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The New Physics: Key to Strengthening COIN

by A. Lawrence Chickering

In a series of short reflections, Tom Ricks neatly summarizes major themes in current thinking on how to strengthen COIN.¹ Sharing a trait that is evident in most current theoreticians, he omits serious discussion about how to recruit the populace of countries threatened by insurgencies to play an active role in COIN.²

This failure has several dimensions. I want, in this short essay, to address one of the most interesting of them, which relates to the importance of basic principles in physics to counterinsurgency warfare. I will focus, especially, on the difference between the “old” (Newtonian) physics and the “new” physics of quantum mechanics and relativity theory.

The point I want to explore is simple. Most of the “best”, current thinking about COIN—including the *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* itself—is rooted in the simple causation of Newtonian physics. Newtonian physics sees reality in the model of a machine. It holds that everything affects everything else in a highly predictable way. Another way of saying this is that all causation is “local”. An actor does something, and something else happens as a direct result. In COIN, the military protects people, or helps the government give them services, and (the theory holds) people rally to support both the military and the government. A macro example of this mechanistic thinking is Marxism, with its theory of the class struggle and “historical inevitability”. In COIN—understood in the Newtonian framework—the government and the military are the major actors: if they protect people and provide services, the people (it is assumed) will respond. In the first paragraph above, this (old physics) perspective would understand the statement about recruiting people “to play an active role in COIN” to mean recruiting them actively, visibly, and specifically to help the military fight insurgents.

This way of thinking is so widely shared—and so aligned with “common sense” (the quotation marks are necessary because of Voltaire’s lovely insight about common sense—that it is not all that common)—that one may wonder what other kind of causation is possible.

Quantum mechanics and relativity theory (the “new physics”) have a very different, more complicated view of causation, one not at all aligned with common sense, which explains why it is so widely ignored. There are good reasons, however, for believing that this other, more complicated concept of causation might often be more effective for COIN than the simple, Newtonian view.

In contrast to the *local* (direct) causation of Newtonian mechanics, the other view focuses on *non-local* (indirect, invisible) causation, in which one does something at Point A, and something else happens at Point B. Aligned with this non-common sensical view is the so-called

¹ Tom Ricks, “Counterinsurgency Insights by Tom Ricks,” SWJ, 11/26/10

² I addressed this issue specifically in a recent paper, “Civil Society and Counterinsurgency – II: Recruiting Citizen Armies for COIN,” SWJ, 11/24/10

“uncertainty principle”—that just as you can’t see non-local causation, you can’t predict the results of any particular action; you can only predict *probabilities*.

This very abstract difference is important for COIN because counterinsurgency warfare is greatly influenced by *perceptions* of what is true rather than by “reality” itself. In the old physics, causation and relationships are open and visible. On the ground, therefore, when people become active participants in COIN, they run the risk of making themselves and their families targets for the Taliban. But in new physics terms people can become active participants in COIN in ways that are invisible and unknown—thus not exposing them to danger.

At the present time, most of what is being done for COIN is driven by old physics concepts, while many things we *ought* to be doing are understandable more in terms of the new physics.

One can see the difference between these two concepts in terms of the distinction between *helping* and *empowering*.³ The importance of this distinction is implicit in the widely quoted statement that T.E. Lawrence made in 1917 about the importance of empowering people and giving them ownership by letting them do things. “Do not try to do too much with your own hands,” Lawrence wrote.⁴ “Better the Arabs do it tolerably than that you do it perfectly. . . .”⁵ Helping is a powerful example of simple, Newtonian causation; it produces “concrete, measurable results,” which are the central concern of most philanthropy and donor programs. Unfortunately, the concrete results it produces are far weaker than the outcomes that result from empowerment and ownership.

“Helping” is Newtonian and objective. You build a well, and the “measurable result” is a well. “Empowering” and “ownership” are post-Newtonian and subjective. You cannot “see” empowerment or ownership. These concepts have power when they are *felt* by people. Following Lawrence’s statement, empowering and ownership are the key in COIN.

Empowering people, encouraging them to do things for themselves, shows the importance of non-local causation and results based only on probabilities. When a local community becomes empowered, there is no certainty what it will do. They will do things people care about—things they value. If you work in 100 communities, you cannot say what each village will do, but you can predict that some percentage will build wells, and some other percentage will build schools—and so on.

You know that empowering will not produce the “concrete, measurable results” you can get if the “helper” does the work, but when the helper does the work, there will be no community ownership and no sense of responsibility for security or maintenance of the “improvement”. With empowerment and ownership, people will protect a well or school and will maintain it. That explains why the well built by “an Arab” (Lawrence’s phrase) is worth so much more than one built by “us” (the helpers).

³ For example, see A. Lawrence Chickering, “Humanizing ‘The Man’: Strengthening Psychological and Information Operations in Afghanistan”, SWJ, 10/11/10

⁴ T. E. Lawrence, *The Arab Bulletin*, August 1917.

⁵ Quoted from David Petraeus, “Learning Counterinsurgency: Observations from Soldiering in Iraq”, *Military Review*, 2006.

Although economists tend to have no interest in this kind of ownership—their interest is focused entirely on *private* space—our attention here is on private rights and ownership of *public* space, and there is no reason to think economists could not study it with powerful results.

With empowerment and ownership, people will do what *they value*. With empowerment and partnership comes the social basis of a connected society, one with important pieces in the foundation for a modern state—in the foundation for both a market economy and a political democracy.

“Becoming an active participant in COIN”—returning to the first paragraph—means very different things from the perspective of the old physics versus the new. In the old conception, people participate actively and directly. In the new conception, they operate *independently, building a school and then protecting the school*. In doing so, they *protect the system*, which—if they built the school—they *are now a part of*. Empowered people, reaching out to each other in common purpose and working for economic and social progress, are active participants in COIN—but there is no formal relationship with it. As invisible partners in COIN, they are not exposed to the same dangers as people whose collaboration is open and visible. To put the point in economic terms, the costs of collaboration are much lower if you are invisible because the chances of being killed are greatly reduced. If people throughout Afghanistan were empowered in this way, there would be no Taliban; there would be no insurgency.

This new way of looking at popular participation in COIN is especially important because recent articles have reported Afghans who end up regretting their active (direct, Newtonian) cooperation with COIN. Besides the danger they face, the turnover in U.S. personnel and constantly changing policies and priorities leads many Afghans to look back and conclude that the U.S. is not a reliable partner. Some complain that there is little continuity in U.S. positions, that the U.S. walks away from relationships, and it cannot protect people.

That is a vulnerability of the old (Newtonian) form of collaboration. The new collaboration, on the other hand, borne from empowerment and ownership—and pursuing communities’ own values and responsibilities—represents a much more powerful and sustainable form of partnership. It also represents a form of partnership that does not expose the partners to the same dangers.

Who Should Do What?

The difference between these two concepts of causation is also evident in the decision about *who* should initiate different kinds of action. Throughout the literature on COIN, and in the *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, Newtonian assumptions dominate in the emphasis on what the military needs to do. This may seem obvious and unavoidable in a document produced by and for the military. But if the issue is how best to fight counterinsurgency warfare rather than only the military’s role in COIN, then a broader perspective may be required.

Both the *Field Manual* and much current thinking do, of course, emphasize other actors, including the government and civil society. A variety of different issues arise regarding roles that include who makes decisions, who implements them, and how they get implemented. In a simple Newtonian framework, somebody makes a decision, orders are issued, and they are carried out. In the world of counterinsurgency, rife with paradoxes and post-Newtonian causation, *perceptions* often dominate—with decisions, orders, and implementation ultimately driven not by “reality” but by how key audiences *perceive* reality.

Antagonism to outsiders is the key reality driving those perceptions in a tribal society. The more people perceive that the driving forces of events are outsiders—whether they are military or the government—the more difficult it is to achieve the real objective, which is to promote the perception that Afghans *themselves* are the principal agents of change. Encouraging people to “defend the system” depends, first, on their having a stake in it; and this perception, second, will be even stronger if they are doing the work and *therefore they are the system*.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) are best suited to accomplish all of this. But now challenges of causation break out everywhere—challenges that military organizations have little experience addressing. These challenges include:

- How to recruit CSOs to play the roles they need to play—empowering people rather than helping them. This task presents different challenges than the normal structures both of the military and the civilian sides of the government: how can CSOs be encouraged to do what is “right” without any instrument for commanding their obedience? And: how to get them, again without commands, to change their current practice of helping rather than empowering to a new approach of empowering in order to help? This is especially important because CSOs’ credibility depends on maintaining their independence. The moment they are perceived to be doing governments’ bidding is the moment their effectiveness in promoting economic and social development becomes compromised.
- How to train the CSOs to engage passive, fatalistic communities to become active participants in COIN? How can CSOs promote change in basic cultural behaviors (passivity, resulting from role-driven habits) when CSOs cannot command this change? And
- How to encourage a government to move toward good governance, reliable service delivery, and other marks of a “good” government that its people see as legitimate? How to do this when governments, pleading sovereignty, will resist any action that appears to come as a result of foreign pressure?

All of these challenges grow out of situations where the objectives and actions to achieve them cannot be commanded (Newtonian causation). As much as possible, initiatives for change must come from *them*—objectives, ideas for action, and implementation. As much as possible: the more things can come from them, the more empowerment that results—and the more ownership.

There is no space to explore these thoughts at length. But the search for spaces that encourage the *other person* to say and act in positive ways touches all aspects of relationship, even including language. The language of commands and Newtonian causation is built on declarative sentences. The language of ideas *from the other party* (post-Newtonian causation) is built on questions: “Have you ever thought about . . . ?” “What if you did this . . . ?” “I wonder what this would look like . . . ?”

Often reactions to ideas will depend more on *who expresses them* than on *the content of the ideas*. Creating “spaces” for ideas to emerge from the other party thus often depends on finding advocates inside the other camp to initiate discussions about them.

Recruiting CSOs

CSOs insist on maintaining their independence, and they need it to be effective. While this may seem to make it difficult to recruit them to a mission and then monitor progress, it is not as difficult as it might seem. The answer may be found in basic principles of economic markets.

A famous economist once remarked that “Wherever there is a demand, a supply will rise to meet the demand.” The demand is the mission, but one way to encourage sympathetic consideration for it is to include CSOs in designing the mission—asking their advice. Active collaboration in design greatly reduces the difficulty of getting agreement on the mission. Since CSOs often have far more experience working on non-governmental, societal issues than the military or diplomats do, such collaboration has powerful logic supporting it.

When implementing programs, continuing consultation goes with monitoring. In a collaborative environment, successful solutions are often co-created, and monitoring is done in a collaborative spirit.

If attitudes of the funder (civilian or military) and a CSO really diverge during implementation, the ultimate sanction is defunding. But in really engaged relationships, marked by high trust, that will almost never happen. The model for this is the relationship between donors and grantees in almost all philanthropic relationships. Or an even stronger model is contracting parties negotiating and implementing contracts.

Funding decisions can also play a significant role in promoting programs aligned with overall strategy. Many high U.S. Government officials, both conservatives and liberals, Democrats and Republicans, are supporters of Hernando de Soto’s Instituto Libertad y Democracia (ILD), which promotes property rights for the poor. Yet this general support rarely translates into collaboration in specific places. Why is de Soto not active in Pakistan or Afghanistan? He has been to both places. High officials in both places undoubtedly understand the huge strategic significance of getting property rights for the poor, giving them a stake in those societies. Yet that general understanding has not been translated into action in many strategically important countries. What is wrong with the structure of our foreign policy institutions that inhibits active support of programs like de Soto’s, which could play important strategic roles in places like Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan? (One possibility is that the quantum logic underlying the power of de Soto’s model conflicts with the simple Newtonian logic of current policymaking.)

Ownership is an important ingredient for promoting change in passive, fatalistic cultures and encouraging them to play active roles in improving their own lives. In “self-governing” organizations, in which people have real authority to design and implement plans for change, empowerment and change can happen very quickly.

And *stories* about change can also have powerful catalytic effects, spreading the inspiration for change and belief in its feasibility. I heard recently about three villages working with the National Solidarity Program (NSP) in Afghanistan that created three quite different public facilities. One, which built a school, became aware that the community next door had built a water treatment plant, and the desire for change—and belief it is possible—spread.

Stories about change *could* spread even faster with development of serious communications strategies that communicated stories of new possibilities: of girls attending school, of new schools being constructed, even of security measures in which communities

organized themselves against insurgents. In a world heavily influenced by perceptions, such stories have great strategic importance. Information and Psychological Operations should place far greater emphasis on such story-telling than they do.⁶

Promoting Governmental Reform

When the subject of promoting reform of other governments' institutions and policies, policymakers sometimes think they can "push" those governments to reform their schools or step up counterinsurgency activities or other activities. Extreme actions include promoting regime-change, as the G.W. Bush administration tried to do to Iran by funding a radio program based on Radio Marti against the Iran regime and by funding local NGOs to push for reform.

Actions such as these, based on simple (old physics) models of influence, often go nowhere. Funding local CSOs to oppose a regime or demand rights from it, whether in Egypt or Iran, only paint targets on the CSOs, whose leaders can be imprisoned and the organizations' activities suppressed.

This is too large a subject to address in this article. There is room here only to sketch broad principles aligned with the new physics that may produce positive results.

If the issue is political rights and an autocratic regime, advocacy by both CSOs and foreign governments tends to push for mechanistic change. I mean by this instant change, change by governmental edict—a picture book Newtonian process. Human beings, however, do not change suddenly. They change incrementally—organically. This is especially true in environments with low social trust, because sudden change causes uncertainty; and people will not tolerate uncertainty when there is no trust between the parties.

Autocratic governments live in fear. When CSOs push for rights, dictators often put them down because they fear social unrest, which will lead to the unraveling of the political and social order. The ultimate fear of uncertainty is in the breakdown of order. Alexis de Tocqueville explained why protest is greatest when reform is happening: because reform pushes the hope for more, and more leads to more.

Demands for rights are demands for a more open process—for participation. When people trust each other, they tolerate more free speech, a more free press—more of all kinds of freedoms. People who demand rights mostly focus on the rights to oppose the regime. Their focus is on promoting governmental change, demanding that the leaders give up power, and give it to them.

They should try opening up the system by positive initiatives aimed at improving public institutions such as schools. The organization I founded and run, Educate Girls Globally (EGG), has created a model of change that is very different, increasing the power of ordinary people enormously without threatening those in power. It brings all major stakeholders in school together—parents, teachers, bureaucrats, and girls—to work together to improve schools and make them work for girls. The process empowers all groups, and it has been so successful that

⁶ See A. Lawrence Chickering, "Humanizing 'The Man': Strengthening Psychological and Information Operations in Afghanistan", SWJ, 10/11/10

we have not met resistance or conflict in a single one of the more than 2,300 schools in which we are working. It is a venture in citizenship, bringing people together to work for the public good.⁷

Conclusion

Looking hard for opportunities to introduce programs in Afghanistan inspired by quantum logic is especially important because the Taliban itself largely operates under that logic—from its “unconnected” operational system to its focus on the primacy of perceptions and “narrative” over the “reality” that drives so much of coalition strategy. Despite talk about the importance of perceptions and a “counter-narrative”, U.S. policymakers have not *begun* to address these issues, driven by quantum logic.

Perhaps the most important difference between the old physics and the new physics is that although the Newtonian vision seems much more powerfully “ordered”, at its deepest place, its vision is of *an unconnected world*. The new physics, on the other hand, with its paradoxes, its non-local causation, and its quantum logic, fundamentally describes a *connected world*. This explains why so many books on the new physics compare it especially to Asian religions and spiritual practices.⁸

This point about a connected world is important in understanding both the challenges of COIN and the most powerful available responses to them. It is important to understand the spiritual “story” connecting the Taliban and Al Qaeda, with their reactive narratives based on “us” versus “them”; and it is also important to understand the most powerful responses to the Taliban narrative. These responses are based on the spiritual essence in all human beings, which reaches full flower in all successful social programs, that pushes people in positive ways to reach out to each other in common purpose and connect.

The challenge for COIN in Afghanistan is to reform current institutions and policies so they encourage and promote in positive ways this universal human impulse. The models for doing this are out there, especially those promoting empowerment and ownership.⁹ The challenge is to see beyond the current, confining idiom dominated by Newtonian logic and see an increasing place for promoting institutions, both public and private, that provide space to realize the universal desire for connection.

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⁷ For more on EGG, see *ibid*.

⁸ Among the many books on this subject are Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics*, Gary Zukav's *The Dancing Wu Li Masters*, and Paul Davies, *God and the New Physics*.

⁹ The only program I know that is entirely animated by this new physics vision is the program I founded and run, Educate Girls Globally (EGG). For descriptions of the program and its implications, see www.educategirls.org and also A. Lawrence Chickering, “Humanizing ‘The Man’: Strengthening Psychological and Information Operations in Afghanistan”, SWJ, 10/11/10

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