

## Introduction

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

*Austin Choi-Fitzpatrick, Douglas Irvin-Erickson, and Ernesto Verdeja*

What kinds of ethical challenges emerge in pursuit of peace, human rights, and social justice? A desire to bring change should lead to action. Action quickly leads to complexity. And some of the most complex complexity involves ethics. Textbook ethics are a good start for how we think about the world, but have a “last mile problem.” They help us get started, but when the moment of decision is reached, and when the rubber meets the road, as it were, judgment and discernment (or id, impulse, bias, and inertia) may have the final word. That’s why we created this book—to hand to our students, our colleagues, and our friends, certainly—but to educate ourselves as well. We learned a lot from the chapters in this book.

For those of us who believe our goal should be not just to understand the world but to change it, this book proposes a simple question: *What kind of ethical challenges are involved in those change efforts?* The three of us teach in graduate programs where we invite our students to wrestle with this question and its many answers. But we know that the dilemmas of change-oriented action are most visible not in a classroom but in practice, as we go about the real work of trying to understand and change the world.

\*\*\*

Let’s start with an example. Nonviolence is a wicked problem. Not since the late 1960s have America’s contradictions been on fuller display. A pandemic laid the country low, a national reckoning on race is afoot, and the stock market is booming. If America’s streets are alight, so is its conscience. It seems everyone loves Martin Luther King Jr., which is a sure sign that he is poorly understood and that the radicalness of his message risks being lost.

In fact, every organizer in Dr. King's wake has understood his commitment to creating conflicts that laid bare the hypocrisy of American peace. They know that America's prophet of nonviolence is also the standard-bearer for disruptive civil disobedience and mass noncompliance. Much has been made of King's principled commitment to nonviolent action. Rightly so. There is much more to be said, however, about the vital importance, indeed the vitality, of *conflict*. Too often nonviolence has been misread, by the public but also by those who should know better, as a kind of passivity that avoids disrupting the status quo and confronting illegitimate power.

Struggles for peace, rights, and justice have long been framed as occurring between two ethical poles. The first is represented by King, writing in *Beyond Vietnam*.

"Peace and civil rights don't mix," they say. "Aren't you hurting the cause of your people?" they ask. And when I hear them, though I often understand the source of their concern, I am nevertheless greatly saddened, for such questions mean that the inquirers have not really known me, my commitment, or my calling. Indeed, their questions suggest that they do not know the world in which they live.<sup>1</sup>

The second pole in this ethical debate is pointedly formulated by a young Malcolm X, writing in "The Ballot or the Bullet":

You may wonder why all of the atrocities that have been committed in Africa and in Hungary and in Asia, and in Latin America are brought before the UN, and the Negro problem is never brought before the UN. This is part of the conspiracy. This old, tricky blue eyed liberal who is supposed to be your and my friend, supposed to be in our corner, supposed to be subsidizing our struggle, and supposed to be acting in the capacity of an adviser, never tells you anything about human rights. . . . When you expand the civil-rights struggle to the level of human rights, you can then take the case of the black man in this country before the nations in the UN. You can take it before the General Assembly. You can take Uncle Sam before a world court. Uncle Sam's hands are dripping with blood, dripping with the blood of the black man in this country. He's the earth's number-one hypocrite. . . . Take it into the United Nations, where our African brothers can throw their weight on our side, where our Asian brothers can throw their weight on our side, where our Latin-American brothers can throw their weight on our

side, and where 800 million Chinamen are sitting there waiting to throw their weight on our side. Let the world know how bloody his hands are. Let the world know the hypocrisy that's practiced over here. Let it be the ballot or the bullet. Let him know that it must be the ballot or the bullet.<sup>2</sup>

This tension—between these poles and within this complex relationship—deserves more attention and is one of the many challenges to ethical action that led us to compile a volume entitled *Wicked Problems*. The two perspectives of King and Malcolm X we selected strike to the heart of this reckoning with conflict. They go to the very core of the deep ethical and practical challenges any change-oriented social movement must confront. While King and Malcolm X are often reduced to polar opposites—their ideas oversimplified into a neat binary where Malcolm X supports violence and King defends nonviolence—both encouraged their followers to think about violence and nonviolence in strategic and ethical terms, inviting critical reflection about when violence could be necessary and justified to secure the liberation of the oppressed. What's more, both understood the strategic role conflict—in both its violent and nonviolent forms—plays in liberation. Both understood that conflict as disruption is necessary for peace. Both realized that the struggle against injustice requires a complex series of judgments and actions that involve combining one's commitment to fundamental values with practical concerns over strategic and tactical efficacy, often in rapidly changing contexts where the outcome is unclear.

In “The Ballot or the Bullet,” we find Malcolm X at a point in his life when he is thinking seriously about what kinds of institutional safeguards need to be in place for the Black nationalism movement in the United States to consider accepting American democracy as viable. Malcolm X had long advocated for Black economic self-sufficiency, pride for African Americans, and Black separatism within the U.S. political community as a response to white racial prejudice and the gap between American democratic ideals and the reality of American culture, society, politics, and economics. This Black nationalist project, for Malcolm X, always required self-defensive violence against white supremacy. In “The Ballot or the Bullet,” he links this Black struggle to a global human rights movement where Black, Brown, and formerly colonized people around the world stand in solidarity with each other, willing to mobilize their global might in defense of their collective human rights. The United Nations, by this light, offered one path forward, as a forum for highlighting American perfidy and hypocrisy. The clear implication is

that the UN should consider the United States a site for human rights intervention. The contemporary version of this argument is to suggest that an intervention based on the UN Responsibility to Protect is required to defend traditionally marginalized communities from human rights violations within the United States, since social, political, and economic systems have proven insufficient or complicit.

Both King and Malcolm X clearly saw nonviolence and the ballot as desirable means and ends, respectively. Both saw conflict as a potential resource for destabilizing the convenient truths of the white majority, even if they differed on the uses of violence. Rereading King and Malcolm X helps us to see that calls for nonviolence suggest tactics that increase conflict. Shedding fresh light on this history also reminds us that King and Malcolm X saw the struggle for the abolition of poverty, for Black liberation, and for civil and human rights in the United States within a global context. If we want to talk about “ideas in action,” we must find and build links with local grassroots efforts as well as global justice movements and movements for decolonization.<sup>3</sup>

What is more, this framing of King and Malcolm X forces the recognition that conflict avoidance means siding with the status quo, siding with systems of injustice, and giving up on peace and justice. The same reckoning is happening worldwide, as societies everywhere face similar challenges over how to confront violence, injustice, and disenfranchisement.

Our argument is clear: Struggles for peace require conflict.

\* \* \*

Struggles for peace create challenges. To explore this book’s theme, what we’re calling *wicked problems*, we have invited contributions from activists, educators, scholars, and scholar-practitioners. We asked them a simple question: *What kind of ethical challenges emerge in the course of doing the work that you care the most about?* You are holding their answers in your hand.

This book does not showcase long scholarly works on the nature of ethics as debated in the academy. This book does not canvas a few high-profile case studies on one narrow puzzle or dilemma. Rather, we have sought out reflections on the broad range of ethical quandaries faced in everyday struggles for peace and justice.

Often, the field of peace and conflict studies, as it is normally called today, in fact means something closer to peace and “violence” studies. Nevertheless, the idea of conflict (as disruption) functioning as a generative force for

desirable change is central to some strands of peace practice and theory, a point we address in this introduction. Furthermore, the peace and conflict studies literature has considered the ethics of peacebuilding, transitional justice, and traditional conflict resolution. In particular, scholars have focused considerable attention on the ethical dilemmas of specific humanitarian interventions, whether they were justified and whether they achieved their intended outcomes. But interventions—just like negotiations, social movements, and peacebuilding efforts—are undertaken by *people*. Our attention is thus turned to the enduring dilemmas that peace and conflict resolution practitioners face in their everyday work. That is why we set out to hear more voices, about more dilemmas, in more contexts, and across more levels of intervention than is possible in more conventional scholarly books. It is also why this book embraces a heterogeneous range of ethical frameworks, empirical analyses, and perspectives. And that is why many of these short pieces are written in the first person, about a real dilemma faced by a real person, and in real cases where people are trying to show up and make a difference. This book might hail from a field called “peace and conflict studies,” but we believe these stories resonate more broadly and may be relevant to anyone committed to aligning real-time change-oriented action with broader ethical principles.

Writing a book about ethical dilemmas in any field raises several questions, not the least of which are the following: *What is the field? What do we mean by ethics? And what do we mean by a dilemma?* There is a wide range of perspectives about the scope and content of ethical discourse across different domains of this field, especially related to practical and applied ethics, but our intention is not to adopt any one particular conceptualization. Rather, our objective is to depict ethics as an everyday practice that engages practitioners *as a matter of course*. We focus on ethics and dilemmas as practical puzzles experienced by practitioners in the midst of their lives rather than rarified units of philosophical abstraction puzzled over by our peers in academe.

### **Organizing Concepts: Field, Ethics, and Dilemmas in Peace and Conflict Studies**

Let us begin with the question of how to conceptualize peace and conflict studies. We refer to it as a field rather than a traditional discipline because

of its highly heterogeneous nature. The field nevertheless has, we believe, a nexus of shared understandings.<sup>4</sup> By “peace and conflict studies,” we refer to several features of this nexus.

First, we are referring to the broad range of scholarly inquiry concerned with investigating the causes, patterns, and meaning of violence and conflict, as well as the spectrum of responses to mitigate or terminate violence and to prevent its recurrence. This requires examining the many understandings and justifications of peace—some at odds with one another—as well as available approaches and strategies to achieving it. All three of us believe contentious politics and disruptive protests are often required in pursuit of a more just and peaceful society.

Second, this field is interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary. It draws on methods and research from across the social sciences and humanities, and increasingly other disciplines as well. Within this broad definition, there are numerous methodological perspectives and assumptions that underpin research and practice.

Third, the field is explicitly normative in orientation, in particular with its focus on the reduction or elimination of avoidable human suffering and harm and the promotion and sustainment of peace. To generate knowledge in this field is to take sides.

Fourth, and important for our purposes, the field has a strong connection to practice. By “practice” we mean concrete action to reduce or eliminate harm and to enhance human flourishing. These efforts involve an enormous number of formal and informal actors, from the grassroots to the global. That’s why many of the contributors to this volume are practitioners.

Fifth, the field has a complex genealogy. Peace and conflict studies draws on historical lineages that intersect in some places while diverging in others. Here we cannot provide a comprehensive history of the field—others have done so already<sup>5</sup>—but we can emphasize the oft-overlooked: this field has been deeply informed by popular social movements, whether they be against war and state repression, colonialism and anticolonialism, inequality and poverty, or discrimination and cultural destruction.

Finally, academic programs have played a crucial role as incubators of peace research and have developed a large body of scholarly knowledge. There is now also a large “professional” class of peace practitioners based in international organizations like the UN and the European Union, civil society non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and social movements, governments, think tanks and academic programs. The significant experience of this

professional class has resulted in a sophisticated corpus of theoretical, technical and applied knowledge in areas like conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and development. However, this technical and increasingly institutional expertise must also be tempered with the rich and varied practical knowledge and strategies developed by peace activists, honed through years of engagement in the streets, in community centers, in the courts, and in the halls of political and economic power.

Peace and conflict studies, then, consists of research, teaching, and practice in a constellation of related areas. Today these include alternative dispute resolution, antiracism work, civil rights advocacy, civil society building, collective action, contentious politics, counterterrorism, dispute resolution, genocide and atrocity prevention, human rights, human security, humanitarian intervention and response, international law, mediation, negotiation, nonviolent direct action, peace education, peacebuilding, postconflict stability and reconstruction, reconciliation, refugee and displaced persons advocacy and support, religious peace traditions, restorative justice, social justice, social movements, sustainable development, transitional justice, trauma healing, and victim advocacy, among many others.

The field is significantly richer because of these and numerous other intellectual and activist traditions, while simultaneously it has been challenged by perspectives like feminism and postcolonial and decolonial theory, which have deepened critical analyses of the field's sometimes limited normative foundations and values.<sup>6</sup> The most famous of the field's limitations, and the subject of numerous essays and books, is referred to as the "liberal peacebuilding" paradigm, which emphasizes expert knowledge and international organizations over local knowledge and community, and teleologically positions free markets and liberal democracy as the universal path toward peace.<sup>7</sup> Many of these enduring dilemmas can be seen, for example, in the contested history of the U.S. government's U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP). Where some see the USIP as a champion of the world's most promising peace practitioners, others see it as an agent of neocolonialism that stifles peace practitioners who do not support the liberal peace paradigm; and where some see it as a counter to the influence of militarism in U.S. foreign policy, others consider it to be a part of the U.S. national security apparatus.<sup>8</sup>

Where there is depth and dynamism, there is also debate. This is especially evident in scholarly, practitioner, and policy disagreements over how to intercede to stop ongoing armed conflicts, which are characterized by a range of assumptions and analytical paradigms that are occasionally in tension

with one another. Earlier approaches emphasized conflict regulation,<sup>9</sup> and later conflict management, to underscore the urgent need of containing ongoing violence as the primary and immediate aim of peace negotiators.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, scholars in peace and conflict studies have come to understand that conflict is a normal and necessary aspect of social life—something that philosophers long ago termed “agonism,” or *ἀγών* in ancient Greek, meaning a kind of conflict that is productive and leads to positive, more just, and more peaceful changes to social systems. Karl Marx understood this and considered violent conflict to be a perfectly ethical engine of social change.<sup>11</sup> Jane Addams understood this and argued peaceful, constructive conflict was necessary for social justice.<sup>12</sup> Ella Baker understood this and saw that peaceful struggle was necessary for civil rights. King and Malcolm X understood that conflict was necessary for freedom.<sup>13</sup>

Across peace and conflict studies, approaches that consider conflict as something to be contained or managed have been criticized not only for their relatively narrow focus but also for bracketing out important structural conditions and drivers of violence. As our colleague Kevin Avruch notes, even the names we use to delimit the field carry “deep moral and political assumptions about the nature of people and the world.”<sup>14</sup> Terms such as “conflict regulation” and “conflict management” encourage us “to adopt a realist or neorealist position about the nature of conflict and potentials for inducing change,” which leads us to assume that the deep causes of a conflict are “beyond our reach, untouchable, located in human nature or the very nature of the conflict system.”<sup>15</sup> As a result, those who define the field in terms of regulation or management aim “to achieve balance, stability or deterrence, and not much more.”<sup>16</sup>

When the Australian academic and public servant John Burton proposed the term “conflict resolution” in opposition to “regulation” or “management,” he did so as a way of grounding an explicit moral critique of the practical implications of the state and power-centered perspectives on conflict that dominated traditional international relations, as well as the settlement-oriented goals of mediation and alternative dispute resolution.<sup>17</sup> To seek to regulate, manage, mediate, or negotiate conflict, in Burton’s view, is to ignore the possibility of resolution.

When our colleague John Paul Lederach, in turn, advanced “conflict transformation” as an alternative, he intended it to be an implicit moral critique of what he saw as the limited aspirations of Burton’s conception.<sup>18</sup> The goal of conflict transformation, as opposed to resolution, would be not merely to



resolve a conflict but to fundamentally change the social relationships between enemies and build lasting reconciliation, even while accepting certain forms of conflict and disagreement as elements of a healthy social life.<sup>19</sup> This would require looking beyond cases of large-scale armed conflict or the role of elites. We must also examine how violence and conflict may permeate all levels of society—how it is *experienced*.

In the early 2000s Lisa Schirch, a professor and practitioner, proposed that the field be known as “peacebuilding,” arguing that Lederach’s theoretical conception of conflict transformation could be further expanded.<sup>20</sup> Peacebuilding would involve both structural and systemic changes within a conflict and entail interventions by various kinds of actors, both external and domestic, into those conflict settings, most often in postviolence contexts. Other scholar-practitioners have developed concepts like “justpeace,” a term meant to capture how justice and peace are inextricably linked—and thus inseparable—requiring that policies and strategies advancing peace be oriented toward a more capacious and integrated understanding of justice.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, in African American political traditions, pastor and scholar Beverly Goines reminds us, “peace is an ambiguous term when it comes to the experience of black people in the United States.”<sup>22</sup> While conceptions of social justice and negative peace have been adopted and used throughout the field of peace and conflict studies, these concepts were first developed by thinkers like Martin Luther King Jr., Ida Wells, and Marcus Garvey—thinkers whose ideas were forged in relationship with social action. By the turn of the twentieth century, Goines writes, the peace movement in the United States focused on educating the masses, Christianizing and modernizing people around the globe, and promoting the scientific study of international disputes. From the perspective of Black Americans and people of color, Goines continues, these early formations of the peace movement and peace and conflict studies were based on a definition of peace that was elitist, where “the oppressor has to assume that the oppressed are either ‘happy’ if the oppressed are not actively making their distress known, or that the oppressed have acquiesced to whatever ideology that is used to legitimize their inferior human status.”<sup>23</sup> This was the “negative peace” that King wrote about in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”—a kind of peace “espoused by white moderates that prioritizes ‘order’ over a ‘positive peace which is the presence of justice.’”<sup>24</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, Goines continues, linked war and peace with the problems of democracy, while activist Paul Robeson understood that peace and freedom were connected “and saw the Afro-American people’s

quest for social justice as the way to address both issues.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, in the tradition of Black thought, one might say that social justice includes peace, where social justice signifies positive peace *plus* freedom. For Black people or any oppressed people, Goines concludes, peace and justice are therefore inseparable—and, in fact, conflict is necessary for achieving social justice.

Taking Goines’ critique seriously, we therefore argue that the “peace and conflict” field would benefit enormously from a more thorough theoretical engagement with the notion of agonism, and a more visible practical engagement with generative conflict tactics and strategies as paths toward social justice. Conflict is always a tool, but only sometimes a weapon. It belongs in the peacebuilder’s toolkit.

### Ethics, Dilemmas, and Wicked Problems

Each of these conceptions about what the field *is* carries explicit assumptions about *what* constitutes practice in that field and *how* to best pursue this work. These assumptions, therefore, bring with them an unavoidable additional ethical critique about the way conflict should be thought about and acted upon. As a consequence, engaging with conflict as a scholar, practitioner, or scholar-practitioner is always a value-laden endeavor. Taking action means taking risks, and perhaps taking sides. Regardless of whether one seeks to regulate, manage, resolve, or transform conflicts, to build peace, or to enhance social justice, one inevitably does this in order to reduce harm and do good.<sup>26</sup> Questions of ethics arise immediately.

In theory, the question of ethics in peace work is straightforward: *ethics* involves *developing a coherent system of normative principles to examine and inform actions that recognize or advance human dignity and well-being, or that otherwise minimize or end human suffering*. Ethical conduct therefore concerns applying these principles to guide our actions.

In practice, however, the situation is much more complex. Practitioners are often confronted by decisions where there is no obviously correct or best choice of what to do. If the intention is to “do good,” whose good counts? How does one prioritize and judge between competing perspectives on the good? And how does one know how to act and when to act? The defining feature of *dilemmas* is that they arise because *dire situations may demand some form of response, but often all of the options may incur undesirable consequences of some form or another*. Dilemmas are not merely ordinary

problems. Whereas problems admit of some solution, dilemmas are constitutively defined by circumstances that allow for only suboptimal outcomes. Dilemmas are wicked problems, or problems whose *causes and consequences are so inextricably intertwined that one can't understand them, let alone cope with them, separately.*<sup>27</sup>

How should peace and conflict studies address wicked ethical problems that arise in the field? Much of the existing scholarly literature either focuses on highly abstract questions about agency and responsibility or focuses narrowly on a specific set of circumstances, such as the venerable “just war” tradition, which provides moral guidance on whether and how to fight wars. The UN’s Responsibility to Protect norm, itself firmly rooted in just war thinking, has widened that discussion somewhat to evaluate under what conditions external military intervention is morally and legally permissible to stop severe human rights violations. For those readers in the Global North, think back to Malcolm X’s “The Ballot or the Bullet” and consider this question: How many people in your social circles who tend to support UN interventions in countries across the Global South would *also* support UN interventions on behalf of the rights of minorities in their own country? On behalf of French Algerians in the suburbs of Paris? On behalf of migrants kept in cages, forcibly separated from their children, on the southern border of the United States? On behalf of detainees who remain, for decades, in Guantánamo Bay?

But ethical dilemmas appear in many other dimensions of peace work, beyond the international realm of conflict management, peacebuilding, transitional justice, and human rights. The details will vary across cases and circumstances, but in schematic form we can identify ethical dilemmas as concerning:

*Actors:* The presence of many actors with a stake in a conflict can raise numerous challenges. For instance, who should be recognized to speak for and in the interest of victims, especially where privileging one group risks sidelining others? Under what circumstances is it morally defensible to work with major agents or enablers of violence, and what are the trade-offs involved? How should the needs and desires of multiple victim groups be balanced when they are in tension? Who decides?

*Values:* When values are in conflict, such as the immediate end of direct violence versus long-term justice, how does one decide which values to support? How should values and efficacy of outcome be balanced? What criteria should one use to justify these decisions?

*Motives:* It is commonplace to argue that ethical action requires ethical motives, but the latter are often insufficient for success. How important should motives be for assessing the ethical integrity of action? How much weight should be given to ethically sound motives over, say, efficacy of outcome? Conversely, what if the driving motives of actions are not wholly ethically defensible, though the outcome is desirable? How are motivations linked to interests, preferences, values, and goals?

*Actions:* Even when motivations are defensible, how does one choose among competing options that each may have problematic or otherwise unforeseen consequences? What is the proper balance between reformist approaches, which may be based on piecemeal, steady, and cumulative change, and radical approaches, which may push sharp, disruptive, and intentionally unsettling strategies, even if nonviolent? And when, if ever, is violence a legitimate means of resistance or of bringing about change?

*Time frames:* How should one balance the needs of the present with the needs of the future, especially when they are at odds or when the long-term consequences of possible actions are unclear? Similarly, how should one balance demands for accountability for past transgressions with the needs of the present or future?

These broad analytical quandaries and categories help frame the complexity of specific dilemmas as they emerge. They also represent a significant theme across contributions to this volume. As Elizabeth Hume and Jessica Baumgardner-Zuzik discuss in their chapter, throughout the field there is relatively little by way of sustained reflection, empirical data, or ethical guidelines that would help one navigate wicked ethical problems. We hasten to note that the field of humanitarianism, which involves using emergency aid to alleviate ongoing severe human suffering, is an exception with an especially rich tradition of ethical reflection. That tradition informs peace work, and it serves as an important starting point for the reflections in this volume.

A core element of modern humanitarianism is found in peace scholar Mary Anderson's articulation of the "Do no harm" principle, which established that *ethical humanitarian action must be judged primarily by its consequences and not only its intentions*; to do no harm is to ensure that an action must not contribute to greater suffering or danger for the targeted civilian population. This principle was animated by concerns that humanitarian aid and relief could, under many conditions, cause or prolong conflicts, which

led to more suffering than relief.<sup>28</sup> Thus, for Anderson, “Do no harm” served as a clear answer to a pressing ethical dilemma she and others in the humanitarian and development fields faced in their daily work.

Of course, one should not place people in danger as a consequence of one’s actions, and therefore one should think carefully about which activities have the potential to cause harm and how much risk is justified. Yet, as Agnieszka Paczyńska and Susan Hirsch have noted, “do no harm” is often insufficiently precise for informing practice and may prove incapacitating in circumstances where any action carries adverse consequences. Crucially, not acting is itself a form of action—it too carries consequences. In response to the limitations of “Do no harm,” Hugo Slim has argued that “the call to do good is a much more positive professional motivation than the more censorious call to avoid doing harm,” while Larissa Fast has explored the concomitant dangers aid workers face in carrying out their work.<sup>29</sup>

Humanitarianism largely focuses on the alleviation of current suffering and the protection of civilians in immediate danger. Its time horizon is intentionally limited in scope to the present and near future. However, wicked problems have impacts that extend beyond immediate harms and that arise in many other contexts of peace work, including longer-term peacebuilding. The question of ethical action may be ambiguous where an external third party—such as a peacebuilding or economic development organization—is financed by international organizations and governments that have material interests in promoting peace or social change. Because peacebuilding “entails the most intensive and wide-ranging intervention by others into the conflict system (society or culture),”<sup>30</sup> peacebuilding is among the most ethically fraught areas of practice in the peace and conflict studies field.

Especially problematic is the occasional unwillingness of third-party peacebuilders to reflect on the connection between their own moral values and the values, goals, and interests of the governments, organizations, and institutions for which they work.<sup>31</sup> The prevailing institutional arrangements across the world—i.e., which donor countries and global NGOs mobilize in service of peacebuilding work—were largely created in reference to the economic and political arrangements of nation-states and therefore “‘morally’ exclude sub-national groups from articulating their ethical claims against nation-states in [an] internationally and legally sanctioned forum.”<sup>32</sup> Peacebuilding work, no matter how self-consciously and ethically designed, often points normatively toward the goal of state-building, which in turn may entail the suppression of claims made by subnational groups that view

the state itself, with its monopoly over the instruments of violence, as a party in the conflict.<sup>33</sup>

Indeed, from this vantage point, the principle “Do no harm” is a low bar for ethical standards of practice. In such contexts, Paczyńska and Hirsch remind us, peacebuilders might see themselves as doing good, and certainly not doing harm, yet be unable to reflect upon the content of this good and how it might not be serving the interests of the people they are attempting to help.

Writing from her own experience as a professional working for international organizations, scholar and peacebuilder Reina Neufeldt has proposed an “action-reflection” model to help peacebuilding practitioners think clearly and ethically about the implications of their good interventions.<sup>34</sup> Critical self-reflection along these lines is also necessary within peacebuilding organizations, especially if these organizations want to avoid falling into patterns that have been shown to limit individual members’ ability to reflect ethically. This may include groupthink scenarios or a focus on procedures and process over substantive outcomes.<sup>35</sup> Without a mechanism for such action-reflection, Neufeldt argues, it becomes exceedingly difficult for the peacebuilder to avoid co-optation, to balance donor demands with local integrity, or to decide how to formulate, prioritize, and change goals in shifting contexts.

For Tim Murithi, the ethical practice of peacebuilding must also admit the moral validity of actors who are not considered worthy of having their voices heard within state-centric institutions, even when this means morally validating those who use violence as a means of addressing their interests in a conflict.<sup>36</sup> From Murithi’s perspective, ethical reflection requires peacebuilders to include all human groups in the moral vision of a peace process, without demanding that individuals give up their group affiliation as a prerequisite for moral standing. The issue of ethics and leadership and the enduring dilemmas that arise in the practice of peacebuilding, Murithi argues, center around dilemmas like navigating trade-offs between accepting violent actors and denouncing violence; operationalizing positive peace without compromising the principles of justice and democratic inclusion; accepting victims’ experiences without allowing victims to “other” their former perpetrators; and balancing competing claims for justice with an understanding that it is often the marginalized and the weak within the power structure of society who are problematically expected to do the forgiving and reconciling. Pamina Firchow’s important work on “everyday peace” also

captures the pressing need for returning authority and agency to the communities most affected by violence rather than assuming a univalent, universal understanding of peace can be implemented in any context.<sup>37</sup>

## Themes and Dilemmas

With this book we have set out to dramatically expand the conversation about ethical dilemmas. We have done this by including more voices from a wider range of change-oriented action than is usually considered to be part of the peace and conflict studies field. Our reasoning is simple: the field is larger than many recognize. This is clear, if provocative: inequality and racism in the United States and the Global North are peace and conflict studies issues; debate over the legitimacy of violence, anywhere in the world, is a peace and justice issue; debates over policing and the state, anywhere in the world, are peace and justice issues; collective action and contentious politics, anywhere in the world, are peace and justice issues. It is important to ask ethics-oriented questions about the outcomes of foreign interventions, of course. It is crucial that we develop tools that build a better world for everyone rather than hectoring and “helping” others elsewhere. In talking about ethics of action, then, the lessons are for all of us and wherever we work for change.

### Section I: Violence

The book’s first section returns to the wicked problem that started this chapter: the role of violence. There is a broad and long-standing consensus that nonviolence is the most ethical approach to social change, an argument built off the pioneering thought and action of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. This deep consensus about ethics has recently been joined by a compelling argument for the efficacy of nonviolence. Political scientists Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan have drawn on an impressive array of data to argue that nonviolence is, on average, a more effective tactic for social change.<sup>38</sup> Say what you will about ethics, they argue, strategic nonviolence is more likely to work. Their work is as groundbreaking as it is compelling, requiring a fresh round of theorizing about the role of violence as tactic and strategy. Indeed, social action in the wake of this ethical-tactical consensus raises new wicked problems.

Tony Gaskew, writing as both a scholar and a former police officer, steps into this conversation with a provocative argument: African Americans have little choice but to use violence to protect themselves against systematic state repression. Gaskew's argument for armed self-defense explicitly takes on the tradition of Black nonviolent resistance as ineffective and too accommodating, noting that armed resistance has long been an important feature of the civil rights movement. This contribution covers a range of ethical dilemmas in the American context and provides an important—if potentially uncomfortable—statement on responding to injustice. His call to arms, as it were, is all the more salient in the current American context. We write in the midst of a broad-based and nonviolent radical justice movement, in the form of Black Lives Matter. We also write in the midst of a strident and violent response, in the form of widespread tear-gassing, detainments, and beatings by the police and federal law enforcement, violent assaults and shootings by armed right-wing vigilante groups, and numerous racist attacks.

Writing from the heart of the contemporary Poor People's Campaign, Liz Theoharis and Noam Sandweiss-Back argue that America's recent history is "bloodied with examples" of how government positions create unlivable conditions for the poor in the United States, the richest country in the world, that are nothing less than "violence of the highest order." From the Great Recession of 2008, "the very speculators and financial institutions that were responsible for the devastating crash were bailed out" by the Obama administration, and twelve years later, in March 2020, "the Federal Reserve materialized over a trillion dollars to buoy Wall Street in the days immediately following the COVID-19 shutdown." Meanwhile, the U.S. government offered "threadbare and temporary support to most citizens and completely lock[ed] out millions in undocumented communities, homeless encampments, prisons, and more." The U.S. death toll from the COVID-19 pandemic grew to nearly 900,000 while this book was under review. Poor, minority, and marginalized communities have suffered the most. Notably, the suffering comes in two forms, from the disease itself and from a shredded social safety net, seemingly designed to bail out only the wealthiest. Nonviolent mass social awakening, Theoharis and Sandweiss-Back insist, is the only way these systems of violence can be undone.

Nonviolence raises its own ethical dilemmas, political scientist Kirssa Cline Ryckman suggests: while there is no ethical justification for violence, unchecked state repression may put additional activist lives at risk. Violence, Ryckman argues, should not be a proactive strategy, but may be a tactic of last



resort. This approach has the effect of pitting two ethical positions against one another: the tactical and Gandhian commitment to nonviolence advanced by Chenoweth and Theoharis and Sandweiss-Back on one side and the fundamental commitment to the survival and self-preservation advanced by Gaskew on the other.

Ashley Bohrer, a philosopher with a long history of political activism, completes the section with an important set of reflections on the trade-offs between reformist efforts to work within the political system and revolutionary pursuit of deep transformational change through a more confrontational posture, even while remaining peaceful. Bohrer moves beyond the standard academic (and often reductive) frame of “reform or transform” to explore how both approaches can be used strategically, depending on circumstances, while also noting the inherent tensions that this draws out.

What this section makes clear, yet again, is the tension baked into the dual pursuit of peace and justice. What are the practical implications of tactical nonviolence and of self-defense? How shall we think about the interplay between these two commitments? What impact does the theory have in shaping personal action and social movement strategy? These are important questions, and getting the answers right is crucial for both means and ends.

## Section II: Leadership and Organizations

From a specific tactic, our attention shifts to the role of leadership and alliances in ethical action. For Minh Dang, ethical representation as a leader is especially fraught in movements that seek to integrate the voices of those most affected by injustice. A survivor of human trafficking and now head of the UK-based antitrafficking network Survivor Alliance, Dang lays out the challenges of building a justice movement among survivors who have myriad economic and political needs and demands, while also resisting dehumanization, “pedestalization,” and tokenization from the wider public and media. Dang concludes with steps for concrete, tactical alliances, support for lived experience expertise, and sustained pressure for the reform of the laws and practices that facilitate human trafficking. While acknowledging that these wicked problems might not be completely overcome, her discussion of the practical ways in which leaders can ameliorate them resonates with Bohrer’s chapter on moving beyond simple revolution/reform binaries.

University president and social movement scholar Daniel Myers considers the role of allies in leadership positions, offering his personal history of leadership activism as an ally to the movement for LGBTQ rights. Myers identifies a number of important roles that allies can play, such as cultivating support from broader audiences, but he also underscores a host of knotty challenges, including those related to identity, representation, authenticity, and voice, asking, in essence, *Who ought to speak for whom?*

Scholars have long known that a successful movement requires, among other things, adequate material resources to survive setbacks and to have a long-term impact. alicia sanchez gill, an organizer with the Black radical feminist network INCITE! and now a philanthropy activist, examines how funding from influential donors can play a pivotal role in activism while also introducing risks, including the co-optation of the mission, the sidelining of experiential knowledge and activist voices, and the dilution of the core message. Her chapter is enriched with contributions provided by other activist leaders, including Darakshan Raja of the Justice for Muslims Collective, Janis Rosheuvel with Solidaire, Donald Anthonyson with Families for Freedom, Zuri C. Tau of Liberatory Research and Social Insights Research, Latishia James-Portis, a chaplain and peace facilitator, and Travis Akil-Brookes and Nicole Newman, organizers in Washington, D.C. Each shares a grassroots perspective on profound ethical dilemmas that leadership presents in community organizing, direct action, and social movement work.

Longtime conflict resolution facilitator and now scholar Philip Gamaghelyan explores another angle to the challenges of leadership and activism. Drawing on the work of science fiction authors Ursula K. Le Guin and N. K. Jemisin, who have long engaged with justice issues in their work, Gamaghelyan identifies a range of political actors: those who acquiesce to injustice, those who leave, and the ones who “stay and fight.” The latter group often faces significant challenges, including the dilemma of navigating both domestic pressures from a repressive state and well-meaning but overwhelming influence from outside allies. Gamaghelyan uses his experiences from across the South Caucasus to explore the ethical trade-offs in alliance building in these complex situations.

Reina Neufeldt, a peacebuilder and scholar, explores how individual unwillingness to examine core values can provide unmerited justification for certain policies and prevent important and thoughtful deliberation with affected parties. She concludes with several recommendations for promoting

ethical reflection and humility in peacebuilding, which in turn can democratize leadership opportunities.

### Section III: Systems and Institutions

Powerful institutions shape the peacebuilding terrain. They act as catalysts for change, and they also create obstacles and challenges. Peacebuilding institutions themselves create and sustain dilemmas. The book's third and final section highlights a few of these dilemmas through a number of carefully selected case studies.

Deena R. Hurwitz directly engages the lived-experience dilemmas that emerge from working alongside vulnerable communities. Hurwitz's work on human rights advocates and lawyers—who work in places where the rule of law is compromised, whether in a country ruled by a dictator or an ostensibly liberal democracy governed by national security imperatives or military law—presents a number of ethical dilemmas that arise when advocates encounter the manipulation of law for political ends. These are “dilemmas of personal conscience and of professional responsibility, of moral accountability and complicity—and how that is defined, by and for whom,” she writes. What happens when a vulnerable local partner asks a human rights lawyer or advocate to carry sensitive documents, letters, notes, or photographs? How forthright should one be with the security forces and border personnel of a rights-abusing state? Should one answer truthfully as a matter of principle, although it may compromise the safety of colleagues, clients, friends? Should one respond with false information? Or should one be evasive or give partial information? Hurwitz's questions strike at the core of two major themes of this book so far, as those seeking social change balance the well-being of the vulnerable people they hope to serve with the realities of state violence and the constraints of oppressive institutions.

George Lopez, a scholar and former member of the UN expert panel on sanctions on North Korea, and Beatrix Geaghan-Breiner, a student of international relations, explore the normative issues surrounding the contemporary uses of economic sanctions in international politics, which raise complex ethical questions because of their often profound economic impact on civilians. In principle, sanctions are used to compel repressive states to change their violent behavior, but as the authors note, shorn of specific and clear evaluative criteria and benchmarks, sanctions can exacerbate civilian

suffering. At its most basic, the wicked problem is whether it is worth inflicting new harms in order to end ongoing harms. Lopez and Geaghan-Breiner use the case of U.S. sanctions against Venezuela to develop a norm of the “responsibility to restore” targeted economies in critical areas. They conclude by outlining the various practitioner and scholarly tasks needed to bring this to fruition.

Ernesto Verdeja turns to the wicked problems at the heart of international mass atrocity prevention work, today characterized by a complex assortment of human rights NGOs, governments, and regional actors like the UN, African Union (AU), EU, and many other institutions. Drawing on interviews with practitioners, prior scholarship, and his own experiences in prevention practice, Verdeja sketches a general ethical framework for atrocity prevention. This exercise highlights key ethical dilemmas, including challenges concerning representation (who speaks for the vulnerable?), practical issues around the use of force to protect civilians, and the question of compromising with perpetrators in order to stop massacres. Verdeja concludes with a set of general reflective guidelines that help limit the scope of these dilemmas, even if they cannot be eliminated.

Mediation scholar Laurie Nathan’s contribution extends this discussion, focusing on dilemmas that arise in mediating armed conflict between violent states, insurgents, and external actors like the UN and the AU. Nathan is a scholar, as well as a longtime conflict mediator with the UN and AU, and here he examines how mediation efforts often require compromises with armed groups that can leave accountability and justice demands off the table. Exploring AU mediation efforts in Côte d’Ivoire (2010–2011), Libya (2011) and Syria (2011–2018), Nathan characterizes the trade-offs between securing immediate peace and protection of civilians and the long-term pursuit of justice as fundamentally a “situational incompatibility of good norms,” where a hard choice is required among norms that are both desirable and, in different circumstances, generally compatible.

For example, even if peacebuilders can identify criteria for deciding when to respond to violence against civilians, there is still the question of how to respond. Felicity Gray, a scholar of international peacekeeping, notes that most civilian protection programs—including those of the UN and AU—rely on the use of armed peacekeepers, based on the logic that a credible threat of retaliation will dissuade would-be perpetrators from harming civilians. Gray identifies limitations with this status quo and offers instead a *nonviolent civilian protection approach* that is rooted in a wide range of nonviolence

practices and strategies. The goal is to reduce overall levels of harm and threat. This more extensive and integrated approach allows Gray to explore the alternative set of dilemmas that may emerge were this approach to be adopted. It is a provocative and thoughtful chapter that, by essentially putting the Responsibility to Protect literature into conversation with the strategic nonviolence literature, goes against the dominant trend of international civilian protection practice.

The contribution of South Africa-based scholar and practitioner Tim Murithi explores the ethical dilemmas surrounding transitional justice. Transitional justice itself might be best thought of as a wicked problem, since it involves thinking about how societies moving away from authoritarianism or armed conflict to peace and democratic rule reckon with legacies of violence and impunity. Murithi's extensive work in the South African transition and across Africa provides him with a vantage point to examine profound problems in a number of contexts. These include questions of how to balance possibly divisive demands for accountability and economic redistribution with calls for societal reconciliation, which may happen at the expense of victims and historically marginalized groups. Murithi's chapter notes how these dilemmas become especially acute when incoming political leaders are constrained in their ability to address the past. A failure to look back may limit the use of institutions like truth and reconciliation commissions to engage with issues of justice, reconciliation, and trauma.

We conclude this section with observations on the dilemmas arising in two institutions that represent where most of our authors and many of our readers are based: NGOs and the academy. Elizabeth Hume and Jessica Baumgardner-Zuzik of the Alliance for Peacebuilding (AfP) rightly note the need for rigorous research in crafting viable and effective peacebuilding programs. The AfP is a central player in modern peacebuilding, with over 120 member organizations from across the humanitarian aid and development worlds, as well major academic research institutions. Hume, AfP's executive director, and Baumgardner-Zuzik, the senior director of learning and evaluation at AfP, are especially concerned with research that privileges technical mastery and methodological sophistication while ignoring issues of context, the rights and moral standing of research subjects (including vulnerable civilians), and asymmetric power relations. Their chapter lays out a set of practical guidelines for ethically informed research that underscores the need for conflict sensitivity, protections for vulnerable research populations, and clearer standards for program design, implementation, and monitoring.

Finally, the academy. Typically, discussions about ethical action in peacebuilding focus on questions of policy choice and implementation, mobilization tactics and strategies, and research ethics for program and policy development. However, the education of future peacebuilders is itself a critical ethical decision point, one that may have long-term effects on an individual's understanding of and conduct in the world. Peace and conflict scholars Agnieszka Paczyńska and Susan F. Hirsch bring these issues to the fore in their examination of the ethical dilemmas surrounding teaching about violence and peace in conflict zones, whether in our own communities or in faraway locales. Drawing on the increasingly common use of experiential learning and field-based courses, Paczyńska and Hirsch discuss how students with strong normative commitments but limited understanding of the world find their assumptions challenged and questioned in the field, where problems and possible solutions are much more complex than they may have expected. The authors highlight a host of wicked problems and provide concrete suggestions on how to make field courses more ethically reflective, noting the importance of consent, inclusivity, and listening to local voices. The result is an approach that underscores the value of field experience while also encouraging humility and awareness of the claims and agency of local actors. These dilemmas and responses are relevant well beyond the academy, as they apply to any field-based efforts, whether undertaken by researchers or activists.

### Crosscutting Themes: Identity and Inequality

Reading across these three sections suggests that identity and inequality are recurring. It is clear to any contemporary reader that inequality and identity are critical rallying points for dynamic and emergent social action. We would like to take a moment here to further argue that these are two areas where the peace and conflict field simply must catch up with activity on the ground. As male editors in the Global North, and with our own positionalities and identities, we emphasize intersectional issues related to the ethics of peace, rights, and justice work that occur in the context of strategic nonviolence, activism, and contentious politics, in the dilemmas of leadership and organizations, and in efforts to change systems and institutions. A number of essays prompt reflection on gender and the politics of sexuality, while taking the principles of intersectionality as a given. We might say there are any number of

positionalities at play in the book, as these essays take up questions of gender roles in movements and gender conflicts through issues of race, class, culture, ethnicity, sexuality, and many others.

Nathan, Murithi, Hume and Baumgardner-Zuzik, and Paczyńska and Hirsch thread issues of gender mainstreaming into their discussions of the ethics of movement leadership, peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and critical pedagogies. And it is not for nothing that Theoharis and Sandweiss-Back frame their discussion of the poor people's movement through the words not of the oft-quoted Martin Luther King Jr. but of Coretta Scott King, whose unique positionality as a Black woman and a public figure married to a civil rights icon is deeply entwined with the emergence of her own distinct, but often overlooked, political philosophy.

For Bohrer—whose chapter sets out not to chart a set of gendered ethical dilemmas in social justice movement work but rather to highlight competing options for movement activists weighing prefigurative and harm-reduction approaches to social movement work—the path to a politics that can galvanize movements into seeing the radical possibilities of a more just and liberated world is paved by the contrasting ideas of Audre Lorde and Serene Khader. Where Lorde provides a philosophy that helps activists avoid replicating oppressive structures, Khader suggests resistance strategies should be assessed on their efficacy. From these two contrasting visions of feminist theory, Bohrer extracts a set of provocative and invaluable questions that movement leaders must ask themselves about institutions that have largely been built by and for men from dominant classes, castes, ethnicities, and religions.

Scholar and organizer Dang focuses directly on the gendered dilemmas faced by movement leaders. Drawing on her experience leading one of the few survivor-led NGOs dedicated to empowering survivors of slavery and human trafficking, Dang argues that lived experience expertise is essential for social movements, but that survivors face a “double bind.” How should survivors of sexual or gender violence bring their experience to the movement when this leadership and advocacy exposes the individual to the male-centric social gaze that permeates wider society and that constantly generates narratives that reduce the agency of survivor-activists to the “gory details” of their past experiences? A second dilemma, Dang argues, emerges if we are to take seriously standpoint epistemology—the fact that what we see and know is based on who we are and where we stand. The challenge is clear: how to cultivate crucial movement allies from

communities that lack the unique perspective that comes from lived experience of human trafficking. These dilemmas also emerge *within* survivor movements, she writes, making it all the more important for cisgendered women like herself to explicitly look for opportunities to empathize and educate themselves about the experiences of survivors who are nonbinary or transgendered women and men.

Myers picks up the question of gender identities and the perceived legitimacy of allies in leadership roles of organizations. Reflecting on his experiences as a lifelong activist for LGBTQ rights, Myers unpacks his time as an “ally in leadership” for Queer Nation during his years as a student, and how these experiences helped him understand how to be a better ally. Legitimacy in social movements depends heavily on endorsement from the community, Myers writes, and such endorsements depend, in turn, on identity markers. In the context of LGBTQ rights movements, these identity markers are necessarily gendered. Because the Queer Nation movement needed people to claim their identities as queer folks, Myers writes, having straight leaders with gender markers of privilege and advantage would have undermined the purpose of a social movement designed to empower and defend the rights of those whose gender identity markers rendered them marginalized and oppressed within a wider society.

Drawing on years of experience as a leader and organizer with INCITE!, a network of radical feminists of color, gill picks up the conversation around the gendered dilemmas of leadership in movement spaces. gill invites a series of essays, in the style of self-reflective narratives, which elevate the stories of leaders who live at the intersections of many marginalized identities. In the crucible of their struggles, gill presents the internal conflicts faced by movement leaders with intersectional identities, as they are confronted with competing needs and demands from the many marginalized groups with whom they identify.

Darakshan Raja’s contribution to gill’s chapter presents the challenges experienced by Muslim women in leftist spaces who face struggles that white and cis-gendered male leaders don’t encounter when confronting state violence, gendered violence, harassment, and the surveillance state that targets Black and Brown Muslim women and femmes.

In their essay, Janis Rosheuvel and Donald Anthonyson unpack many of the inherently gendered dynamics they encounter in the Families for Freedom movement, which was founded to resist the brutality of the mass deportation system that emerged following passage of the “1996 Laws” and



the post-9/11 criminalization of migrant life, and unites members from Black, Asian, Latinx, undocumented, and documented communities.

gill also presents the reflections of Zuri C. Tau, who was spurred to help found an organization, Building Local Organizing for Community Safety, after Atlanta police burst into the home of a grandmother and shot her. For Tau, the burden of this memory—of an old woman, sitting in a neat and clean kitchen, in dignity before a most undignified and inhuman death—has led to a lifetime of doubts and regrets, all of them entangled in questions of positionality and identity: *Did I give up too soon? Did our work mean less because those who were most vulnerable were not the most visible? Were we the right organizers for the fight?*

In her essay Latishia James-Portis, a movement chaplain and facilitator, reverses the lens, looking at regrets and dilemmas not from the perspective of the advocate but from the perspective of movement leaders who are traumatized. What should be done when it is that trauma which sustains involvement in the movement, while simultaneously preventing one from showing up as the person they claim to be?

Nicole Newman's narrative of organizing in Washington, D.C., explores the exhausting toll exacted on individuals when "white folks in organizing and advocacy spaces suddenly see the validity of lived experience and then want to hear from people impacted, though many Black people have been restating the same needs, root causes, and interventions for years." The transactional and performative experiences that many white organizers and white advocates ask of their Black allies require a kind of emotional labor that is itself toxic and exploitative, while entailing a "constant flattening of our experiences and a belief that there is one way to be Black and working class"—which is all too familiar to anyone exposed to the way white narratives have long attempted to make sense of Black lives.

Finally, picking up on these themes of translations, transactions, and performances, gill presents organizer Travis Akil Brookes's reflections on movement masculinities. "Masculinity, masculinity, masculinity. Shit's toxic. I can read, I can go to the workshops, I can have the conversations," Brookes recounts, "but if I'm not giving myself the grace to unlearn masculinity then I'm more of a problem than a 'solution.'" In Brookes's critical reflection of the dynamic between the construction and deconstruction of his masculine self-identity as a movement leader, we find a hard-won awareness that "it was the labor of Black, trans, and queer folk that helped me to see that where I am now, where I was then, and where I will be is all a part of the journey. And if

I'm really about unlearning this shit, then I gotta recognize that I'm going to fall down, I'm going to fail, that I need to center healing, and that I should not do any of this alone—independence is a deeply entrenched belief of masculinity and white supremacy.”

Brookes's lesson that the myth of independence is an entrenched belief in both masculinity and white supremacy reverberates through Gaskew's chapter. In many ways, we can read Gaskew's contribution to this volume as a kind of coming-of-age story. The profound awareness that his life's purpose is to wage war on white supremacy is mediated by an intergenerational passing of the torch from father to son, as Gaskew frames the Black Radical Tradition as both an intergenerational birthright and a spiritual inheritance. To be clear, the Black Radical Tradition is not defined or limited by constructs of gender. Gaskew is not suggesting that it is. Importantly, in his vision this tradition has always been a collective voice for liberation. Contrast this with Brookes's observation that the myth of independence is entrenched in social constructs of masculinity and white supremacy.

The myth that Europeans and Euro-Americans (and “white” people more generally) are a self-sufficient stock, who exalt individual independence as a moral virtue, conceals the fact that the material wealth and concrete power of European and Euro-American societies have been built upon the oppression, exploitation, enslavement, and genocide of tens of millions of fellow human beings.<sup>39</sup> The myth of the self-sufficient white man is epitomized by the idealized image of the frontiersman in the American imagination, but the belief that this ideal white Euro-American man provides for himself and his family through his own hard work with no help from others conceals the core reality that wealth and “independence” depended very much upon land, labor, resources, and life taken from people of color.<sup>40</sup>

Brookes's reflections on his own journey to embrace a wider and more “connected-to-others” gender identity exposes the myth of individualist masculinism as a subtle but pernicious tool of white supremacy. Gaskew's chapter helps us parse the possible responses to the wicked problems Brookes brings up, as both chapters present the reader with blueprints for the abolition of white supremacy that begin with an understanding that one's self is spiritually connected to others. The transitional moment from childhood that Gaskew recalls is, quite explicitly, a rejection of the ideology (and myth) that independence is the measure of a person. In fact, by presenting the essence of the Black Radical Tradition as an intergenerational birthright and a

spiritual inheritance, Gaskew embraces the principle of *interdependence*—not *independence*—as a core moral virtue and a powerful means for liberation.

Wicked problems are present in our philosophies and in our actions, in efforts to change our own communities and to serve strangers in other places, in our strategies and in our tactics, in our budgets, organizational charts, leadership approaches, alliances, and collaborations, and even in our pronouns—who is the “our” we are referring to?

In order to build this volume, we have done our best to highlight a broad range of voices from around the world and from various justice struggles. Some provide more analytically systematic assessments of wicked problems, while others reflect on these big issues with their lived experiences as the starting point. It is our hope that this ecumenical approach brings greater nuance and complexity to assessing these ethical dilemmas. Above all, we hope it expands our ability to take more ethical action.

### Where Do We Go from Here?

*Wicked Problems* provides a number of perspectives that illuminate the extent to which peacebuilding exposes practitioners to complexity. Creativity and critical thinking have never been more important in the peacebuilding space, especially with the growing realization that the world’s problems, and solutions to the world’s problems, are not straightforward, nor is the world divided up into clear binaries of good actors and bad actors, nor domestic and international issues.

*Wicked Problems* highlights efforts to go beyond narrow academic debates to examine the practical opportunities and challenges raised by decision-making dilemmas as they are experienced on the ground. This book can advance scholarship on ethics in a number of academic subfields: international and global studies, peace and conflict studies, justice studies, and human rights. Our larger goal, however, is to enhance feedback between practice and scholarship so practice can inform theory and theory can inform the work of practitioners, advocates, and peacebuilders.

Our second objective is to broaden the tent of who we consider fellow-travelers on the justpeace path, as it were. We believe there is room for anyone committed to the struggle for human rights, social justice, and positive peace,

the last broadly understood as creating sustainable conditions for human flourishing. In fact, one of the reasons we decided to build this book is that, despite our different disciplinary backgrounds—sociology, global affairs, political science—we recognize many similar wicked problems involved in actually *doing* the good work our various academic and movement backgrounds advocate for.

We have a final, and longer-term, objective with this book. Fields of scholarship and practice such as ours are doomed to fail if people around the world begin to think of us as hypocrites, uncritical and naïve do-gooders, or true believers who objectify others and treat individuals unjustly in pursuit of goals we deem morally good. On occasion, people who work for positive social change—whether they are trying to build bridges, pioneer interfaith work in their city, or fight for rights halfway around the world—justify their actions according to the crudest of ends-oriented utilitarian logics. We often consider the dictum “Do no harm” to be the highest of ethical standards, a North Star of sorts. Yet even here we are confronted with a dilemma. Ethicists from almost every tradition and around the world would consider this to be the least you can do, the bare minimum, the smallest of starting points. Meanwhile, activists like King and Gandhi took actions to put individuals into harm’s way for a greater good. Which takes the ethical precedent: the individual or the collective? Your own group members or followers, or others? Oppressors or the oppressed?

Wicked problems indeed.

Whether we are conducting trainings and workshops or on the front lines of peacebuilding, social movements, or other efforts to support social change, we tend to think we’re doing good simply because we’ve shown up and are on the right side of a dichotomy. Reading across this volume helps us to see that it isn’t so simple. Avoiding such pitfalls requires honest and collective self-reflection. This self-reflection, in turn, requires nuanced ethical conversations. We hope this book is a step in the right direction.

## Notes

1. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Beyond Vietnam,” in *A Time to Break the Silence: The Essential Works of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed., Walter Dean Myers (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013), 78.
2. Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet,” in *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, ed. George Breitman, (New York: Grove), 23.

3. See generally Stephen Eric Bronner, *Ideas in Action: Political Tradition in the Twentieth Century* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).
4. See Kevin Avruch, "Does Our Field Have a Centre?," *International Journal of Conflict Engagement and Resolution* 1, no. 1 (2013): 10–31.
5. Avruch, "Does Our Field Have a Centre?"; Louis Kriesberg, "The Development of the Conflict Resolution Field," in *Peacemaking in International Conflict: Methods and Techniques*, ed. I. William Zartman and J. Lewis Rasmussen (Washington D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 1997), 51–77.
6. Victoria Fontan, *Descolonización de la Paz* (Cali: Pontificia Universidad Sello Editorial Javeriano, 2013); Kevin Kester, Michalinos Zembylas, Loughlin Sweeney, Kris Hyesoo Lee, Soonjung Kwon, and Jeongim Kwon, "Reflections on Decolonizing Peace Education in Korea: A Critique and Some Decolonial Pedagogic Strategies," *Teaching in Higher Education*, no. 2 (2019), doi: 10.1080/13562517.2019.1644618; Atalia Omer, "Decolonizing Religion and the Practice of Peace: Two Case Studies from the Postcolonial World," *Critical Research on Religion*, no. 3 (2020), doi:10.1177/2050303220924111.
7. Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh, ed., *Rethinking the Liberal Peace: External Models and Local Alternatives* (London: Routledge, 2011); Roger Mac Ginty, *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance: Hybrid Forms of Peace* (London: Palgrave, 2011); Edward Newman, Roland Paris, and Oliver Richmond, eds., *New Perspectives on Liberal Peacebuilding* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2009).
8. Michael D. English, *The US Institute of Peace: A Critical History* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2018).
9. Paul Wehr, *Conflict Regulation* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1979).
10. Dennis Sandole and Ingrid Sandole-Staroste, eds., *Conflict Management and Problem Solving: Interpersonal to International Applications* (New York: New York University Press, 1987).
11. Lewis A. Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (London: Routledge, 1956).
12. Jane Addams, *Newer Ideals of Peace* (London: Macmillan, 1906).
13. Peniel E. Joseph, *The Sword and the Shield: The Revolutionary Lives of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: Basic Books, 2020).
14. Avruch, "Does Our Field Have a Centre?," 11.
15. Avruch, "Does Our Field Have a Centre?," 11.
16. Avruch, "Does Our Field Have a Centre?," 11.
17. John Burton, *Conflict: Resolution and Prevention* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990).
18. John Paul Lederach, *Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation across Cultures* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995).
19. Avruch, "Does Our Field Have a Centre?," 11.
20. Lisa Schirch, *Ritual and Symbol in Peacebuilding* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 2005). For a defense of the traditional liberal peace, see David Little, "Religion, Peace and the Origins of Nationalism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*, ed. R. Scott Appleby, Atalia Omer, and David Little (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 70–104.

21. Mac Ginty, *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance*; Oliver Richmond, *The Transformation of Peace: Rethinking Peace and Conflict Studies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
22. Beverly Janet Goines, "Social Justice as Peacebuilding in Black Churches: Where Do We Go from Here?" in *Building Peace in America*, ed. Emily Sample and Douglas Irvin-Erickson (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020).
23. Goines, "Social Justice as Peacebuilding in Black Churches," 23.
24. Goines, "Social Justice as Peacebuilding in Black Churches," 23.
25. Goines, "Social Justice as Peacebuilding in Black Churches," 29.
26. Reina C. Neufeldt, *Ethics for Peacebuilders: A Practical Guide* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016).
27. Charles Hauss, *Security 2.0: Dealing with Global Wicked Problems* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).
28. Mary B. Anderson, *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace—or War* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1999).
29. Hugo Slim, *Humanitarian Ethics: A Guide to the Morality of Aid in War and Disaster* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 7; Larissa Fast, *Aid in Danger: The Perils and Promise of Humanitarianism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).
30. Avruch, "Does Our Field Have a Centre?," 11.
31. Neufeldt, *Ethics for Peacebuilders*.
32. Tim Murithi, *The Ethics of Peacebuilding* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 43–70, at 47.
33. Murithi, *Ethics of Peacebuilding*, 161.
34. Neufeldt, *Ethics for Peacebuilders*, 126–128.
35. Neufeldt, *Ethics for Peacebuilders*, 126–128.
36. Murithi, *Ethics of Peacebuilding*, 165.
37. Pamina Firchow, *Reclaiming Everyday Peace: Local Voices in Measurement and Evaluation after War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
38. Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).
39. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).
40. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014). And see Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *Loaded: A Disarming History of the Second Amendment* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2018).