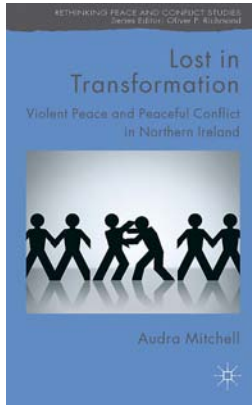




## BOOK REVIEW



# Lost in Transformation: Violent Peace and Peaceful Conflict in Northern Ireland

Audra Mitchell  
Palgrave Macmillan, 2011

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### Keywords

Northern Ireland, conflict transformation, violence, threatworks, non-violent coexistence, world-building

Conflict does not necessarily lead to violence. Rather, it can be a powerful means of resisting, constraining, and even preventing acts of violent expression. Transformative interventions designed to tackle conflict and foster peace often do not prove effective in reality. Moreover, they can enact continuous cycles of violence between opposing populations. Peaceful coexistence does not simply stem from the removal of the root causes of violence. What is, instead, dearly needed is a critical shift from peace-building alone to plural world-building.

These are the foundations of Audra Mitchell's argument about the need for a serious reconsideration of the nature of peace interventions in conflict-ridden contexts. To illustrate her point, Mitchell embarks upon an in-depth analysis of how the initiatives that have been implemented in Northern Ireland since the mid-twentieth century affected the major conflicting parties. A value added to the study in this regard is the key incorporation of primary sources of information, providing insights into the personal experiences of members of the Irish Republican and Ulster Loyalist protagonists in the events of the Troubles as well as the viewpoints of the institutional actors responsible for the policies that affected the belligerent groups. Through the lens of constructive criticism, Audra Mitchell questions

both the success and relative serenity of the Northern Ireland peace process against a backdrop of widespread praise of the process as an exemplary model of peace-building. The alternative to this conventional intervention is envisaged by her as a new ethos of orientation toward the interrelation between violence, conflict and peace. It is one that promotes the concept of plural world-building in an effort to ensure that more is consciously created in peace interventions than is inadvertently destroyed.

## BACKGROUND

A key idea in Audra Mitchell's theory is the notion of world-building. It is based on an understanding of the term *world* as a social entity that incorporates everyday communal structures, patterns, and practices (p. 4). The process of world-building, therefore, constitutes a wide range of daily social interactions which naturally involve the construction, preservation and alteration of multiple worlds (Ibid.). World-building is thus "an essential part of being human, and necessary to sustaining communal life," as Mitchell frames it (p. 6).



The inability to partake in forms of world-building, move between worlds, or protect one's world is categorized by the author as an acute violation (p. 7) of human and civil rights. The destruction of worlds, or even the emergence of threats to the existence of worlds alone, in turn engenders feelings of insecurity and resentment which may find outlet in the violent behaviour of affected social groups, especially when the changes initiated cannot be resisted otherwise. Audra Mitchell unravels in her study how the transformative peace initiatives in the fragile context of Northern Ireland actually exacerbated the already tense relations between the Loyalist and Republican communities, and initiated cycles of radical violence due to a lack of consideration of the world-building activity of the adversarial actors in question.

The peace and securitization interventions that are critically analyzed in the book comprise the range of policies implemented since the beginning of the Cold War by the British and Irish governments and municipalities, the European Union, and other international actors. Mitchell reveals in the course of the study that the largely flawed approach of these efforts originated from the common misconception among the intervening actors about the interrelation between conflict and violence. This resulted in poor strategic decisions that hindered conflict transformation efforts in the Northern Ireland polarized context.

The problem, as viewed by Audra Mitchell, lies in the reality that, in their strategies, transformative interventions normally employ a presumption of a one-way correlation between conflict and violence, namely that conflict is a root cause of violence (p. 12). Consequently, these initiatives are aimed at the eradication of conflictual forms of world-building in an effort to bring about positive change. Such attempts, however, skate on thin ice. By hindering, to the extent of completely removing, conflictual worlds and ways of world-building, they often impose their own (hegemonic) visions of world-building that erase others (p. 93), and so may initiate cycles of violence (pp. 34-35), which might not have existed beforehand. Furthermore, transformative peace initiatives fail to take into consideration the potential role of conflict in balancing different worlds, as a means of resisting, constraining, or preventing violence.

## IMPLICATIONS

The way forward is envisaged by Audra Mitchell as interventions whose aim is not to remove conflict, but

rather to enable parties to engage in conflict non-violently, and thus resist violence (pp. 217-218). Her idea is that unstable societies should perhaps be allowed more non-violent conflictual activity than relatively peaceful ones, as a way of dealing with the greater threats they experience. In other words, the more social groups are enabled to conduct forms of plural world-building, the less they should be prone to actual violence. The broader implications of these findings relate to the critical re-conceptualization of the field of peace and conflict studies. The proposition of the author entails an essential reframing of the term to peace, conflict and violence studies for the purposes of a more conscious reflection of the relationship between the three highly debated terms.

*Lost in Transformation* is an intellectually stimulating read. Drawing upon the work of prominent theorists such as Hannah Arendt, Agnes Heller, and Dorothy E. Smith, Audra Mitchell's approach to the attainment and preservation of non-violent coexistence promises to be of interest to practitioners, scholars and students alike, since it challenges the established practices of conflict transformation in ways that seek to enhance the efficacy of peace interventions. The time for such rethinking is ripe, especially in a reality where traditional conflict resolution efforts are proving insufficient to address the myriad of contemporary intra-state conflicts.

The value of *Lost in Transformation*, to both the study and practice of conflict resolution, is not only significant but also radical. Despite the fact that the findings of the book are based on a case study of the Northern Ireland peace process, their implications transcend country-specific contexts and introduce valid points to the broader peace and conflict field. The questions it raises about the actual peacefulness of peace initiatives as well as the modifications in the conflict transformation practice it proposes are ideas worth considering by professionals. While the findings of the book do not seek to condemn the established approaches to conflict resolution as such – neither do they intend to provide policy prescriptions – they highlight the dire need for integrating a plural world-building approach into transformative peace interventions. This approach is characterized as the creation of conditions that allow multiple worlds to coexist in a non-violent manner (p. 1). If given the chance, Audra Mitchell's theory of plural world-building has the potential to initiate constructive change in the attainment of non-violent coexistence between communities. It is up to the competent reader to give it a chance in the first place. ■



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