

Wicked Problems: The Ethics of Action for Peace, Rights, and Justice

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Many readers will be familiar with the expression “wicked problems,” which provides the title for a new edited volume designed to sensitize practitioners, activists, researchers, and teachers to common ethical challenges that deserve careful attention if the fields of peace, human rights, and justice work are to advance. Wicked problems are understood in everyday language as problems that are difficult to solve. However, the concept has a history in academia that stretches back to the late 1960s, when mathematicians and scientists grappled with applying traditional scientific methods to social planning. They realized that unintended risks to human well-being, subjective interpretations of social problems, and unique configurations of many variables, to name just a few attributes of wicked problems, bedevil attempts to mitigate social problems systematically.

The editors of *Wicked Problems*, three professors at prominent schools/centers of peace and conflict studies, argue that those working in peace and justice fields are particularly prone to encounter wicked problems with no apparent “right” solution, because the pursuit of peace and justice requires conflict. Conflicts are predicated on real emotions, interpretations, historical discourses, and contradictory applications of value systems that make peacebuilding work messy and create dilemmas for actors and practitioners in the field. Thus, the editors assembled a collection of scholars, activists, and practitioners to present dilemmas and pitfalls into which well-intentioned and even well-trained peacebuilders can easily stumble.

The editors' introductory chapter lays out the premise of the book, provides an astute summary of the state of the field, presents fundamental theoretical frameworks, and identifies ways in which the field is developing further. Developments include growing attention to domestic histories of inequality, oppression, and positionality with respect to systems of power and inequality (especially but not exclusively related to gender, race, and ethnicity in the North American context). Identity and lived experience feature prominently in the book, and the editors dedicate a section in the first chapter to foreground them. Readers who are new to the field will find their orientation helpful. I recommend the chapter to those of us who work in the field as a helpful contemporary conceptual map of our field that can encourage more intentional and productive collaborations.

Conflicts push parties (and people nearby) to choose sides. The real estate for neutrality narrows, forcing practitioners to lean on professional values, but even when those are clear and well-developed, practical situations often defy easy application of well-established value sets (such



as do no harm, protect human dignity, and end human suffering). On the ground, the pace and tempo of conflicts have a life and unpredictability of their own, robbing actors and practitioners of time and space to react, consult, learn, collaborate, train, and adapt. Dilemmas ensue, as the editors explain: “dire situations may demand some form of response, but often all of the options may incur undesirable consequences of some form or another” (10). One might expect this to be the introduction to a philosophical book about applied ethics, but the most prominent feature of the book lies in its focus on practice and the real-world dilemmas that arise in organizations, struggles for justice, and peacebuilding efforts. The editors organized the book’s seventeen chapters into three sections: Violence; Leadership and Organizations; and Systems and Institutions. In each section, movement activists, organizational leaders, and scholars identify dilemmas they have encountered or studied, and they detail thorny situations, failures, and measures that can or should be taken to mitigate unintended consequences and make peace and justice work more effective.

The first section addresses the perennial question of the role of violence in struggles for peace and justice, and the chapters take various positions on the effectiveness of violent and nonviolent methods (or combinations of methods, in Kirssa Cline Ryckman’s analysis of empirical research, which includes findings on the limited benefits of some radical or violent movement flanks). Given violence’s close relationship with cycles of trauma and suffering, practitioners and scholars in our field have privileged nonviolent forms of struggle for justice because of their relative effectiveness and their alignment with values such as reciprocity and the oneness of humanity. However, other values, such as the right to self-defense and support for the autonomy and dignity of oppressed people come into tension with preferences for nonviolent conflict methods. This tension appears in the chapter by Ashley J. Bohrer (assistant professor of gender and peace studies at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at University of Notre Dame) on the difficult choices social movement organizers often must make between prefigurative principles (where ends are related to means) or harm reduction principles (that demand attention to suffering now, at any cost).

A chapter by Tony Gaskew (professor of criminal justice at the University of Pittsburgh, Bradford) argues from a Black radical perspective for armed resistance against state oppression and racist policing in the United States as a matter of tradition, spirituality, dignity, pragmatism, and necessity in the face of white supremacy. He goes further to join other critics who argue that not only is armed resistance superior but the tradition of nonviolent resistance celebrated by white liberals in the US serves to legitimate and ensure the state’s oppressive monopoly on the use of physical force. Conversely, Liz Theoharis and Noam Sandweiss-Back, leaders of the Poor People’s Campaign, argue in a co-authored chapter that only diverse interconnected movements and mass nonviolent collective action guided by moral conviction can bring about fundamental social and economic change in the United States. Together, these chapters offer a diverse selection of prominent critiques of and support for nonviolent methods of struggle.

Interestingly, the four chapters in this section on violence and nonviolence employ the language of costs, benefits, and strategic choice more than the book’s overarching themes of dilemmas and wicked problems, perhaps because this section is oriented toward social movement strategy. Alternatively, perhaps the question of violence is so fundamental to the field of peace and conflict studies that it is assumed to be a long-standing dilemma. In any case, this first section illustrates the importance of reading the book as a whole, or at least in sections, as individual chapters fill in blanks for each other and allow the reader to consider dilemmas from different viewpoints.

The second section, on leadership and organizations, addresses ways in which organizations, as loci of legitimacy and influence—in contexts ranging from neighborhoods to national and international networks—can risk excluding allies and the very people they seek to serve. Much depends on choices made about who leads and how they lead. Organizations are crucial for social change work because they focus resources and efforts, demonstrate collective will, and enable strategic decision-making. However, that focus always comes at a cost of excluding some worthy priorities and people in favor of others. Moreover, the very development of foci and leadership within cultures steeped in patriarchy, gender normativity, white privilege, and capitalism favor some people and priorities over others. Organizations may be inclined to suit their strategic decisions and policies for the inequitable twenty-first century they inhabit, not the future they envision, but such choices can come into conflict with central values like equity and liberation. The dilemma is as old as Robert Michel's Iron Law of Oligarchy, and the results can be detrimental, if not catastrophic, for the sustainability of organizations. (See also in this regard Philip Gamaghelyan's chapter in this volume on cooptation and the neoliberalization of peacebuilding coalitions, and Felicity Gray's discussion of the integration of nonviolent civilian protection practices into traditional armed peacekeeping efforts.)

For example, Minh Dang, executive director and cofounder of Survivor Alliance, and Daniel J. Meyers, president of Misericordia University, in their respective chapters, present challenges related to the optimal balance between centering those with lived experience or centering allies. Dang points out that leadership by survivors of slavery and human trafficking is important to those they represent, and that it sharpens organizations' insight into the problems they are founded to tackle. But, to avoid abusing survivor leaders, who work in worlds with little understanding of slavery, their roles must be designed in ways that avoid the dehumanization of essentializing their survivor identities and the further indignity of tokenizing only a few leaders who fit the mold of the "perfect victim" (91). Meyers, while recognizing Dang's points about the importance of victims' representation and experience in his own work with LGBTQ activists, identifies advantages of ally leadership for those organizations which pursue highly focused instrumental goals, where networks and access to political power can be helpful. alicia sanchez gill (executive director of Emergent Fund) curates testimony from organizers of color in the United States, lending further gravitas to Dang's arguments.

Subsequent chapters in the second section focus on the perpetual tension among social change agents over whether reformist strategies that seek a thousand small victories are preferable to bold revolutionary strategies that honor visions of equity and liberation with plans for dramatic far-reaching structural change. Both approaches are built on similar value systems, but Reina C. Neufeldt (associate professor of peace and conflict studies at Conrad Grebel University College) warns us that our values—or, rather, a blind allegiance to a limited set of values—can lead to failures in peacebuilding work. Conviction about the rightness of our causes can throttle critical thinking, consultation, and deliberation. It can narrow our openness to multiple values, sometimes the values of the very people peacebuilding experts seek to serve. Thus, Neufeldt calls us to embrace what she calls "values humility" (141).

The final and most extensive section, on systems and institutions, focuses on conflict interventions, often by third parties engaged in projects including nonviolent civilian protection, genocide prevention, transitional justice, and international sanctions. In a return to questions about the utility of violence that appeared earlier in the book, several chapters here also consider the ethics of coercive conflict methods and the treatment of parties that use them. Ernesto Verdeja (one of the editors, an associate professor of political science and peace studies at the University of Notre Dame) and Laurie Nathan (professor of the practice of mediation and director of the



Mediation Program at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies) describe difficult strategic choices professional peacemakers must make when negotiating with violent actors, partnering with states, or endorsing limited uses of threat or violence. All such choices might violate professional values such as “do no harm,” or can risk legitimizing violence. On the other hand, as Nathan points out from his comparison of peacemaking case studies in Côte d’Ivoire, Libya, and Syria, strategic violence to oust “villains” can align with democratic norms and calls for justice. Unfortunately, the pace and fog of armed conflict makes the weighing of conflicting norms and values difficult.

On a different track, George A. Lopez (professor of peace studies, emeritus, at Notre Dame’s Kroc Institute) and Beatrix Geaghan-Breiner (an undergraduate student at Columbia University), in one chapter, and Tim Murithi (head of program at the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation in Cape Town), in another, note that established practices like sanctions regimes and transitional justice programs have not yet evolved to address ethical blind spots in their formulations. Murithi complicates the often oversimplified categorization of victims and perpetrators in transitional justice projects. Holding up the case of child soldiers in Uganda as an example, he asks: What happens when perpetrators are also victims of injustices? Lopez and Geaghan-Breiner raise different kinds of ethical concerns when, inspired by legal discussions of peacekeeping responsibilities to protect and rebuild, they propose a “responsibility to restore” when sanctions indiscriminately harm civilians. In both cases, the authors seek to push peacebuilding ethics to their next stage of development.

I read *Wicked Problems* as an attempt to up the game of peace and conflict studies and peace and justice work by taking hard looks at challenging moments that test what we think we know about conflict, power, movements, peacebuilding, and more. The editors lean into the close relationship between peace and conflict studies scholarship and practice, and they have taken a wide view to encompass as much of the field as possible. Given the breadth of the task, the book coheres as well as any edited volume can do, and the introductory chapter does a good job of framing the project. Authors often refer to one another’s chapters, demonstrating a collaborative approach that contributes to the book’s overall unity of purpose. The selection of authors left this reader in no doubt as to their qualifications to speak to their fields of practice and research.

Wicked Problems will appeal to practitioners and scholars as a way of comparing notes across sectors and subfields. It could serve as an accessible supplementary reader in an undergraduate or graduate course to sensitize students to the values and ethics of the fields of peace and justice studies. It could work well in a capstone course or proseminar, and it would be especially helpful in programs and departments that train practitioners. In fact, the book ends with a chapter by Agnieszka Paczyńska and Susan F. Hirsch (both professors at the Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter School for Peace and Conflict Resolution at George Mason University) that focuses on engaged or experiential learning courses and that demonstrates how students working with nongovernmental organizations and community partners encounter dilemmas and feel the tension of conflicting goals and values. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the book’s focus on dilemmas—on those “wicked problems”—means that it offers a window onto the cutting edge of the practice and study of peace and conflict.

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