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The Nature of Intractable Conflict surveys the development of the latest ideas on the origins of violent conflict, and the methods for its mitigation and resolution. Christopher Mitchell focuses on the evolution of theory and practice over the past 40 years, and the particular role of creativity and innovation in cultivating new approaches to seemingly intractable conflicts.

The first chapter revisits the age-old nature-versus-nurture debate on the origins of human aggressive tendencies, laying a banal positivist premise to the subject of intractable conflicts. Mitchell acknowledges contemporary perspectives in Psychology that argue that behaviour is a function of genetic predisposition and the environment, and that human nature does not in itself necessarily compel violence and aggression. He counsels, however, that human nature is not infinitely flexible and the range of possible responses are not limitless. Thus, there are empirical patterns and regularities in certain contexts that can be of useful guidance in addressing intractable conflict. Beyond this positivism, however, Mitchell is able to confront the reader with the instrumentality of innate human tendencies, both in its violence and aggression inhibiting behaviour, in situations of conflict and intractability. This chapter, though framed strictly within behavioural and evolutionary psychology, succeeds in opening the issue of conflict as an ontological question in human societies. It is a gateway for readers to explore other domains relevant to political theory and peace studies that inquire into foundational dimensions of conflict embedded within relatively functional societies. Such domains include the works of Chantal Mouffe on conflictual democratic politics, Mario Blaser on anthropology and ontological conflict, Adrian Little on his enduring conflict theory, among others.¹

In chapters two and three, Mitchell outlines the basic structure and development of conflicts, and elaborates these with a conflict typology. In his discussion of Johan Galtung’s seminal concept of the conflict triangle, Mitchell adds the dimension

of goal incompatibilities and the concomitant questions on how and why such incompatibilities arise. A separable aspect of structure is its longitudinal character, pertaining to the development of latent conflicts into mobilisations and organisation of conflict parties (pp. 37–43). The discussion turns to a classification of conflicts based on a variety of criteria, where Mitchell attempts to direct the subject towards an overarching categorisation of tractable and intractable conflicts, and their corresponding characteristics. Of specific, novel importance to Mitchell’s discussion is the fluidity of parties’ raison d’être, relationships and the systems within which they operate. These however are underemphasised, especially in his summary of intractable conflict characteristics to open the next chapter.

In chapter four, Mitchell lays a clear distinction between incompatibilities between parties on one hand, and the behaviour that transforms incompatibilities into intractability on the other hand, allowing the reader to focus on strategies that address such behaviour. Chapter five attempts to disentangle the ‘total conceptual mess’ of conflict prevention theorisation over the decades by distilling it into fundamental questions on the kinds of conflicts, the timing of prevention and the forms of prevention. Mitchell impresses with a thorough problematisation of evaluating preventive approaches, and dismisses, perhaps correctly, the propriety of at all evaluating prevention. He equivocates, however, in conceding to the inevitability of conflicts arising (p. 108), and his doubts on preventive action would have been an excellent node to link back to his choice to examine the origins of conflict and its nature-versus-nurture debate in chapter one.

Chapters six to eight discuss conflict mitigation measures, regulation of conflict and their institutionalisation. Mitchell again distils unwieldy literature through common, fundamental themes in conflict mitigation theorisation. The highlight in this discussion is his insight on envisioning future ‘interdependence’ between conflict parties. Where there is prospective interdependence, current restraint and reciprocity bears future benefits; where there is none, mitigation only prolongs conflict. The discussion explores the historical progression of conflict regulation, and emphasises the dynamism involved in rule formation illustrated by the development of ‘gentlemen’s agreements’ or rituals to predictable legal regimes or formal systems of conduct. Chapter eight summarises the subject of institutionalisation through a five-tiered categorisation of ideal types of rules systems. Mitchell reiterates the theme of fluidity, urging reflections on the suitability of such systems to contemporary societies and conflicts. Interestingly, he examines the propriety of the most recent institutionalisation, the International Criminal Court, in both its potential to prolong conflicts or give an incentive to the termination of the same.

Mitchell opines that prevention and mitigation only scratch the surface of intractability, and that the locus of the challenge is in devising solutions that end conflict. Chapters nine and ten explore these solutions with a discussion on the subject of conflict termination. Chapter nine focuses on the termination of armed and murderous violence, which may do nothing to resolve the underlying causes. Mitchell introduces the policy development of peacebuilding out of older discourses on peacekeeping. He also traces the development of the international community’s ‘responsibility to protect’ discourse and the emerging new discourse on porousness of domestic sovereignty in the context of modern conflicts. He raises the current, and enormous body of critical literature on peacebuilding, and does well to highlight the demandingly sophisticated and multidisciplinary roles of modern peacekeepers,
which includes the gaping difference between ‘minimalist goals’ of preventing violence and ‘maximalist’ ones of removing underlying sources of conflict.

Chapter ten addresses squarely the underlying contradictions and contradictory goals that lead to violent conflict. He revisits the characteristics of intractable conflict and offers a finer distinction between “process intractability” and “issue intractability” (pp. 218–219). To address these categories of intractability, he then mobilises possible solutions through what he calls expansion, substitution and division or distribution. Distribution, the most familiar approach in conflict resolution, often deals with sharing power, resources and responsibilities. Mitchell, however, takes pains to emphasise the sharing of ‘cultural space’, but misses an opportunity to connect this again with a recurring theme of fluidity - or the fluidity of collective identities, nations and sub-nations, and how these affect the design of peace solutions that address cultural space. Chapter ten also raises, albeit very briefly, the issue of justice and fairness as a characteristic of solutions to intractable conflict. Mitchell underscores here the importance of a sense of equitability felt by all conflict parties, and the absence of any opportunity to feel envious of the divisible gains of other parties. He enters into a lengthy discussion on indivisibility (p. 235), the highlight of which includes examining the different but simultaneous dimensions of divisibility and indivisibility an object or issue may possess, or thinking of indivisibility from a phenomenological perspective.

Chapter eleven introduces the concept of ‘insoluble’ conflicts which are characterised as genuinely ‘zero-sum situations’. Mitchell describes this extreme category of intractability as one of existential contradiction between conflict parties. He recites many creative strands of ‘out-of-the-box’ approaches, including what identifies as reframing, bridging and integrative solutions. This ties into some of the newest and vibrant scholarship on integration theory and civil conflict. Perhaps inadvertently, Mitchell again repeats the theme of fluidity of goals and actors in the section on altered preference orderings (p. 249), where he explores the convergences of aspects of entrapment, commitment and prospect with the Thomas Saaty’s Analytical Hierarchy Process. Of particular import is his probe into solutions that emerge as conflict parties’ evaluations and goals change. One final highlight of the chapter is his discussion of radical disagreement and agonistic dialogue (p. 257), which informs readers on an emerging vein of scholarship of Agonism that seeks to mobilise conflict to beneficial ends, rather than overcoming conflict.

Chapter twelve explores the concept of reconciliation within the context of the end of intractable conflicts. He focuses his discussion on reconciliation directed at ensuring the durability of peace. While the entire chapter is comprehensive in its discussion, covering a range of issues from short- and long-term reconciliation,

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3 Mitchell refers to Thomas Saaty’s Analytical Hierarchy Process, a framework for developing solutions for rival goal sets in complex conflict negotiations (see Mitchell 2014, citing Saaty and Alexander [1989] and Saaty and Vargas [2001]).
demobilisation, apology and restitution among others, the subject of reconciliation itself seems gratuitous, given that the strongest analyses are found in the previous three chapters on ending intractability. Nevertheless, Mitchell expressly attempts to include the concept of conflict transformation (p. x), and the final chapter is capped off by underscoring the fulfilment of three dimensions (i.e. ending the use of force, establishing processes that address issues, and changes in attitudes in the long-term) as the conditions for a possibility of transforming relationships between erstwhile enemies.

Overall, The Nature of Intractable Conflict is a valuable compendium, enriched by Mitchell’s pursuit of distilling relevant but over-researched topics. Moreover, his own insights scattered throughout the text links his survey of the subject of intractability with emerging trends in current scholarship, which makes this book a relevant signpost in new research.