

A book review by Maruša Conič

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Choreography of Resolution: Conflict, Movement, and Neuroscience

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The times of the 21. Century are bursting with options, wealth, knowledges, access to information, possibility, and technology. Yet to some environments this abundance pertaining to the technological development has not found its way or it has not been distributed via the market, institutional structures, public infrastructure nor other ways. Some parts of the world have not experienced the enrichment of their culture and expansion of social life but rather have witnessed destruction, death and a near extinction of their zeal, creative possibilities, social ties and communities. The intrusion of third parties, of countries with strategic interests, the weapons imports, the long-standing ethnic conflicts, the civil and economic tensions, and the clashes of religious influences can form an entangled nexus of tensions that escalate to a conflagration of conflicting ideas, emotions, principles, rules, calculations, laws, identities or a shared scarcity. These escalations and the use of physical force and weapons, cause suffering, losses, and create further entanglements in the broader conflict. The topic is of immense relevance for professionals dealing with economic growth, as in traumatized environments and communities facing violent destruction economic development is severely impeded. The setback experienced due to armed conflict and violent chaos takes away resources, courage, social capital, cultural capital, resilience, ideas, and business connections.

To attempt an exploration of new directions in conflict theory and practice, a project »Dancing at the Crossroads« has been established and after a four-year activity (2009 - 2013), the participants wrote the ground-breaking work: »Choreography of Resolution«. The central

workshops have been held at the European Graduate School in Switzerland. In the book »Choreography of Resolution«, the authors – academic professionals, conflict intervenors, therapists, and specialists for conflict resolution present the recent endeavours in exploration of how the conflict is contained and entangled in communities and in individuals. They explore and present their findings about how the ongoing tension, small verbal or nonverbal manifestations of a particular conflict as well as the repercussions and consequences of escalated and damaging ones, have a severe impact on the emotional, spiritual, and social lives of individuals. Thus the severity, the role, the meanings of actions, and the origins are first and foremost to be looked for in the people. The expression of the experience and the analysis of the conflictual process are under some circumstances and capacities not possible and thus resolution with traditional mediating methods can prove to be ineffective. »The Choreography of Resolution« offers an inclusive approach including movement and dance, bringing together expertise that could add the missing approach in mediation.

In the first chapter of the *Choreography of Resolution* Emily Beausoleil argues for a greater consideration of neuro - scientific advancements of the areas that are important for conflict transformation: physiology of emotion, communication, receptivity, attunement, empathy, and creative thinking: »In a relatively short time, they have demonstrated the intimate and complex relationship between cognitive and »embodied« states, expanding vocabularies for understanding how movement affects patterns of thought and interaction – the patterns that either make change possible or render it impossible. This work reveals new possibilities for the value of dance in training third parties and in helping to shape the nature of interventions and formation of embodied approach tools.

In reference to these claims presented by one of the authors in »Choreography of Resolution«, we give a short overview and vantage points of concepts in embodied knowledge and embodied cognition: Considering the cognitive processes as a medium for decision making, Teed Rockwell proposed that the mind emerges not entirely from brain activity but from an interacting nexus of brain, body, and world. He endorses [embodied cognition](#), holding that in the past neuroscience endorsed a form of Cartesian materialism, an indictment also issued by many other fields. Based on [John Dewey](#)'s heritage, he argues that the brain and the body bring into existence the mind as a "behavioural field" in the environment. Significant for understanding the physically embodied and embedded nature of cognition are the various ways in which cognitive problems are offloaded onto physical processes, making two-way bodily interactions with the environment essential to cognitive success.

In the second chapter of the book Tara Ney and Emmy Humber remind us that the discipline of »conflict studies« is a newly invented one and is necessarily interdisciplinary: political science, law, sociology, psychology, humanities, and more recently, neurobiology are actively informing the field. Given the slow uptake of new advances, one of the possible explanations for the failure to incorporate these critical dimensions is »the possibility that they have become dominated and subsumed by more powerful but invisible discourses that influence law and politics, such as neoliberalism, bureaucratization, and institutionalism, which value rationality, efficiency and outcome«, write contributors Tara Ney and Emmy Humber.

The authors recognize the traditional (first - generation) models of dealing with conflict, called also interest-based as being steeped in the values of Enlightenment era thinking, firmly oriented to individualism. These approaches have had a major impact on Western practices of responding to disputes in business, organizations, criminal and civil law, public policy, urban planning, and international relations. Therefore, we are witnessing in the field of conflict resolution a substantial pluralist breakthrough in methodology and in critique by other social sciences that include concerns about ethical incoherence, cultural sensitivity, and a lack of emphasis on relationality, emotionality, physicality, and tacit experiences. Among the many ideas they expose the dance metaphor. Dance metaphors that focus on relationality are admittedly not ideologically neutral as scientific criteria would require them to be. However, assessing a methodological approach on the basis of how non - ideological it is has been deemed impossible even in economics. In economic science, Robert L. Heilbroner argues, the conception of rationality underlying economic theory is specific to the emergence of capitalism as a mode of production and that economics as a science cannot avoid confronting issues (especially the distribution of material wealth and power) that are inherently political and ideological. Duncan K. Foley argued that the concept of rationality connects economics firmly to the Hobbesian - Lockean tradition of political philosophy, which purports social research to explain the political and economic organization of modern society as the necessary outcome of the interaction of »naturally« constituted rational individuals confronting each other as competitors for scarce resources. To avoid the terrible consequences of anarchic struggle, these rational individual actors are supposed, according to this »just so« story, to agree to the institutions of property and political authority that constitute the framework of modern society that leads inexorably to sharp inequalities in economic wellbeing,

Chapters 3 – 6 elaborate on the analogies in the negotiation processes and conflict resolution to dance practice, giving alternative heuristic tools for a reorientation of understanding and the recognition of inevitability of the physical aspect of the resolution processes. The analogies are

mostly narrating metaphors and expressions in conflictual and resolution content such as »choreography of negotiation«, »making a move«, the relevancy of »space« and can only be properly addressed if we bring the element of space into our analytical processing of conflict. Including the body into the cognitive apparatus opens the path for movement and dance scholars to research deeper into the role that the body plays in thinking, feeling, perception, decision, and other processes. It also paves the way for the recognition of dance as a possible tool for practitioners in the conflict resolution field. In the »Choreography of Resolution« the authors elaborate widely and systematically on which aspects of human functioning are particularly significant and relevant in the grounding of cognition, attitudes, and emotions in the physical cues from the elaborate body-wide network. With the body wide network they refer to the whole psychosomatic network of neurological, hormonal, gastrointestinal, and immune systems that keep the entire body in constant communication. On the basis of the new conceptualizations they further discuss the notions of embodied awareness, embodied empathy, the role of the left side of the brain and the right side of the brain in conflict development, and prepare the terrain for building interdisciplinary bridges between the rigorous, linear and verbal approaches and humanist, artistic approaches.

Chapters 7 and 8 focus extensively on developing different kinds of intelligences through dance, like kinesthetic and emotional intelligence. In the 9th chapter authors explore how to develop intuition through dance. Further on pedagogical tools and workshop and session ideas are being presented, in chapter 8 they refer to different aspects of intuition and discuss the importance of intuition in mediation and how to help develop it for it to be helpful instead of misleading, misunderstood, mistrained or ignored. A part of what creates struggles and pressures to escalate conflicts is also provided by the economic environment. To cope with the challenges in the environment, or consequences of escalated conflict, individuals use more or less ingenious reactions, responses, and strategies. In mediated conflicts, mediators assist negotiations and participate in »interdependent decision making«. Upgrading the logical and linear paradigm in conflict resolution, contemporary mediation suggests developing intuition for mediation practitioners that qualifies as the »system 1« way of thinking, according to Kahneman's theory (System 1: fast, intuitive, metaphorical, impressionistic, emotional, and unconscious). The authors of the book stress that even though we tend to identify ourselves with our »system 2« thinking – our rational, logical, calculating way, we are often actually more shaped by our »system 1«; that is why it is important for mediators to develop intuition and to recognize their own biases, sub - consciousness and be sensible to experience.

In the 10th chapter an internationally renowned modern dancer and choreographer Margie Gillis presents an in - depth guide with movement exercises with a purposeful design and a

carefully studied framework and possibilities for application by mediation facilitators. She introduces the chapter by discussing how movement offers a space for discovery and for inclusion of somatic thinking. Based on her extensive practice through the years she suggests that the aesthetic frame of dance creates the possibility for increased receptivity as new solutions arise from mobility. For conflict transformation and resolution practice this embodied conflict transformation asks us to mobilize our muscles to reorganize the neural pathways that influence habitual responses. Investigating connections between neuromuscular responses and movement patterns will help illuminate how the physical is a constituent of the mental. In her repertory of somatic approaches, she offers guidelines for reflection and gives directions for coping with practical issues that might spring during the exercises.

The chapters 11 - 15 give extensive reports on actual studies of the cases in Ireland, Cambodia, and Liberia. They write about the Irish traditional step dancing as it has represented a form of resistance to oppressors, Cambodia's classical dance as a meaning making manifestation of political importance and Liberia's musicians and dancers uniting people and creating a calming atmosphere in anger and trauma-filled refugee camps during the civil war. Here the authors discuss the role of dance in conflict, the endeavours undertaken by the NGO's where dance and culture proved to play the central role in stabilizing post-conflict communities and describe successful practices including body-work in storytelling, confrontations, and revelations of emotional content of conflicts and in therapy for the victims of violent conflict or war. A skilled social psychologist can make use of the techniques for the insight into how social conflict is internalized in individuals and how internal conflict reciprocally expressed and externalized in cultural life and broader institutional framework.

In chapters 16 and 17 they suggest that through movement - based approaches, workplace conflict intervenors can help develop the notion of mindfulness that could, using creative physical movement in conjunction with conflict management and critical reflection, be useful in addressing workplace conflict linked to worldviews. They stress the possibility to overcome the automatic thought patterns linked to worldviews - like linear, hierarchical, and dichotomous thinking - through movement, and further on stress the importance of supportive, safe opportunities in organizations to paradigmatically shift to becoming places of safe emotional and creative expression, inclusion, and equal consideration.

Economists and empiricists of the social sciences could design and apply a myriad of observational techniques and of approaches for determining the important variables, descriptions of the patterns, measuring scales, etc.,... There is immense potential for the fields of behavioural and experimental economics to discover new factors that drive behaviour, or get closer to observing how the known factors behave under different tasks. Once researchers start

developing methods of observation and analysis that combine empirics, comparative approaches in institutional systems and organizational studies, semiotic approaches, heuristics, cognitive science and other approaches, the field can open a pool of options for new knowledge about decision making and social interaction.

For the mediation and experimental field that combines traditional and somatic strategies the formalization of embodied knowledge could present quite a balancing exercise.

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