-CAR] was, until recently, the Institute for Conflict Analysis & Resolution. Its continuing mission is to advance the understanding and resolution of persistent, protracted conflicts among individuals, communities, identity groups and nations.

In fulfillment of this mission, the School conducts a wide range of programs and outreach activities. Among these are its graduate programs offering the Doctorate and Masters of Science in Conflict Analysis and Resolution at its Arlington campus and an undergraduate program taught on its Fairfax campus. S-CAR also offers a joint Master's degree in the field with the University Malta in Valetta. Clinical and consultancy services are offered by individual members of the faculty, and a number of short certificate programs are offered, as well as public programs and education that include the annual Vernon M. and Minnie I. Lynch Lecture Series.

The School's major research interests include the study of conflict and its resolution, the exploration and analysis of conditions attracting parties in conflict to the negotiating table, the role of third parties in dispute resolution, and the application of conflict resolution methodologies in local, national and international settings.

The School's Applied Practice and Theory Program [APT] develops teams of faculty, students, alumni and applied practitioners to analyze and address topics such as conflict in Schools, and other community institutions, crime and violence, and jurisdictional conflicts between local agencies of government. Recently the APT program has extended its focus to other types of intra-societal conflict in countries such as Liberia and the Ukraine.

Long an integral part of the School has been Dr. Marc Gopin's Center for World Religions, Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution, and this center has recently been joined by the Center for the Study of Narrative and Conflict Resolution, led by Dr. Sara Cobb. Most recently the School has established the Center for Peacemaking Practice under the direction of Dr Susan Allen Nan Among other activities, the Center will take over many of the short training courses provided by the School at its research, retreat and conference center down at Point of View on Mason Neck.

For further information please consult the School's web site at [www.scar.gmu.edu](http://www.scar.gmu.edu) or telephone (703) 993-1300.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Dr. David J. Dunn was educated at University College, London, Lehigh University and the London School of Economics and Political Science.

He taught International Relations and Peace and Conflict Studies at Staffordshire University in the United Kingdom for over twenty years before moving to Keele University in 1997, where he taught International Relations and Security Studies. Still associated with Keele, he is an Honorary Senior Research Fellow, working in the field of Peace Research, International Relations and the issues that connect them.

In the last decade a study of John Burton's work was followed by a survey of the first fifty years of peace research. Currently, he is working on a study of the pioneers of Peace Research, the crisis in International Relations theory (and practice) and the current state of peace research around the world.

## FOREWORD

The School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution is most pleased to publish Dr. David Dunn's work on "Engaging Provention; a Pressing Question of Need" in its Occasional Paper series. There are a variety of reasons for this, not least among them the intrinsic interest of Dr. Dunn's theme for us at the School - and for the field of Conflict Analysis in general - but also for the clarity and grace with which he presents his arguments.

For one thing, many of us have long felt that some of the ideas and themes that were first set out thirty years ago by one of the School's founders, Dr. John W. Burton, needed revisiting and re-evaluating, which is precisely what this paper does in a comprehensive and provocative manner. For another, the author throws a strong light on an often neglected aspect of Burton's work, often underplayed, even by those who do use many of his ideas in their own work. Most people in the field, for example, are familiar with the nature and utility of problem solving workshops in analyzing and often helping to resolve protracted and intractable conflicts. Many scholars have written about, or had their own work influenced by, ideas about the importance of basic human needs. The ideas of proactive prevention—in Burton's vocabulary "provention"—have become routinely part of a conflict resolver's toolbox, even if the word itself has not yet managed to become incorporated into the spell-check dictionary of desktop computers.

However, in this paper Dr. Dunn draws attention to a neglected central theme - that Burton was never afraid to tackle large themes and universal problems and that he was passionately convinced that research had to be useful for solving such problems—the mess that we were in— and how it was all inter-connected. As the author points out, Burton's writings were about links between war and violence, between legitimacy and satisfied needs, between anticipation prevention and survival.

All these and other themes are tackled in Dr. Dunn's paper and there is no one better qualified to remind us of the breadth of Burton's interests or the scope of his scholarship. David Dunn was a student of John Burton's in London in the 1960's and he stayed in touch with Burton in England and the United States, as well as during Burton's retirement in Australia. He is the author of a major study of Burton's life and work—"From Power Politics to Conflict Resolution; The Work of John W. Burton" [London; Palgrave; 2004]—and is currently at work on a major survey of the origins of the field of peace research, tentatively entitled "Pioneer of Peace Research". The current paper is thus a foretaste of much interesting writing to come.

-Christopher Mitchell

Emeritus Professor of Conflict Research.

## Introduction

In three major sections, what follows is unified by the notion of need. The uses of this term are slightly different, but there is a unity throughout. That unity is the life and work of John W. Burton, whose contribution was recognised and celebrated at the conference, held at “Point of View” in April and May of 2011, that preceded this work.

Over the course of 40 years my engagement with John Burton followed no consistent pattern. He was one of my teachers when I was an undergraduate student at University College in London, and I was immediately attracted to his way of thinking and his engagement with students. He did not look down on us, but trusted our opinions and urged us to think creatively, and he valued our opinions. We went, necessarily, our separate ways, and after graduate school in the United States and London I embarked on a career teaching International Relations in the United Kingdom. Though I did not encounter Burton for two decades, his work and perspective stayed with me and influenced my own approach to the study and teaching of the subject. When I did re-engage with Burton’s work, it influenced me profoundly, to the extent that I wanted to write a study of its evolution: the importance of it, as far as I was concerned, was such that it needed to be engaged more widely and more significantly (See Dunn, 2004). That purpose is re-stated here.

In the last years of Burton’s life I got to know him well. I visited him often (at least as often as intercontinental travel and work allowed) at his home in Canberra, and we conversed long and frequently. What is striking is that, even as the years advanced, he was driven. He had a routine: breakfast, newspapers and journals, ostensibly a nap, then writing. He rested, but his mind was always active, pushing forward his own thoughts. He was not an angry man, but he was not content either. He was driven by the belief that the way things are are not the way they have to be. (See for example, Burton 2008). He resisted that notion, intellectually and viscerally.

## Burton’s Developing Perspective

Burton was very much his father’s son; he took his name and was John Wear Burton Junior. The father was of British stock, who emigrated to Australasia and became a Minister of the Methodist Church. He was a reformer and religion was about doing good, about social improvement. He was, by all accounts, a forceful character who did, in fact, effect significant reforms. He set an example for John junior to follow. The younger Burton received his first degree in Psychology, graduating with First class Honours. He joined the Australian Civil Service, where he hoped and assumed he would be of service. He shunned the church, even though there seemed to be plans for him to follow his father’s path. He shunned it because he could not tolerate “all the religious stuff.” As he said, “Religion was about improving things, not all the other stuff.” He went to London, worked at Australia House and also received his Ph.D. from the London School of Economics. To cut a long story short, Burton went far and very fast, becoming effectively the head of the Australian Foreign Service shortly after the end of the Second World War. He attended the founding conference of the United Nations in San Francisco and was a significant player in the development of post-war Australian diplomacy. He was forceful, and he made enemies. Principally, he did not share the consensus view with regard to the emerging Cold War in Europe and Asia. He resigned, but he did not drift from the scene. He became High Commissioner in Ceylon, a candidate for the Australian Labor Party, a farmer in the greater Canberra region (he was married and had family responsibilities), and he also had research posts at the Australian National University in Canberra. Even outside the formal structures of power and party, he attended the Bandung Conference of Non-aligned Nations and several Pugwash conferences that united scientists across the Cold War divides.

In 1963, Burton became a full-time academic in London. In that role he was something of a novice, but he was a published author (Burton 1956, 1962) and a man of great experience when it came to ‘practical politics’. Taking a more general perspective for the moment, it is important to establish a view on the nature of the discipline that Burton was joining. By the early 1960s the discipline of International Relations was beginning to change. The established texts were those written by Morgenthau, Hartmann,

Schumann, Schwarzenberger, Claude, Wolfers, Manning, Wight, Bull, Carr, Herz and Hinsley, to name but a few.

Interestingly, many of these were written by expatriate Europeans, who left their homelands as the Second World War approached. To that extent, a focus on power, war, and competition could be deemed appropriate in terms of tracts for the times. In other words, the power politics approach was dominant, in terms of the conventional wisdom. The 'aboutness' of International Relations--that which was to be taught to undergraduates as an essential core of assumptions as to how the world worked--was a focus on the politics of power. In terms of methodology, the historical-philosophical-intuitive approach was dominant. Yet there were signs of emergent novelties; the 'theoretical' consensus was challenged, from within International Relations and the emergent Conflict and Peace Research. David Singer, Karl Deutsch, James Rosenau, Stanley Hoffmann and Herbert Kelman started to speak not of balances of power, diplomatic manoeuvring and the like, but of perception, decision-making, images, and mindsets, as well as questions pertaining to rather more scientific outlooks and sophisticated methodologies. In part, this was to free International Relations from the suspicions and accusations that the discipline was not much further advanced than contemporary history and/or informed journalism. Certainly, taking Morgenthau as an example--whose text 'Politics Among Nations' (1967) dominated the discipline, certainly in the United States--what is remarkable is how imprecise was his use of terms. Moreover, there was an emergent view that International Relations ought to be taken more seriously with regard to policy choices and influences on government. Here, Economics served as a clear example: in the United States there was a Council of Economic Advisors, ready and able to offer policy advice based on more than insight. It is as well to recall that 'positive economics' as a notion was replacing that of 'the dismal science'. In International Relations, the debate became fruitful and vibrant, with questions of theory, method, evidence, prediction, modelling, objectivity and values soon added to the agenda. To some this was but a fad, an American fashion, and a series of neologisms. But to others it was promising and opportune.

Burton was in the latter, modernising camp and this is hardly surprising. He had had enough of fitting events into mindsets as far back as the days of the Chinese Revolution of 1949 and the Korean War. Yet there was a more pressing problem that he needed to address. At the point where Burton joined University College, the undergraduates were examined jointly with those of the London School of Economics. There were clear differences of perspective and emphasis, and this soon led to the development of a new degree course at University College. Novelty was important for Burton. Indeed, shortly after his arrival in London he was instrumental in founding the Conflict Research Society, in 1963. In 1964, he was a moving force behind the founding of the International Peace Research Association. The new degree course fitted in, representing an opportunity to engage the emergent novelties as well as making a clear shift away from the dominant conventional wisdom that the London School of Economics represented. Burton was assisted by a small but crucial group of like-minded individuals: Michael Banks, John Groom, Anthony de Reuck, Michael Nicholson, Chris Mitchell, Bram Oppenheim were principal among them. They had been brought together in Burton's Centre for the Analysis of Conflict, located one floor above the teaching rooms at University College. The point here should not be lost: Burton, and his colleagues, saw an integral relation as between theory on the one hand and policy on the other.

To that extent, there is a thread of continuity that runs through Burton's life and work. First, the life was the work. Second, the developing thought was for "something," not just for itself, nor for a sense of completeness. Being 'Burtonian' was about developing a set of ideas with purpose as well as developing instrumentalities through which these ideas would be made practical in effect and with consequential outcomes. Burton, like his father, sought to change things. He did not have to accept the unchanging, self-perpetuating, and self-reproducing verities reflected in and taught through the conventional wisdom. Therein, for him, lay the problem. He was, always, true to his Yorkshire roots, wont to call a spade a spade. Thus, he argued, we have got it wrong. We get the wrong definition of the situation, we get wrong policies in consequence, and the situation gets no better, at best, and in many cases even worse.



This was a consistent feeling that motivated Burton. But he did not have an alternative, yet. In the course of his career he wrote a great deal, that output representing the search for an alternative to power politics (See, particularly, Burton 1965, 1968). He did not, as some might think, search for what is now called “a silver bullet;” he would have found that notion absurd and insulting. Rather, looking at his work—and recall that for a man who never intended to be an academic he produced twenty books—the thread is the search for something that will stand as a core at the heart of an alternative framework of explanation. He was motivated by a sense of getting away from the limits that were represented by the power frame. He looked at images, values, communication, systems, holism, globalisation—before it became the notion that it now is—amongst other things. But he found the key breakthrough when he focussed on the concept of needs. Basic human needs were the key. So, too was the little-known American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce and especially his notion of abduction. Essentially, Burton sought to be pragmatic. Just as he had little time for religion in his youth, he had little enthusiasm for the philosophical canon. He knew of it, but he was not a prisoner of it. Coming out of the American pragmatist tradition, Peirce represented for Burton a philosophical standpoint that fitted his own position. We do not need to discuss at length the nature of want, conflict, deprivation and the like. We simply have to look out of the window, see what is going on; we do not need to define and finesse, we need to see and do. Why are the prisons full? Why are states falling apart? Why are so many systems lacking in legitimacy? Why do men and women rebel? Why is there so much conflict? Why do strategies of coercion fail? Why do people lose faith in politics? These are the issues that concerned Burton, and they are those that led him to read widely. In effect, he redefined the ‘aboutness’ of it all. In looking at how systems overlapped, interlinked, and were consequential in terms of the interlocking of relationships, he transcended the distinction between domestic politics on the one hand and international politics on the other. It was absurd to suggest that international politics began at the water’s edge, that politics could be separated into a “high” and a “low” agenda, that the big things that happen in world politics because states make them happen, that military force was a decisive weapon in

world politics. Whist International Relations struggled incrementally with questions of interdependence, linkage politics, globalisation, the politicisation of markets and money and the like, Burton transcended the confusing ‘aboutness’ of International Relations by redefining the paradigm of global politics in a complex world. And he did so not by stressing the primacy of states and power but by emphasising the power and the potential of human needs. He was not blind to questions of complexity, but he stressed the need for an holistic perspective, arguing that however complicated and difficult it may be, we need to look at the whole, since we cannot afford the convenience of partial perspectives.

Beyond that, he set great store by the notion of prediction. That, too, was part of the agenda that he engaged in the 1960s, seeking to make International Relations a ‘social science’. For Burton, International Relations is a social science, with its roots in the Anglo-American tradition, and it sits in social science schools and university faculties. However, he felt that, in the course of the last two decades—perhaps longer—much of that scientific ethos has been lost. Philosophical fads and fashions, often in the guise of science scientizing, had served to effect a drift from first principles, with massive deleterious consequences.

## The Mess We Are In

On Burton’s agenda in his last years was a paper that he drafted but never finished, but his title was clear. He had read the several books by the British author and commentator Will Hutton, which included *The State We are In* and *The World We are In*. These titles gave Burton his, but his unease was hardly novel. He took the view that Australia was getting into a mess in terms of its engagement with China and Asia after 1949, for example. In other words, it is hardly novel to suggest that we are in a mess. We must, of course, recognise that there are those who tell us that there is much to be thankful for, that we are better placed that we were in the ante-bellum United States or the Great Britain of Charles Dickens and the workhouse, that the European colonial empires have been dismantled, that former subject peoples are now ‘free’ and that autonomy and freedoms are more widespread. All of this is fine as far as it goes. But

any conflict researcher or peace researcher will acknowledge, as a matter of purpose, that there is still a very, very long way to go, that appearances may be deceptive, and that legal-political decrees conceal existential miseries. Of course there are some improvements, but conflict management is not conflict resolution, coercion is not the same as legitimacy, stasis is not the same as evolution, and control is not the same as consent. To that extent there is much to do.

Looking back at 2011 as an example, there are reasons to believe that we have a long way to go before we have adequate explanations of events and appropriate policies. The year began with an apparent accumulation of events that came to be known as the Arab Spring. Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrein, and Syria seemed to fit into a pattern, and soon there was talk of revolution in the Arab World. Of course, these were events of great significance, but it is questionable as to whether or not we were looking at revolution of the gun, twitter, or facebook. To be sure, Mubarak was deposed in Egypt and Gaddafi in Libya. Undoubtedly, these events were consequential and significant in being so. But there is one prior question: why were we so taken by surprise by these events? Why were they not predicted? It is not a question of looking into a crystal ball or reading the runes, but it is more than saying "it is hard to predict" or "it seems to me" or "it is too close to call." What, for example, were the probabilities of unrest and or instability in the politics of Libya if, after 42 years, Gaddafi was to fall? What options then lay open, and for whom? What were the likely consequences of instability in Egypt were Mubarak to leave the scene after decades of "stability?" What policy options presented themselves then, and to whom? As it transpired, shortly after a major Strategic Defence Review which postulated that certain outcomes were unlikely and that forces could be structured differently, the British government found itself actively involved in influencing events in Libya, from offshore and afar. The French were involved too, as were the Americans but, after Iraq and in addition to Afghanistan, only to a limited extent and for a limited time, overtly at least. The British prognosis was for a short-term and low-cost involvement, both of which proved to be incorrect.

Nor were these cases the only or first examples of un-preparedness based on a faulty understanding of emergent dynamics. It was, and it remains, the case that International Relations stood and stands embarrassed at its collective inability to predict the end of the Cold War, the break-up of the Soviet Union, the remaking of Eastern Europe and its transformation (back) into Central Europe, and the unification of Germany. Indeed it was a key element of the conventional wisdom that Germany could never be allowed to unite, principally because the Soviet Union would not allow it.

Science claims to be self-correcting, insofar as statements of the 'if-then' variety are either verified or they are not. If they are not, something has been excluded or omitted and we need to go back and reconstruct the hypothesis. Evidence is important and so too is a degree of methodological self-awareness. Specialist knowledge is important but is not necessarily prioritized as having best and/or first claim. Indeed, Burton was skeptical with regard to the role of 'specialist knowledge' when it came to matters of conflict resolution. (See his comments in Burton 1987). It is important to recognize the key role of hypothesis-testing in the accumulation of findings and the search for dynamics and patterns. Importantly, the tasks of 'revolution' in Egypt and Libya were not accomplished with the demise of Mubarak and Gaddafi. To that extent, for example, the repeated violence in Egypt in the autumn of 2011, this time representing demonstrations against the Army, were predictable in the extreme. This is not the place for an extended discussion of the Middle East and the Mahgreb. Rather, these examples serve to illustrate why it was that Burton was so keen to establish that a social science perspective necessarily gave rise to an emphasis on prediction. To a large extent, it has to be said, the lessened emphasis on social science, and a consequent engagement with philosophical perspectives in the guise of science, is a backward step. We have, therefore, hasty policy responses and limited time-perspectives. Consequently, we have recurrent problems rather than strategies of change and adjustment. The sense of liberation that is clear within post-Gaddafi Libya and which is currently stifled in Egypt and Syria is most welcome evidence of the salience of the need to engage with the power of human needs, rather than the requirements of dynastic leadership or presumed non-legitimate

needs of states. What is primary here is not the state, but needs and groups: these will not easily fit into states. The passing of Gaddafi from the scene opens up the space within which the agenda of democracy in Libya can be addressed: it does not amount to 'problem-solved' and nor does the death of Osama bin Laden. The underlying, principal problems await solution, even as the television news screen shows new images and events are consigned to recent memory.

Beyond the Middle East, problems abound at the global level. We are struggling to adopt a systemic perspective and where there is not a struggle there is a marked reluctance. Indeed, working within the limits of conventional discourse is unlikely to resolve the deep-seated problems. Amongst these might be listed the fundamental crisis of global ecology, the management of the international economy and, in addition, two major sub-systemic crises, both of which are nowhere near resolution: that of the United States financial deficit and the protracted crisis of the Eurozone.

It may be that the persistent and pressing problem of the environment will serve to assist in the adoption of an holistic perspective, forty years after Barbara Ward and Rene Dubois reminded us that we have Only One Earth. What that work (and the photograph that adorned its cover) ought to have effected was a radical change in social cosmology, for it threw into sharp focus the limitations of the Westphalian logic of state-centricity, even as Burton was writing about a World Society. Neither Burton nor Ward and Dubois were treated as seriously as their work deserved or the logic of their case demanded (though it has to be said that, as far as International Relations is concerned, World Society is probably Burton's best-known work). There is a continued reluctance and, indeed, positive resistance to an engagement with an holistic perspective. But consider the evolving dynamics. If some Europeans are concerned at the migration of people from, say, Poland, what are the likely responses globally to the inundations of low-lying areas in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Bangladesh and the consequent need to move vulnerable populations on a massive scale set against which the inundations of Nauru and Tuvalu will look positively small-scale?

Technology, only in its infancy when Burton wrote World Society (1972), allows us to see the problems

as they accumulate: melting of the icecaps and glaciers, deforestation and the like. Of course, there have been improvements, with the United Kingdom a case in point, where environmental conditions have improved, partly in response to legislation and partly owing to de-industrialisation. Nevertheless, the continued growth of India, China, Brazil, and other emergent economies--entirely legitimate in national terms--are consequential globally. There is a long-term problem to be solved, and it is clearly stated: the survival of the human race, in states or otherwise, on a vulnerable planet. There is an imperative, but we struggle to address the question grudgingly and incrementally, if at all. We are, apparently, wedded to the notion that where we are involved in meetings, conferences, and summits then there is virtue if, were we to stay up all night and into the next day, we can then 'do a deal'. This is akin to the economic concept of 'satisficing': we can live with it for now, but nobody is entirely happy. This is a notion of traditional diplomacy that may have its place in the logic of Westphalia, but it will not conform to the needs of holism. Burton was right; adopting a holistic perspective is complicated, but there is a huge (and neglected!!) literature of systems thinking that came to fruition in the 1960s and 1970s and which was not engaged with nearly enough seriousness and effort and it has certainly not been worked-out (See particularly, Burton 1968). We would be well advised to take note of it. And why should we do this? Because we cannot afford the luxury of the partial perspective, whether this be civic, sectoral, statist, or regional. "Me first" as a political stance is not irrelevant, but it has only limited value, being but a part of the whole. Integration is necessary.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of the United States deficit. Apparently, over time there seemed to be no answer to the question of "how much is enough?" Rather, the preferred option was "decision deferred." However, there comes a time when the dominance of the sub-system (in this case the U.S. Congress) needs to be rectified. Systemic survival requires that subsystems change, except that in this case the subsystem seems incapable of acting, other than in the matter of deferring again and again. Systemic problems demand systemic responses, the requirements of electoral politics notwithstanding. Would the American population, wedded to notions of American exceptionalism,

willingly accede to higher taxes in the longer term? If not, what are the costs of resistance and who is willing to pay them and for how long?

In summary, we need to engage with the questions not of national interest, but of systemic needs, and at all levels. The inter-relatedness of issues was brought into sharp relief in Britain in August 2011 when, as if 'from the blue,' riots erupted in London and other cities. The destruction was significant, and the responses of the authorities and the press predictable. Old problem, so the same solution. It was, we were told, by spokespersons for the government and the Prime Minister himself, sheer criminality. By the end of 2011, in consequence, prisons were full. So, an appropriate response, it was suggested. Except that the systemic problem is not being addressed. Anomie is back on the agenda, disaffection rife, and the search for 'positional goods' goes on undiminished as youth unemployment rises and economic growth is regarded as the key indicator of economic success.

And here is where the logic of the state confronts the logic of the market. International money markets--and credit rating agencies, it must be recorded--set the agenda. It is clear that the states are following. To assuage the markets, citizens are suffering directly, immediately, cumulatively, and in the longer term. If that is the new dynamic, then an agenda of choice follows: what of the conditions of accountability? Of legitimacy? Of fairness and not so much the concept of justice but the consequences of deprivation. Deprivation can be measured; justice is debated. Burton was keen and consistent in pointing out repeatedly that where needs are not fulfilled--and wants are but a poor substitute for need satisfaction, at best a means to a desired end--then conflict is likely to follow. Prisons, exemplary sentences and "three-strikes-and-you-are-out" will not do. Why? Because they do not solve the problem. The irony is that we really do know what the problems are, but the mechanism will not be engaged except and until we free ourselves from the conceptual jails that are embodied in the conventional wisdom, the power frame of reference.

Even a cursory engagement with recent salient problems demonstrates that we are capable of struggle and management at best--and only for now. In

stressing the costs of resistance and adjustment, Burton implicitly introduces a time dimension into the analysis. This might sound a banal observation, but in terms of the conventional wisdom, the future is a succession of tomorrows, through which we can only struggle and manage as best we can. Regrettably, in current circumstances, the future cannot look after itself; we are now dealing with an agenda of obligations to those young and yet to be born. Is it melodramatic to suggest that the costs of maladaptation are likely to be catastrophic? Is it Utopian to suggest that instead of nationalism and exceptionalism we engage with global citizenship and an ethic of global responsibility? There is an agenda of choice here: all is mutable. The costs of mere persistence and positive resistance--politically and intellectually--are mounting.

## The Way Ahead

The first point to make here is that many see the way ahead as a continuation of what we are doing. This, after all, is what politics is all about, since politics is that art of the possible. Yet if politics is the art of the possible, then we can only deal with what we deem to be possible. Amelioration is a virtue; eradication of problems unlikely. As Kurt Vonnegut might say, "so it goes." But, to return to an earlier comment: the way it is is not the way it has to be. There is an agenda of choice.

Firstly, we need to return not to the so-called 'Golden Age' of the 1960s: there never was one. However, there was a mood of optimism in International Relations, and social science more generally, that we could envisage some progress. We could amass evidence, build theory, improve the agenda of choice, choose relevance, and demand to be heard. Burton would ask: does International Relations pass these tests today? Does the engagement with continental philosophy and the persistence of 'interrogations of the discourse' really, actually constitute a measure of progress, or the appearance of novelty in place of progress? The social scientific stance is itself critical, not least since the question "Why?" is central to it. Indeed, the question why is more subversive than we give it credit for, especially since "because" is never answer enough. We have enough critical questions; what we need is answers. Why war? Why conflict? Why deprivation, anomie,

and social atomization? What constitutes welfare and security? Answers do not depend on redefining terms almost as an end in itself; look out of the window, we see the problems. We need to engage with the philosophical stance of pragmatism. It is established in the United States and associated with William James, Charles Sanders Peirce, and John Dewey. That it spills over, through Dewey and, via the University of Chicago, into an agenda of education and the scientific study of politics (in which Harold Lasswell and Charles Merriam, not to mention Quincey Wright played major and significant parts) is significant. It should be re-engaged, in the interests of addressing the question of relevance and “theory for what?” If International Relations is not about relevance to the world ‘out there’ then it is hard to know what it is about. It is not a study in and of or for itself; look at its roots post 1918.

What is significant is that, even in 2012, so many works in International Relations are limited in their scope and method. Indeed, most fail the Burton test; that is to say that a systematic survey of references and bibliographies is revealing insofar as it demonstrates that Burton is absent. World Society is most quoted, where he is quoted at all. In some respects this is not surprising. Perhaps, for commercial reasons, he is ‘too old’. His work is certainly not passé. Nor is it worked out, as an old and once productive seam. Rather, in many respects Burton engaged with and ‘passed through’ International Relations. In so doing, he redefined the paradigm and redefined the ‘aboutness’ of it all. Meanwhile, International Relations struggles with the ‘aboutness of it all’ seeking to maintain the centrality of the Westphalian conceptual apparatus whilst also considering ‘add-ons’, perhaps even, in face of ‘anarchy’ in the post-Cold War era, re-engaging with Morgenthau. There seems to be a process of conceptual stretch at work, a kind of ‘states plus...what?’ agenda. To be sure, there are welcome and benign influences at work here too, such as the feminizing of the discourse. However, too much of it seems unpromising, of limited utility, and some of it intellectually sterile, to the effect that International Relations is in crisis. There is confusion within, and there are important issues being discussed beyond the boundary.

Burton’s work provides an instrumentality to allow a breakout from this miasma and confusion. It repositions the paradigm, shifts the ‘aboutness’ of it all, the ‘what’ that we need to know. The primary level of

analysis (recall that we have been discussing this at least since 1961 in International Relations) is shifted to the human level, without qualification, without gendering. He asks us, what is it that we, as humans, need? Not what we want (and it is important to note that when Burton wrote his doctoral dissertation, ‘want’ was one of the key concepts of the discourse) in terms of goods (though these might be means to an end), but those things that cannot be bought: recognition, belonging, identity. This is not addressed in an atomistic fashion: he also recognises that people are social beings. Indeed, he usefully and provocatively challenged the traditional notions of the need for instrumental controls in society by stressing how well-behaved, sociable, and polite people were in relation to each other: society works. Where, and when, people are told that “There is no such thing as society” then consequences follow: selfishness, atomization, and anomie amongst them. It may be useful to compare and contrast the reality and the rhetoric of Thatcher’s “no such things as” with Cameron’s “Big Society” that appears to stress voluntarism.

In other words, Burton challenges us to escape traditional power politics Realism and engage with the existential realities, by looking at them anew, outside the confines of the statist jail. He did not, ever, say that there was no such thing as the state, and he did not say that there was no future for it. It was, he said, one system, amongst many. It was not always the most relevant in all circumstances to all people. In other words, we have multiple loyalties, multiple identities dependent upon the systems of interaction that we inhabit. Identity is not about either/or. It is about identity when and in what circumstances. Of course, this makes things more complicated, but there is a price to pay for reductionism and essentialism: often that means getting it wrong. We have wrong definitions of the situation. Indeed, it is extraordinary how often people adopt a stance that allows them to square the circle, so long as they can say that they do not wish to be confronted, and thus confused, by the facts.

Evidence is all. Not in itself, but as a means to prediction in light of hypothesis generation. We need to engage with the business of self-correcting social science as a means to an end. Libya and Egypt threw, and throw, into sharp relief the nature of what we think we know about the world. Safe to say, as Burton did, that regional specialists are not always the best

experts to call on. Of course, they have an expertise. But so, too, do conflict specialists, who have studied the causes of conflict, the dynamics of conflict, and the consequences of conflict. It just so happens that, in certain times and places, these latter are less-valued. But chin-stroking will not do any longer. We are in a position to be able to do better now, if only we would engage with an extant and real, promising alternative frame of reference. If it seems as if the case for science and prediction is being over-sold, we would be well-advised to recall that at least one person in authority, in the wake of the second invasion of Iraq, argued, unequivocally, that prediction was not his business.

And, finally, it is time we re-engaged with an issue at the core of Burton's work: the need to construct grand, over-arching theory. Again it may sound old-fashioned, but it is not a case of nostalgia. Rather, it is to recognize that in the world of the twenty-first century, a world of complexity, inter-relatedness, and communication, with increased senses of self and of others, we need a conceptual apparatus appropriate to the task. Discipline boundaries are collapsing, and it is appropriate that they should. This has happened in the Physical Sciences and is a mark of progress, an engagement with complexity. In Economics, what made Keynes important was his largely-successful synthesis of the micro and the macro, to construct a General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money. His work was not made redundant, protestations (current at that) to the contrary. The political consensus changed as regimes engaged with the ideology of monetarism.

There is, as argued here, a pressing need for an engagement with the work of John Burton. There is a risk that his work may pass from the scene before it is properly engaged. His work in the field of conflict resolution has continued to bear fruit, and many practitioners are doing sterling work of great importance, usually, and necessarily without publicity and/or credit. The Conflict Research Society in Great Britain persists, the International Peace Research Association expands and flourishes. In the United States, the (now) School of Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University goes from strength to strength, and its achievements accumulate. All this is to the good. But it is to be hoped that the rather more general importance of what Burton had to say is not lost. In essence, it is this: we need to replace the claims

of 'Realism' with a framework of 'reality' as reflected in, and reflecting, the lives of the people who inhabit this planet. It is imperative that we do so sooner rather than later. Moreover, we must do so in a way that is committed, but disciplined, for much will depend upon what we do. It amounts to nothing less than this: a redefinition of the study of political and social behavior on this planet, that is rooted in the actually experienced realities, but which holds out the promise of more and better, for all. That is what prevention is all about and that was both Burton's goal--and his achievement. We need to engage with it now. The alternative? As Marlowe put it: "My men like satyrs grazing on the lawns, shall with their goat feet dance the antic hay." The reality is that we can do better than this.

There is plenty to help us by way of a reconstruction, and the following observations are timeless in their significance and utility. This is not a conclusion but an invitation to engage, refresh, and reconstruct. To young social scientists, the sociologist C. Wright Mills gave the following advice: "It is best to begin, I think, by reminding you, the beginning student, that the most admirable thinkers within the scholarly community you have chosen to join do not split their work from their lives. They seem to take both too seriously to allow such dissociation, and they want to use each for the enrichment of the other." (Mills 1967 p. 195).

Herbert Kelman who, as a major scholar in his own right, argued that meeting John Burton changed his life, argued that there needed to be a re-emphasis in emergent social science: "I would maintain that we must rethink our whole conception of social research. We will have to abandon the illusory goal of separating values from the research process and move toward a definition of social science as an activity that is necessarily and deliberately embedded in a value-orientated and policy-relevant process" (Kelman 1968, p.111). If this sounds blindingly obvious, then the following says much about the routes through 'science' taken in recent years, and it has wider application than that stressed by the author: "In the American climate the prestige of the pure and applied sciences was paramount. It entailed the theory and the theoretical. The humanities had long aspired to such distinction. Deconstruction and post-structuralism seemed to validate resort to the theoretical, to an idiom comparable to that of the sciences" (Steiner 2011, p.10). However difficult it may be--and it is--engaged

scholarship allied to methodological rigor is difficult, and it is difficult insofar as the substantive problems we have to deal with are matters of significance, however defined. What, after 40 years and more, represents 'improvement' in knowledge when applied to the understandings of human behavior? Have we not, in some ways, lost track of this over-riding goal in recent decades?

Finally, there is the central, substantive, and difficult question of ideas. This is what drove Burton away from power politics and towards an engagement with a wide framework of process and analysis that he called 'provention'. Tony Judt in his last months, was as direct and driven as Burton had been, arguing "Why do we experience such difficulty even imagining a different sort of society? Why is it beyond us to conceive of a different set of arrangements to our common advantage? Are we doomed indefinitely to lurch between a dysfunctional 'free market' and the much-advertised horrors of 'socialism'? Our disability is discursive? : we simply do not know how to think about these things any more. For the last thirty years, when asking ourselves whether we support a policy, a proposal or an initiative, we have restricted ourselves to issues of profit and loss – economic questions in the narrowest sense. But this is not an instinctive human condition: it is an acquired taste" (Judt 2011, p. 34). As he also argues, we have gone 'back to the future' when it comes down to assumptions as to how people behave: "Today we have reverted to the attitudes of our early Victorian forbears. Once again, we believe in incentives, 'efforts' and reward – together with penalties for inadequacy. ...Contrary to a widespread assumption that has crept back into Anglo-American political jargon, few derive pleasure from hand-outs of clothes, shoes, food, rent support or children's school supplies. It is, quite simply, humiliating. Restoring pride and self respect to society's losers was a central platform in the social reforms that marked 20th century progress. Today we have once again turned our back on them" ( Judt 2011, p.27). Burton, I am sure, would have concurred with the sentiment, the substance and the implications of what Judt had to say.

We need to do better – because we must.

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