

# Contested administrations

## Conflict resolution and the improvement of democracy

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### Introduction

This research programme focuses on *Democracy* and *Public Administration*, in an emphasis on making democratic institutions better fit to handle contested issues through the use of insights from *Peace and Conflict Studies*. We are interested in public administration's role in addressing and (possibly) resolving contested issues and conflicts, in order to increase equality, strengthen processes of integration and build social solidarity in an urban context. By bringing together senior Danish and Swedish researchers from the field of public administration and peace and conflict studies in an interdisciplinary research endeavour we are able to take an original and unconventional approach to the study of public administrations in different democratic contexts. We argue that this interdisciplinary research collaboration increases scientific quality as well as the innovativeness of the research programme.

### Purpose and aims

By marrying theories of Public Administration with those of Peace and conflict studies, we expect to gain new understandings of how democratic quality can be enhanced by improving the public administrations' role in conflict resolution between state institutions and citizens and among citizens. Consequently, the role of public administration

in conflictual city settings will be an essential focus of analysis as this research programme poses the following research questions:

1. *How can public administrations' ability to handle contested issues contribute to improve the quality of democracy<sup>1</sup>?*
2. *What tools, strategies and understandings of conflict resolution are available to civil servants and public administrations in different democratic contexts?*

The ambition is to 1) explore the role of public administrations in conflict resolution and conflict generation, 2) generate new analytical concepts and develop a theoretical framework for understanding the role of public administrations in different democratic contexts, 3) advance a public administration toolbox for conflict resolution. Through these foci, we address a research area vastly overlooked both in peace and conflict studies and in the public administration literature. These new insights are of practical value for making local democracy work in mature, consolidating as well as contested democracies.

One key role of public administration and civil servants is to handle tensions and to solve contested issues in order to build a strong democratic community. At times these tensions occur along the dimension of

- 1 When using the term democratic quality, we refer to how democracies are able to perform when it comes to aspects of equality, integration and social solidarity, and not the whole spectrum of democratic output.

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majority – minority relations or asymmetric relations between various groups in society. As representatives of the state, civil servants are expected to act in the interest of all citizens as they are to distribute resources and services effectively and in an unbiased manner. However, public administration can also inhabit exclusionist policies where identity – not right and need – determines whether education, employment opportunities, housing, and policing are equally distributed or not.

Strategies for addressing societal tensions are important in order to reach democratic sustainability as our cases represent cities in mature democracies (Copenhagen and Malmö), consolidating democracies (Belfast and Mostar) and contested democracies (Mitrovica and Jerusalem). Democracy is generally perceived as the best-known mechanism for peaceful conflict resolution. This implies that democracies are generally also more likely than non-democracies to provide sustainable solutions to potential social conflicts. Even though democracy is understood as the primary principle for resolving conflicts, there are always contested issues, which might develop into more or less severe conflicts if left unattended. Hence, democracy remains rather weak if it is unapt to handle contested issues within the societal domain.

The perspectives of Public Administration and Peace and Conflict studies stress some common values such as inclusive processes, trust, fairness, transparency, legitimacy and power sharing. All the same we could speak of quite different epistemic communities when it comes to theory. Despite the evident points in common we find diametrically divergent literatures. One important part of the programme is therefore to look for ways of cross-fertilization between the two theoretical domains.

*Theoretically* the aim of this research programme is thus to rethink key concepts in the Public Administration literature and further develop theoretical understandings of conflict in relation to mature, consolidating and

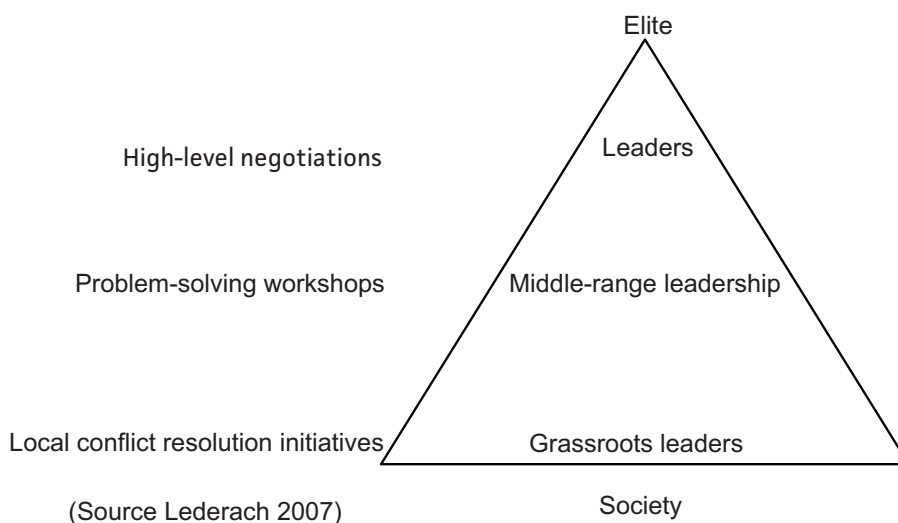
contested democracies with a particular focus on the role of public institutions and civil servants faced with societal tensions. Part of this theoretical work will also include the development of a public administration toolbox for addressing conflicts, which take into account the type of democracy at stake and its institutional setting.

*Empirically* we will explore how different democratic contexts address conflicts within and between administrations and institutions as well as among citizens in six selected urban areas. Studies of administration in newly democratised or conflict-ridden societies could have something to learn from more stable contexts. Conflict resolution concerning contested issues for example pertaining to education, health care, urban planning and housing as well as policing and the judicial system, in mature democratic settings could at the same time have something to learn from how conflicts have been transformed in consolidating democracies as well as fragile democracies. The idea of organizational knowledge travelling between countries and contexts has attracted a lot of academic interest whether we talk about copying, organisational learning, lesson drawing or policy diffusion. The transfer of knowledge from one context to another is however a complicated endeavour, and there are a number of obstacles to policy-oriented learning (cf. Evans 2009). We do not pretend to be able to transplant "solutions" from one city to the other but rather to inspire innovative thinking and provide new tools for handling conflicts.

### Survey of the fields

*Public Administration* shows that the quality of public institutions in democracies is of crucial importance for the citizens and their perception of their society as democratic or non-democratic. In other words, the everyday service delivery (or lack thereof) by public institutions and the direct contact between citizens and civil servants are of utmost

Figure 1. Conflict Resolution approaches and actors (adapted from Lederach 1995).



importance for how public institutions are perceived. However, while most public administrators have to deal with conflicts in their roles as facilitators, observers or parties to conflict. (c.f. van Kempen & Murie 2009) the public administration literature lacks theoretical depth when it comes to understandings of conflicts and ways to handle them (Lan 1997) – a limitation particularly serious in consolidating and contested democracies. When issues of identity conflict, corrupt civil servants or excluding policies become everyday realities, public administration has few answers. This obvious lacuna when it comes to understandings of strategies for handling conflict will be addressed with methods, theories and insights from peace and conflict studies.

From *Peace and Conflict studies*, we align with the theoretical underpinnings of the conflict transformation paradigm, which views conflicts as part and parcel of the social construction of societies (Lederach 1996; Galtung 1995). This approach was originally developed by researchers underlining the processual character of conflicts, viewing conflicts as undergoing constant transformation even though they at times might appear as static (Curle 1971). This research programme will have a strong emphasis on process, stressing the dynamic interplay

between actors and structures in conflictual change (Buckley-Zistel 2008). When conflicts are conceived of in this way, new opportunities for transformation emerge, as conflicts then can be un-, re-, or de-constructed. This contrasts with short-term ‘conflict management’, which mainly seeks to contain conflict by addressing conflicts’ symptoms rather than root causes (Miall et al. 1999:29). Conflict transformation also differs from problem-solving approaches such as ‘conflict resolution’, which seeks to end conflicts through attending to basic human needs of the conflicting parties, such as security and identity (Miall et al. 1999:29). Conflict transformation efforts attend to root causes of conflicts and seek to address power asymmetries and structural inequalities in order to transform societal structures, which are understood as the deep sources of conflict. When investigating into strategies for addressing conflicts on the urban arena, we will search for concrete practices. On the elite level, there might be attempts to negotiation and/or deliberation within the PA leadership and between the PA and various stakeholders. There might also be efforts in the middle-range realm, where leaders in for example community or religious groups can engage in problem-solving workshops and various commissions created to handle contested issues. On

the grassroots level, we might find ordinary citizens engaged in NGOs, community developers and local health officials involved in programmes targeting prejudice, psychosocial work and local confidence building. We believe that these three levels must be comprehensively addressed and interconnected in order to transform conflicts in a successful way, building long-term inclusive and legitimate democratic procedures. The levels and examples of activities are illustrated in the triangle (figure 1).

In order to investigate local public administration processes of conflict transformation, the subfield of *urban studies* will be employed. It offers ideas of how to arrange urban spaces to create inclusive procedures allowing for constructive transformation of societal conflicts. Within the theoretical debate in urban studies, there has been an increasing focus on interactive governance activity in complex conflictual and dynamic environments (Healey 2003). Public participation in local planning, including urban design and regeneration, through the use of deliberative processes, is currently widely promoted as the means of enhancing institutional legitimacy, reducing conflicts and raising citizen influence, social responsibility and learning (Hajer & Wagenaar 2003). Thus, there are many resemblances with the theories of deliberative democracy (Dryzek 2000). It is concerned with how to create fair and just institutional settings for deliberation, with an overall objective of bringing major stakeholders together and, through deliberative processes, addressing, and hopefully solving societal tensions (Allmendinger 2001).

### Project description

Conflicts are part of everyday life whether they are played out between the state and citizens or among the citizens, and can be seen as positive and dynamic aspects of life. However, negative aspects of conflicts are that their results may have severe consequences

for the individual, the group or the society. The alternative – life or society free from conflicts – is, however, associated with suppression and lack of freedom. To quote Churchill ‘*democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried*’. Yet, democratic theory is composed of different traditions that have had opposing suggestions to the best way of handling conflicts (March & Olsen 1989). Here, we share the basic assumption that conflicts need some kind of handling if democracy is to be well functioning. A democratic society is not fully democratic if it is unable to handle conflicts within the frame of democracy and its institutions. There is a gap in research between on the one hand problems and solutions of public administration and institutional design in *mature democracies*, and on the other hand, problematic issues and innovative solutions in *consolidating or contested democracies*. Even if public administration logically addresses the same problems both in Copenhagen and Jerusalem, comparative research of such different cities is limited. Hence both theoretically and empirically, these different fields have the *potential* of being mutually beneficial. Mature democracies have experience and have under a long time incrementally modified and adjusted their administrations and institutions to be quite well functioning, even though they may have accumulated quite substantive problems. Consolidating democracies often lack this ‘institutionalized stability’, but due to their severe issues and urgent problems in the field of public administration, they often show great innovation and inspiring ‘outside-the-box’ solutions, verifying that necessity is the source of invention.

Access to healthcare, building permits, infrastructure investments, improvement of welfare systems, sponsoring of different civil societies – the list of issues for which public administration is responsible or involved is vast. The challenge of public administration is to handle conflicts regarding those issues in a constructive way, as well as addressing

unintended consequences of its practices. However, its often sub-optimal practices and strategies in combination with civil servants' often limited knowledge and training to resolve contested issues may possibly result in a negative impact of public administration on democracy. At the same time, contested issues between people are best solved through the idea of democracy and the practice of public administration. If the performance of public administration is inadequate it needs to be improved.

The role of public administration in general and civil servants in particular in solving the issues that might be conflictual between state institutions and citizens, and among citizens has attracted our attention. In order to analyse this, a theoretical framework will be developed based on a trans-disciplinary approach combining the conflict transformation literature with the literature on public administration. To emphasize local processes of conflict transformation an urban focus is employed. Theories of public administration contribute with concepts and perspectives concerning different institutional designs, and how they can serve as drivers or barriers for improving processes of democracy. Moreover, these strands of literature offer perspectives on the roles and identities of the actors involved in handling public disputes, and how these perceptions can affect the quality of democracy. However, they have had much less theoretical refinement when it comes to understandings of conflict (Lan 1997), although sporadic studies have described conflict dimensions with regards to public administrators' work (see e.g. Lipsky 1980; Forester 1999, 2009). In contrast, theories of conflict transformation provide us with a conceptual toolbox for assessing conflicts and constructive as well as destructive ways of handling them, although paying less attention to the administrative level.

This programme will address this gap in research by applying the insights of conflict resolution to the domain of public

administration. Through this synthesis of theoretical perspectives we have identified the following theoretical and analytical building blocs: type of conflict, actors and agency, institutional design, and democratic quality.

Type of conflicts

- What types of conflicts are at play? How are the conflicts addressed?

Actors and agency

- Who is involved in the conflicts? Does anyone facilitate acts of reconciliation, and if so; how are inclusive processes framed and managed in different settings?

Institutional design

- What is the institutional design for addressing contested issues? To what degree are the processes public and transparent? Which conflict approaches and tools are applied? What are the perceptions of the roles and identities of the different actors involved?

Democratic quality

- To what extent do the democratic institutions through their conflict resolution endeavours contribute to democratic quality in terms of equality, integration and social solidarity?

## Research Design

The methodological route of this research programme is explorative, aimed at advancing theory and simultaneously breaking new empirical ground and the dynamic interplay between theory and the theoretically informed empirical material is a key part of the research enterprise. It is a methodology suitable for theoretical discovery rather than confirmation. The methodological strength of this research programme is the interdisciplinary and multi-methodological approach designed to both capture the depth of single cases and to enable tentative generalisations from comparing six cases. Case studies are chosen as a way to study complex processes through the method of "process tracing" (King et al. 1994) and knowledge will mainly

be generated through semi-structured interviews (Strömbom 2010) with involved actors. These methods open up for interpretations. In addition, we will provide a systematic comparative analysis of various kinds of contested issues and different ways of handling conflicts surrounding these issues by local public administrations in the six cities that represent different democratic contexts with different institutional designs. We will in each case: 1) identify potentially contested issues 2) map out policies for handling conflict, as well as different institutional designs available to city administrations and civil servants in order to identify functional as well as dysfunctional ones 3) assess and evaluate these strategies through a comparative analysis of six urban areas where majority-minority relations and dimensions of inclusion-exclusion are salient 4) analyse the role of public administration in general and the roles of individual civil servants in relation to the societal tensions which have been identified.

Data collection from fieldwork will focus on: 1) what citizens as well as civil servants in city administrations perceive as contested issues, 2) mapping constructive/destructive strategies for handling conflicts addressing contested issues 3) how these approaches affect local democracy. Ultimately landing in a 'qualitative comparative approach' (Ragin 1987), the project aims to build and thereafter to operate within a single analytical framework, and aspires for theory development, while also seeking in-depth knowledge and sensitivity to context-specific circumstances (Axline 1994). The study is intended to generate new insights into the role of public administrations in community building, democracy consolidation and societal conflict transformation in the everyday lives of citizens living in areas where different contested issues are salient.

#### **CASE SELECTION AND SELECTION CRITERIA**

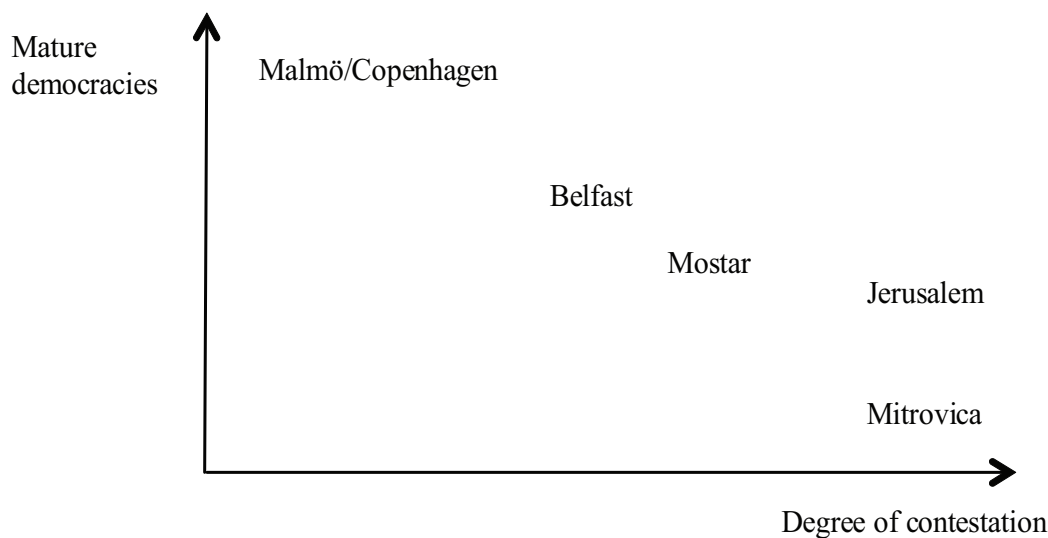
The cases studied represent cities in democratic systems, albeit at different stages in

their consolidation processes. Malmö (Sweden) and Copenhagen (Denmark) represent cases of mature democracy, with stable systems and well-institutionalized mechanisms for conflict resolution. Mostar (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and Belfast (United Kingdom) are cases of consolidating democratic systems, whose democracy is crafted in a post-conflict environment, in a constant struggle to build democratic institutions in order to handle contested issues between previously (and often currently) rivalling groups. Jerusalem (Israel/Palestine) and Mitrovica (Kosovo) are still involved in on-going conflicts with severe exclusion and marginalisation toward certain groups, making their democracy appear rather fragile at best, and non-existent at worst. They hence represent cases of contested democracy.

The selection of cases is based on their illustrations of different democratic contexts, public administration traditions, institutional designs, contested issues and underlying reasons. Public administrations can have severe failures, even though the whole chain from government to the acting civil servant genuinely tries to fulfil their different roles. Here Malmö is a case in point. On the other hand, civil servants can work magic within a context that, intentionally or not, hinders certain groups from getting their basic needs fulfilled, as some times is the case in Jerusalem. Our sample tries to capture many different pictures with successes and failures, in mature, consolidating and contested democracies (Hepburn 2004). The problems that have attracted our interest have different characteristics but same nature depending on which city they occur in (Sassen 2006; Soja 2000).

*Malmö* is a former working-class city, which today is remaking its identity through new innovative and small businesses, the recently established university-college and the in-migration of many young people. The segregation is increasing and there are significant differences in employment status, housing

Figure 2. The selected cases.



conditions and school results depending on where one lives. Malmö has had riots that can be traced back to problems in fulfilling the basic needs of its citizens, while at the same time being a growing city in one of the wealthiest countries in the world. *Copenhagen* is the capital and largest city in Denmark. Thirty years of urban regeneration have resulted in an urban renewed inner city as well as the inner city neighbourhoods. However, this development has also contributed to segregation processes and “ghettoization” at the outskirts of the city. Several of these deprived neighbourhoods are experiencing a variety of conflicts, such as youth crime, lack of social cohesion and trust among the residents, as well as problems with poor-quality housing. *Belfast* is still scarred by a conflict that no longer is active but very present in streets, walls and minds. Segregation is still widespread, and gates that no longer have a military presence are still locked every night. On the other hand, great improvements have been made and the city once again has a rising population and an economic boom in a transition from low-intense conflict and riots to a consolidating democracy. Depending on where they go in *Mostar*, people get unequally treated on bases of their ethnic identity. A Bosniak does not go to western – Croat dominated – Mostar for healthcare and there are

very few, if any, Croats that send their children to schools in eastern – Bosniak dominated – Mostar. At the same time, the city is politically united and is officially obliged to offer the same services indiscriminately. *Jerusalem* is the most contested urban area in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and inhabits a significant power asymmetry where regular Israelis have housing, employment and healthcare of a standard that only the richest Palestinians can afford. Where Israelis just stroll through the military check-points, Palestinian ambulances are stopped and searched for hours. Its public administration is ambiguous and institutionally discriminatory while its whole status is globally debated. *Mitrovica* has a very puzzling institutional setup. In its northern part the Kosovo state is virtually non-existent or ignored by its Serbian population, which go to Belgrade-sponsored courts, police offices and hospitals, in defiance of the independence declaration of Pristina. Southern Mitrovica on the other hand is governed by Kosovars, which try to – so far unsuccessfully – to extend their reach to the northern part. The failures and corruption of Mitrovica has resulted in ‘one’ city in geographical and spatial terms, albeit two worlds in cognitive and actual reality.

## In conclusion: significance of the research

The added theoretical value of this research is to bridge the gap between two different theoretical traditions that rarely engage with each other, but that have great potential to generate new theoretical as well as empirical insights. In doing so, we offer new concepts and an original theoretical framework for understanding the role of public administrations and their capacity for addressing conflicts in different democratic contexts. The programme also adds a practical value as it will transfer knowledge and expertise concerning tools for how public administrations and civil servants in conflictual settings can move beyond societal exclusion and conflict to craft policy solutions and generate democratic capacity for long-term sustainability. These research-based policy recommendations may assist practitioners within public administration and could have an important impact on the works of local administrations and thereby citizens' lives in various democratic settings.

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