

Book Review

Tools for Transformation: A Personal Study by A Curle, Hawthorn Press, Stroud, 1990; 204pp, £8.95 (in UK)

Reviewed by Ian Macduff*

Amid the growing range of books on negotiation, mediation, or conflict resolution in general, some stand out for their clarity of structure and presentation, for the succinct manner in which the basics of managing deals and disputes are presented. Adam Curle's book, *Tools for Transformation: A Personal View*, stands out for quite a different set of reasons. In the first instance, it does not presume to join these ranks of skills-oriented books, in which the complexities of negotiation or mediation are discussed in terms of a set of generic skills. This is, as the title indicates, a personal view. But in being such, it is more than a set of reminiscences about a long career in international peace and development work (as well as a long academic career in education and psychology on both sides of the Atlantic and in Africa and Asia). This 'personal view' contrasts with prevailing genre of books in that the processes of [international] mediation are only understood in terms of a clear and personal philosophy of human nature, of conflict, and of the possibility of settlement.

The mediation described in this book is typically international, often involving violent situations (for example, the secessionist war in Biafra), and private. What is meant by the last point, is that this is not the high-profile mediation of a Kissinger, Owen or Vance; it is mediation initiated either directly through contact with the author or through the Quaker organisations with which he has been associated. It is a book, then, about the quiet personal work that is done, less visibly, in international conflicts. In that respect, this is a work again different from the bulk of much current writing in that it does not reflect the development of the "business" of negotiation, through institutions, training programmes, and new career structures. Yet for these kinds of reasons, the core message concerning the development of a clear core understanding of conflict and settlement becomes all the more valuable. What is said here needs, I believe, to be read into almost all of the current 'literature' on dispute resolution.

The "borrowing" and development of mediation in recent years, the recognition that negotiation is a large part of what we all do every day, have generated a significant body of writing - much of it still, as Professor Menkel-Meadow observed some time ago, in search of a theory. The practice of negotiation and mediation have necessarily also generated a degree of reflection on the ethical implications both of current (legal) practices and of ideal ethical alternatives. But what has been missing is the more rounded attempt to link our developing and familiar practices with some overall framework of values and philosophy. True, most books and articles on mediation, in addition to general arguments about the advantages of participation and autonomy,

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acknowledge a kind of negative justification: mediation has to be better than what we have in the legal system. But this is scarcely a constructive theory of bargaining, of conflict, or of settlement; nor does it really provide the mediator with reasons for conducting mediations in any particular way. It is such a philosophy and set of reasons that Adam Curle seeks to present in his personal view. What is clear is that it is a personal view which, because of the particular spiritual foundation, not all will accept. But that is not the point. Rather, the point seems to me to be that it is important for those involved in the business of dealing with disputes the *have* some clear framework, a personal moral philosophy indeed, for doing what they do.

Some of what Curle offers emerges in the course of his accounts of mediations and discussions of the process at large. For example, in one of the limited direct discussions of the skills of mediation, a brief chapter on listening skills, the author is less concerned to provide the usual 'how to' guide to active listening and appropriate interventions; rather, he provides a more general account of the value of asking the questions and keeping quiet for the answers, an account of the values of silence and attention. This much is, in any discussion, fairly obvious. But for Curle, it is more than mere active listening: it is part of a link with the value of silence and listening in the peace making and conflict resolution traditions of the Quakers, of American Indians (only briefly referred to), and of Buddhist philosophy.

Much of Curle's mediation work has been developed through the offices of Quaker organisations and the non-violent traditions of the Society of Friends have clearly shaped the author and his approach to conflict resolution. But the more explicit declaration of personal philosophy is Buddhist, particularly the Tantric Buddhist traditions of Tibet. In general terms, this is articulated as an optimistic, humanist belief in common humanity, a belief which it is not always easy to sustain in the types of circumstances in which the author has worked. The more specifically Buddhist element of his theory and practice rests on the Buddhist belief that the source of our human conflicts and struggles is "illusion"; and that the task of liberation is one of breaking down illusions of separation, sources of fears, anxieties, greeds. Here it becomes clear how the philosophy - and not just a sense of structure and process - shapes intervention.

For Curle, the role of mediators is as active participants, not passive messengers, nor mere managers of process. The goals, given the model that the author works with, are those of working with attitudes and perceptions. The goal is not merely that of seeking to resolve the conflict (about which there is, in any event, some doubt in current writing and practice). Rather, what the mediator seeks to do is to change the culture of conflict and does so by seeking to change or remove - or at least reveal - those beliefs and attitudes which ground and sustain conflict and separation.

The two chapters on "Active Mediation" are an attempt to give some substance to this image of mediation. These two chapters are presented largely as reconstructed dialogues of typical international conflicts. They are characterised by long interventions by mediator which are perhaps an unfamiliar style for those of us more accustomed to a process-oriented role for mediators. One result, one risk, is that the interventions show a tendency (in this reporting) to be didactic. Some, too, appear to be 'philosophical' discussions with one or other of the disputants, relating to attitudes and implications

(typically demonstrating that the view Party A holds of Party B is mirrored by Party B's attitudes and fears). What is valuable in this is not simply that it demonstrates the uses of a more interventionist style of mediation; it also demonstrates that the interventions are driven by a particular image of disputes and disputants and by a model of the steps the parties will need to take in shifting from entrenched beliefs (illusions) in order to crack the apparent intransigence of conflicts.

It is hardly surprising, given the other professional hats the Curle has worn, that his model of the process points to educative role of mediation. This is more than a matter of dealing with what might be the symptoms of a conflict and creating the terms for some apparent but fragile peace. Rather, it is a matter of dealing with attitudes, biases, perceptions, fears, prejudices, with those illusions that will keep conflict simmering if not revealed and dispelled.

For Curle, as for the rest of us involved in some way in mediation, there remains the question of the effectiveness of mediation. Such efficacy is, of course, difficult to assess given the complex nature of any field of conflict and its resolution. The question is not pursued at length here; no special claims are made about the universal effectiveness of a particular style of mediation and intervention. Rather, a simpler conclusion is reached: there must be some positive effect of a "good life", of a life modelled, as far as can be, on clear moral grounds. This is not a claim to the moral superiority of Adam Curle nor of mediators as a species, nor of Buddhism as a moral path; but it is an argument for the efficacy and imperatives of a kind of personal consistency. And that personal consistency means that the skills of mediation are not merely grafted on top of whatever else we might be or do; they are, rather, a statement of who mediators are - or at least aspire to be.

In the end, then, the core element is that of the importance of having, as mediator, a clear sense of one's own understanding of conflict, motivation, without imposing that as rigid model or moral imperative on the disputing parties. The starting points, then, for mediation, are not so much the limits to law, in critical theories of de-legalization, nor in assessments of the costs and chaos of the legal system; rather, mediation starts in articulating an understanding of the sources of conflict and in a positive and optimistic philosophy of human nature. This, it should be said, is not "merely" the expression of a particular set of spiritual or personal beliefs; rather, it is also clear that the mediator needs to possess a sense of history, especially in those larger conflicts, understanding sources of environmental, political, cultural conflict. The facilitative and educative role of the mediator goes beyond the process-oriented interventions to seeking to provide some kind of insight, for the disputants, as to what the sources of their conflict might be, where the blocks to resolution might lie, and what the paths to resolution may be.

Now, none of this last part will be terribly surprising to anyone who has been involved in mediation. This might seem a normal account of the role of the mediator. But the quality that distinguishes this book from most of the others is simply that the emphasis is not on the *skills* that might be required to achieve these ends but is rather on the *philosophy* which shapes the responses. How many of us, as mediators, could step back from a more descriptive account of what we do to a grander vision of why we do it?

The latter part of book consists of a linked discussion of education, community development, economics, and the environment, also fields of Curle's interests. These appear less immediately relevant to a consideration of conflict resolution until it becomes clear that the same model applies, the same image of the sources of conflict in these other fields appears in the consistent thread of personal philosophy. And the linking of issues of environment, peace and development is one which was clearly made at the Earth Summit (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development) in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. In this respect we have not merely a personal view of the nature of global conflict and paths to resolution; we have also a reflection of an emergent model of global politics.

Adam Curle concludes by returning to his overall theme: a recognition of the illusions of ego; the power of those illusions to generate separation, conflict, fears; and the importance of awareness to reveal illusion. Such a theme is consistent with a long line of writing in philosophical, political and spiritual traditions in aspiring to the development of awareness, consciousness as the path to liberation from our "mind forg'd manacles" [Blake]. What is distinctive about this book is the linking of the personal values and aspirations with the professional tasks, and making this connection the core of the manner of working. What matters, in the end, for Curle are not merely the skills and professionalism of mediation: these are taken as given. Rather, what the mediator aspires to in this view of the job are wisdom and compassion.