

SWARMING JUSTICE: THE ROLE OF MASS MOVEMENTS IN CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

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The field of what is increasingly called Conflict Transformation devotes a lot of attention to the role of the “expert” intervener in facilitating constructive change in relationships as well as in dysfunctional social and political structures. But what if the interveners are a “swarm” of ordinary citizens forming networks and mobilizing social movements to demand political, social, and environmental justice across a range of issues? This paper proposes the science of Complex Adaptive Systems as a new lens through which to understand mass citizen mobilization as a form of conflict intervention using a case study of “Idle No More,” an indigenous group of First Nations protestors catalyzing a peaceful revolution to protect land and water. The paper examines the utility of expanding peace research to include complex systems principles such as self-organization, social entropy, distributed leadership, and the networked world of conflict transformation.

Adbuster’s Media Foundation is a Canadian non-profit that promotes a post-capitalist world and revolutionary protest against inequality and injustice. In July 2011, *Adbusters* posted a call to action for its readers to flood lower Manhattan on 17 September.¹ The call to occupy Zuccotti Park near Wall Street in New York reached across the internet and hundreds of activists’ telephones. The occupation gained worldwide publicity, resulting in A Global Day of Action on 15 October that brought protesters into twenty Canadian cities and eighty-two countries around the world.² By the time Occupy Wall Street ended on 15 November, with help from the new digital

age, the conduct of many conflicts around the world had been transformed.

The academic field of what is increasingly called Conflict Transformation devotes a lot of attention to the role of the intervener in facilitating constructive change in relationships, as well as in dysfunctional social and political structures.³ The Occupy movement and additional mass citizen mobilization across a range of issues and around the world have made clear that the possibility of intervention in long-standing, systemic conflict has changed dramatically.

This paper considers what happens when a mass of “amateurs,” as opposed to “experts” in conflict transformation, take over the role of interveners in long-standing systemic conflicts. More specifically, it explores what happens when the non-specialists are Aboriginal peoples catalyzing “a peaceful revolution to honour Indigenous sovereignty and to protect land and water.” Using a Complex Adaptive Systems frame, the paper examines the highly successful network Idle No More, an ongoing grassroots political protest movement begun in Canada that includes First Nations, Inuit, and Métis voices.⁴ The paper concludes by suggesting that academic experts in conflict transformation might expand their research and practice to incorporate the emergent twenty-first century science of self-organizing Complex Adaptive Systems and stand with their sister peacemakers as participants in the mass mobilization of systemic change.⁵

There is a dearth of research about the methods and consequences of mass action for social justice in the digital age. However, pioneering research into the digital universe, and the emergence of self-organizing collective power among dispossessed and committed activists, offers a tantalizing hint of how and why successful nonviolent campaigns are often transformative when nothing else works.⁶ A few years ago, two outliers in the US military, John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, presented a briefing paper, “Swarming and the Future of Conflict.”⁷ They noted that, though we have all the power of our sophisticated weapons systems and a professional army, we keep losing the war on terror. Suggesting a complex systems approach, Arquilla and Ronfeldt appealed passionately for a “profound shift” in modern warfare, requiring “new approaches to connectivity and control” in an asymmetric combat environment.⁸ They were largely ignored.

Complexity science, which weds the physical and biological sciences to the social sciences, is no longer a novel discipline. This new science has given us the opportunity for a much needed and long neglected synthesis. As a

practitioner and activist, in addition to being a social scientist, I watch with glee as the academy catches up with the scientific basis behind the practice of mediating emergent change in adversarial negotiations.⁹ This reminds me of my long-ago membership in a group of practitioners assembled at Harvard—before *Getting to Yes* was written—to discuss what we mediators out there were doing that actually worked. Roger Fisher, the soon-to-be co-author, leaned his tall body across our table and asked, “We know it works in *practice*, but will it work in *theory*?”¹⁰

We have all watched a line of ants marching toward the picnic table or the kitchen bin. Each ant is following a chemical pheromone trail laid down to guide the quest for food, and also to mark their territory. They cannot find the food source alone and carry it back to the nest. They are completely dependent on one another. When they work together, their *individual* behaviour is transformed by that interdependency, and so is the task at hand. The food, after all, disappears if the ants are successful. British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher famously remarked, “There’s no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families.”¹¹ The science of evolution teaches us that humans indeed live in societies, rarely living alone.¹² Our societies, regardless of size, are complex adaptive systems. Much like an ant colony, a flock of birds, a pod of whales, and a swarm of bees, humans primarily engage in interactive activities during which the relationships we build with one another, and the subsequent collection of diverse brains, often make our own swarm smarter.

An extensive body of literature surrounds the question of whether humans are more successful completing tasks in groups or as individuals; the consensus is that it depends on the task.¹³ Teamwork appears essential, however, as tasks become more complex. While our interactions are local in nature, they nevertheless influence not only our personal and interpersonal behaviour and the culture of our organizations; they ripple out to the larger social environment, with the probability of disrupting the conditions of the *whole* system, always tentative and ripe for change.

Many of us know of the “Butterfly Effect,” where the butterfly flaps its wings in what is left of the Brazilian rainforest, making a tiny change in the weather’s initial conditions, and a tornado touches down in Texas. Nobel Laureate Ilea Prigogine discovered that, in order for structures like tornados to remain active, they need a continuous flow of energy or they dissipate.¹⁴ Perhaps the tornado gains strength as it crosses over many miles

and merges with additional weather conditions along the way, or maybe it loses its force and Texas just gets a little wind. This is interesting for conflict transformation because we can define strategies to disrupt energy flows to those systems harbouring structures that perpetuate violence and destruction of people and the planet. It is truly a different way of thinking about resolving conflict.

Here is more good news. Over time systems seek more—not less—disorder, or entropy. One does not have to be a physicist to recognize the state of the world today as a far-from-equilibrium system! Alfredo Infante and James Lawler define the term “social entropy” as “equivalent to the degree of social dissatisfaction in certain social, economic or political systems.”¹⁵ Their hypothesis is that social entropy, or dissatisfaction, tends to increase with time. Applying the math, Infante and Lawler estimate the degree of social entropy at a particular time and place, noting that, following natural law, disorder will also continue to expand. “Why?” they ask, “is human society not chaotic on the whole?” The answer is found in the presence of self-organizing “rules” and “relationships” that emerge to order our societies, resulting in what early complexity scientists called “order for free.”¹⁶

According to theoretical biologist and complexity guru Stuart Kauffman, the order we perceive exists in a complex transition “regime” between order and chaos.¹⁷ In fact, the “phase transition” that we seek—from impasse to settlement, from revenge to reconciliation, from violence to coexistence, from oppression to justice, from war to peace—is most likely to occur at the “edge of chaos” as it does in other thermodynamic systems. When we turn the heat up under the teapot, at a critical point water undergoes a phase transition from liquid to steam. When we turn the heat up during tense negotiations, a phase transition is possible from deadlock to agreement. A classic example is the deadline that President Carter imposed during the Camp David talks in 1978, to conclude a peace treaty between Israel and Egypt. Carter had all but given up on success when he angrily declared the thirteenth day of meetings to be the final day, regardless of the outcome. That peace treaty has lasted until today.¹⁸

Idle No More turned up the heat in a series of mass political protests across Canada in 2012-13. According to University of Saskatchewan historian Ken Coates in his comprehensive and insightful book about the birth of the movement, “Idle No More . . . may prove to be the most important and transformative event in recent Canadian history, on par with the rise of

women's rights in the 1960s, the sovereignty movement in the Province of Quebec, and the gay pride movements of the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁹

I am continually amazed by how little non-Indigenous peoples in Canada and the United States are informed about or take notice of the history of the Indigenous peoples who live among us. The conclusions of the recent Truth and Reconciliation Commission report, released in Canada in May 2015, mirror the ethnic cleansing and genocides of the past and those that continue to this day.²⁰ The historic objective of both US and Canadian government policies has been cultural genocide of one group in order to provide space for expansion of another. The United States and Canada are not alone among the family of nations whose policies provoke violence. I worked as a mediator in Bosnia during the war and all sides carried out ethnic cleansing.²¹ The enduring fallout from the Rwandan genocide still terrorizes Africa as Hutu paramilitary organizations that fled into Congo from Rwanda continue to wreak havoc.²² Israel expands its relentless drive into the occupied Palestinian territories.²³

Well into the 1970s, ethnic cleansing forcibly removed Indigenous children from their homes and placed them in white, mostly church-run boarding schools. The US government, let us remember, was also implicated in our own boarding school trauma.²⁴ We might ask how any group of humans could dehumanize and abuse children, much less members of Canada's Presbyterian, Anglican, United, and Catholic Churches, which are all named in the First Nations Indian Residential Schools Agreement of 2005 that set up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.²⁵ The new report details six years of testimony and stories from survivors of the profound physical torture and emotional and sexual abuse of children perpetrated by residential school administrators and staff. The last residential school in Canada did not close until 1996.

A sad history recounts the treaties negotiated between First Nations tribes and the British government, beginning with the presumably peaceful intentions of the "Peace and Friendship" treaties with the Mi'kmaq and Maliseet tribes in 1725. The British Royal Proclamation of 1763 prohibited the purchase of First Nations lands by any party other than the Crown. The so-called "Numbered Treaties," eleven treaties signed between 1871 and 1921, gave the Canadian government the right to develop lands in the West and North, including settlement and resource development.²⁶ Many broken treaties litter the historical landscape, notably one which had a provision

promising schools for the education of Aboriginal children on tribal lands. The absence of treaty responsibility on the part of the government remains problematic today.

Recently, however, as the result of continuous Aboriginal resistance leading to some important successes in the courts, the wee beginnings of a change in initial conditions has opened a space for the rise of a new Indigenous social movement. The introduction of the Harper government's 2012 omnibus bill, Bill C-45, with virtually no Aboriginal participation, provided the catalyst for four Saskatchewan women, Jessica Gordon, Sylvia McAdam, Sheelah McLean, and Nina Wilson, to unpack the legislation, searching for changes to environmental protection and Indigenous rights. They were not happy with what they found, and they did something quite remarkable—they *did something* about it.²⁷

Their insistent call to action began with what the organizers called a "teach-in" in November 2012, making sure they drew a crowd by setting up a Facebook page. They came up with the name Idle No More for the teach-in, with a simple message: "This is a grassroots movement for solidarity which welcomes all community members! Location: 20 West, Saskatoon. Actions to take place: information, forums, petition, and a rally to oppose Bill C-45. Due consultation is needed in matters that affect all peoples. Our silence is consent!"²⁸ They tweeted continuously before the meeting, reached out to other local gatherings and potential allies, prepared a petition to stop the legislation, called out online the members of Parliament for and against the bill, and asked for a flood of e-mails.

The local press mostly ignored them. Fewer than fifty people attended the initial teach-in and rally, but it was enough for a small group to ignite a social movement. At that inaugural meeting, university student Erika Lee spoke with passion:

I'm in a political studies class right now, and I was thinking the other day about how we sit there, and we learn about structures, we learn about government . . . but we're never told to go out and do something, because we're not supposed to. We're just supposed to sit there and learn, repeat what we're told . . . and never question what the government we're learning about is actually doing to us as people, as students.²⁹

Despite a winter of very successful rallies, marches, and demonstrations as the Idle No More movement continued to self-organize, the Harper

government held firm. What Coates calls the “open arms” of the movement’s four women leaders, who stayed relentlessly behind the scenes in order to encourage the emergence of local leadership, local events, and self-empowerment, allowed Aboriginal peoples to find their own voice and take charge of building the movement. Their voice was always peaceful, carefully avoiding any direct action that might lead to arrest or confrontations that had occasionally occurred in the past, and brilliantly using social media to enhance volume and reach. Coates writes, “Peace is quiet however and Canadians chose not to hear the silence. . . . Idle No More was not about a single issue, even one as complicated as the protest against the omnibus bill. Instead, it was a movement focused on leading Aboriginal people to stand up for themselves and to find strength in collective action.”³⁰

At the end of 2013, a December gathering confirmed that the focus had shifted from encouraging widespread activity and events throughout Canada “to upholding Idle No More as an achieved space, a platform from which Aboriginal people could push forward on a variety of fronts. . . . It elevated the belief . . . that they had the power, determination, and capacity to make a difference.”³¹

When the haunting memories of attempted genocide continue to be reaffirmed in the absence of healing and reconciliation, the recurring memories colonize the mind, perpetrating an ongoing cycle of internalized oppression and lateral violence. Many of the US and Canadian Aboriginal populations have released themselves from the captivity of an endless, repetitive victim story. As survivors gathering strength, they have found the courage to move beyond victimization to a new phase of healing and self-empowerment.

Idle No More, a profound campaign, is guiding us down a gentle though powerful path to forgiveness for the past and reconciliation with the present. Offering events for internal spiritual healing and a voice for native wisdom traditions that reconnect us to the natural world, this social movement continues to advance, including building international partnerships. How it is led exemplifies how leadership works in Complex Adaptive Systems.

The leadership model that is an emergent property in dynamic, self-organizing groups like Idle No More signals a paradigm shift from those imposed throughout human history by dominance and authoritarianism. When Cynthia Cherrey wrote her book on systemic leadership³² fifteen years ago, she and co-author Kathleen Allen continued to blaze a trail opened

decades earlier by nurses Charlene Wheeler and Peggy Chinn in their book *Peace & Power*, now in its eighth edition.³³ While working as a mediator in Eastern and Central Europe during the Balkan wars, I carried a pink, feminist, liberating book as my process bible during the early and mid-1990s. The book re-imagines power as “power-with” rather than “power-over.” Quoting environmental activist, systems thinker, and author Joanna Macy, “This transition in our concept of power is radical. It involves seeing power not as a property we own, not as something we exert over others, but as a verb, a process that we participate in. This is a huge evolutionary shift.”³⁴

Allen and Cherrey wrote about the “fragmented worldview” that has been persistently promoted by the hierarchical leaders of our dominant culture. Rather than embracing the web of life that marks Indigenous thinking, these leaders hold a linear view of cause and effect, which makes change difficult in a nonlinear and increasingly complex world. When challenges arise in a social system, dominant culture leaders traditionally break the system down to its parts, tinker with partial solutions, and forgo or resist the necessary network connections that scale up the crisis and encourage the emergence of a moral and spiritual call to systemic change. We forfeit the advantage of collective intelligence when structures of command and control suppress distributed leadership.

A key lesson in the study of complex adaptive social systems is that leadership is distributed throughout the system but fails to emerge because of structural hierarchy, which creates a barrier to the spread of nodal connections and an expanding network. “In a networked, rather than a fragmented world,” write Allen and Cherry, “individual actors can initiate change from anywhere within the system.”³⁵

This finding, universally misunderstood as the “leaderless” revolution, has enormous implications for conflict transformation. When mostly young activists were occupying Wall Street and young Idle No More protesters were drumming and dancing in circles across Canada, the press had an awful time figuring out “who’s in charge?” and “what are their goals?” The concept of shared and distributed leadership networks and “emergent” rather than pre-planned outcomes was so foreign and radical that even today both the Occupy Movement and Idle No More are assumed to be either burnt out or gone from the political landscape. Nothing is further from the truth. They are very much alive in the world as they form coalitions, continue to build the movement, and adapt their movement strategies to ever-changing global

realities. Michael Levitin affirms this in an *Atlantic* article, “The Triumph of Occupy Wall Street:”

Many faulted Occupy for its failure to produce concrete results. Yet with the 2016 elections looming and a spirit of economic populism spreading throughout the nation, that view of Occupy’s impact is changing. Inequality and the wealth gap are now core tenets of the Democratic platform, providing a frame for other measurable gains spurred by Occupy. . . . What appeared to be a passing phenomenon of protest now looks like the future of U.S. political debate, heralded by tangible policy wins and the new era of activist movements Occupy inaugurated.³⁶

In May 2015 ten thousand Indigenous peoples and their non-Indigenous allies marched in Ottawa in support of the changes demanded by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report.³⁷ “Idle No More calls on all people to join a peaceful revolution to honor Indigenous sovereignty and to protect the land and water. . . . Take action near you!” is the present challenge on the Idle No More website.³⁸

A series of sacred walks to raise awareness about oil spills, train derailments, and pipeline failures that impact the Great Lakes began in summer 2015.³⁹ Climate change activists joined the walks, looking to Aboriginal protest around the world to save the planet from the extractive industries. The global movement for a restoration of Aboriginal dignity and human rights, with Idle No More in the forefront of leadership in North America and internationally, offers a spiritual and moral guide for us all as we navigate the unpredictable future.

Many of us in the “profession” of conflict transformation have accumulated decades of facilitating dialogue and mediating negotiations among invited, and thus privileged, elites in adversarial situations. They are desperate for help, hoping that our individual leadership and facilitation skills will assist transformation and breakthrough. This is no longer enough. In an accelerating world of market capitalism that promotes inequality, global climate change, endless growth, and endless war, those who study and write scholarly works about conflict, and often practice intervention to end violence, must add to the present repertoire of research and practice. We must scale up our findings to the whole system level, augmenting incremental attempts at partial solutions. In addition to teaching and continuing our search for how best to partner with allies on the ground to intervene in the

systems that support oppression and violence, we might also take a stand with Idle No More and many other seekers of peace and justice around the world, lending our passion for peace, our special training, and yes, our bodies to a profound mass movement, a social swarm for social and environmental justice.

ENDNOTES

1. “#OCCUPY WALL STREET,” *Adbusters* (blog), July 2011. The call to action asked this question: “Are you ready for a Tahrir moment? On September 17, we want to see 20,000 people flood into lower Manhattan, set up tents, kitchens, peaceful barricades, and occupy Wall Street for a few months.” The New York City police shut down the encampment on 15 November.
2. “Occupy Wall Street—October 15—Global Day of Action,” *OccupyTVNY* (YouTube), 25 October 2011.
3. Conflict Transformation is an idea with a deep reach, including not just reconciliation but also systemic change. See, for example, John Paul Lederach, *Little Book of Conflict Transformation* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2003). Lederach explores why “conflict transformation is more appropriate than ‘conflict resolution’ or ‘management.’” Its practice, writes Lederach, requires “both solutions and social change.”
4. See <http://www.idlenomore.ca>.
5. The investigation of a new multi-disciplinary field called Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) that began in the mid-twentieth century has expanded dramatically since 1984 and the founding of the Santa Fe Institute in New Mexico, USA. A good very brief introduction to the theory and language of CAS can be found on the Internet at *Trojan Mice*. From a large store of seminal work, see for example, George A Cowan, David Pines, and David Meltzer, *Complexity: Metaphors, Models, and Reality* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Perseus, 1994); Philip Ball, *Critical Mass: How One Thing Leads to Another* (London: Random House, 2004); Stuart Kauffman, *At Home in the Universe: The Search for the Laws of Self-Organization and Complexity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); John H. Holland, *Hidden Order: How Adaptation Builds Complexity* (New York: Basic, 1995). More accessible works for the non-expert include M. Mitchell Waldrop,

- Complexity: The Emerging Science at the Edge of Order and Chaos* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), and Roger Lewin, *Complexity: Life at the Edge of Chaos* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). For an explanation of chaos theory, a subset of complexity, see James Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science* (Toronto: Penguin, 1987).
6. Brian Holmes, Professor of Philosophy at the European Graduate School in Saas-Fee, Switzerland led a series of seminars in 2011 at 16 Beaver Group, an artists' co-operative in New York, out of which came many of the ideas for the Occupy movement. His discussions of the new global media and radical resistance for democracy can be found on his blog *Continental Drift*, <http://brianholmes.wordpress.com>. See also David Graeber, *The Democracy Project: A History, A Crisis, A Movement* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2013).
 7. John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, *Swarming and the Future of Conflict* (Rand Corporation, 2000).
 8. Arquilla and Ronfeldt, *Swarming and the Future of Conflict*.
 9. 2015 Talk Series: *Big Ideas on Complexity Science and Sustainable Peace* (New York: Earth Institute, Columbia University Advanced Consortium on Cooperation, Conflict, and Complexity). Note especially talks by Peter T. Coleman and Glenda Eoyang.
 10. William Ury, Roger Fisher, and Bruce Patton, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In* (New York: Penguin, 1981).
 11. Paraphrased from an interview published in *Women's Own*, 23 September, 1987.
 12. In *The Social Conquest of the Earth* (London: W. W. Norton, 2012), Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson writes that humans, unlike other cooperating species, have made a leap to "eusocial" ("eu" meaning "true"), our complex human culture and hyper sociality enabling us to make unprecedented strides in technological advancement along with disrupting the earth's natural systems.
 13. See, for example, Anita Williams Woolley et al., "Evidence for a Collective Intelligence Factor in the Performance of Human Groups," *Science* 330 (29 October 2010): 686-88. Interestingly, the individual level of intelligence in the groups studied did not make as much difference as the group's prosociality and inclusion of women.

14. Ilea Prigogine, *Order Out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue With Nature* (New York: Bantam New Age, 1984).
15. Alfredo Palamino Infante and James H. L. Lawler, *Social Entropy: A Paradigmatic Approach of the Second Law of Thermodynamics to an Unusual Domain* (Dallas, TX: Nexial Institute, 2002).
16. Kauffman, *At Home in the Universe*. Reportedly, Kauffman had a vision of a tangled chaotic mess of interconnected genes that somehow spontaneously emerged into the architecture of an organism. His imagined image led him to the study of complex systems.
17. Kauffman, *At Home in the Universe*.
18. Lawrence Wright, *Thirteen Days in September* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014).
19. Ken Coates, *#IdleNoMore: and the Remaking of Canada* (Regina, SK: University of Regina Press, 2015).
20. Truth & Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action, Winnipeg, MB, 2015, <http://www.trc.ca>.
21. *The Ethnic Cleansing of Bosnia-Herzegovina* (Washington DC: Committee on Foreign Relations, US Senate, US Government Printing Office, 1992).
22. Girard Prunier, Crimes of War Education Project, <http://www.crimesofwar.org>.
23. John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Gireaux, 2007).
24. *American Indian Boarding Schools: An Exploration of Global Ethnic and Cultural Cleansing* (Mount Pleasant, MI: Ziiipiwing Center of Anishinabe Culture and Lifeways, 2011).
25. Settlement Agreement, <http://www.residentialschoolsettlement.ca>.
26. Treaties with Aboriginal people in Canada (Ottawa: Government of Canada: Indigenous and Northern Affairs).
27. Coates, *#IdleNoMore*.
28. Coates, *#IdleNoMore*.
29. Coates, *#IdleNoMore*.

30. Coates, *#IdleNoMore*.
31. Coates, *#IdleNoMore*.
32. Kathleen Allen and Cynthia Cherrey, *Systemic Leadership* (University Press of America/American College Personnel Association, 2000).
33. Charlene Wheeler and Peggy Chin, *Peace and Power: A Handbook of Feminist Process*, 3rd edition (Washington DC: National League for Nursing, 1991).
34. Wheeler and Chin, *Peace and Power*.
35. Cynthia Cherrey and Kathleen Allen, "New Ways of Leading in a Networked World," in *Developing NonHierarchical Leadership on Campus*, ed. Charles Outcalt et al. (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2001)
36. Michael Levitin, "The Triumph of Occupy Wall Street," *The Atlantic*, 10 June 2015.
37. Red Power Media: Indigenous Issues and Resistance. Thousands Attend Walk for Reconciliation in Ottawa, <http://www.redpowermedia.wordpress.com/2015/05/31>.
38. IdleNoMore, <http://www.idlenomore.ca>.
39. Mother Earth Water Walk, <http://www.motherearthwaterwalk.com>.