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**Bernard Mayer and Jacqueline N Font-Guzman  
(2022) The Neutrality Trap: Disrupting and  
Connecting for Social Change, Wiley**

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Book Review by Geoffrey Corry

## Beware of the neutrality trap

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**Bernard Mayer and Jacqueline N Font-Guzman (2022)** *The Neutrality Trap: Disrupting and Connecting for Social Change*, Wiley

On 25 May 2020 in Minneapolis, a 46-year-old black man, George Floyd, was held on the ground by police officer Derek Chauvin, who placed his knee on George's neck and murdered him by no longer allowing him to breathe. Was it not for Darnella Frazier passing by and taking a nine-minute video of the crime scene with her smartphone, justice would not have been done.

The graphic video undercut the official version of the Minneapolis Police Department. It immediately went viral when posted online and enabled the Black Lives Matter to become a social revolution across the world building on Floyd's last words: "I can't breathe". When I was working in Haiti last January, I came across this mural painting showing the white police officer in the grip of a black woman trying to get him to take his knee off George Floyd's neck.



This momentous event galvanised both Bernie Mayer and Jackie Font-Guzman to write this book. Then came a second big event in January 2021. They saw the ‘invasion’ of the US Capital on 6 January as the biggest threat to USA democracy in their lifetime. Both events have served as wake-up calls in their role as conflict interveners and mediators to examine “what it takes for a system to change in meaningful ways”.

To reach their conclusion, they have had to dig deeper with stakeholders and not settle for just a new policy or reaching an agreement. They needed to work on systemic issues such as values, identity, power and privilege.

In contrast to Ken Cloke, a well-known American mediator theorist who called for more political dialogue to heal wounds, Bernie and Jackie declare that dialogue has limitations. Cloke (whose article on the role of mediation in Ukraine appears in this edition of your Journal) may think something important has happened in a

listening process that is committed to everyone being heard in an open-minded way. However, Bernie and Jackie believe that the likelihood is, that in a divided society, mediation simply means that the anger gets toned down and the power differentials that reinforce systems of powerlessness are not challenged.

For the authors, this creates a sense of guilt, begging the question: “Have [we] misdirected the energies of the disempowered from organising for change to understanding the privileged?” If this is the case, they argue, then we have all fallen into the neutrality trap. By remaining neutral in the traditional professional manner, we preserve the existing social order and its inequities. In effect, they believe mediators are empowering some and disempowering others.

### **The limitations of dialogue**

They are convinced that unless a serious effort is made “to achieve a deeper understanding in [the] service of moving toward a better future” and acceptance of the harm that has been done, then healing does not happen. “[Well intended] dialogue in the absence of such a commitment reinforces the status quo.” Without deeper understanding of events, neutrality, they believe, ensures that the Trump supporters will return to their positions of power and the African American community will return to a situation of powerlessness. And little will change unless conflict interveners and advocates for social change confront the issues that are dividing the United States.

Bernie Mayer’s frustration with his own dialogue efforts at not getting meaningful communication about genuine differences have led him to realise that he should have given more space to the protagonists to voice their anger and listen to each

other's stories. So far, he writes, he has been reluctant to facilitate such exchanges because they are risky at times when interactions become insulting and abusive. Now his new insight points to the need for more engagement between the protagonists, enabling them to get closer to the heart of the issue, even if that involves finding yourself "in an honest if at times painful interchange". I get the impression that Bernie Mayer's standard approach was for a more cognitive dialogue about each other's values rather than connecting to the emotional content and the personal story behind such values.

For Jackie, as a Puerto Rican woman, neutrality "has been a way for professions to preserve the status quo and sustain oppressive structures". She believes if you remain neutral, it serves as "an excuse for ensuring that an individual conflict is addressed (sometimes) but not the system and the structures that caused the conflict in the first place". This is particularly true when a conflict is nested in unjust social or institutional structures.

This leads to the core argument of the book – don't let yourself become trapped in an unjust interaction and an unjust outcome by virtue of staying neutral. Bernie Mayer remembers a teacher telling him: "Never let your values get in the way of doing what's right." This has come to bother him over recent years and the way that the neutrality-impartiality-objectivity principles have become such a key part of the business model of being a conflict intervener.

They asked themselves the question that has been percolating for some time: How can you remain neutral faced with long term enduring conflicts that involve social injustice? They want to face up to the moral, ethical and political issues that have been hidden by mediators in the traditional debate about power balancing.

## **Constructive engagement**

Bernie and Jackie together make the argument for an approach called ‘constructive conflict engagement’ in situations where conflict is based on profound differences on values and worldviews. They invite us not to minimise conflict for the sake of reaching agreement. Our goal as facilitators should be to support protagonists to understand the nature of their differences without giving up their values or essential goals.

Coming from the island of Puerto Rico in the Caribbean, Jackie gets frustrated when those with colonial power over them have a need to be understood and then this gets turned into an excuse for inaction and a deterrent to advancing social injustice. Surely, the authors write, the goal is to move forward together in understanding. That means for “engagement to be truly constructive, oppressive power dynamics must be challenged”. If that is not done, you preserve the existing social order and its inequities.

They believe that a conflict resolution process must be grounded in the values of democracy and transparency as well as relationships that are non-hierarchical.

It is not until Chapter 6 with a snappy title “Beyond evil, stupid and crazy: systems of privilege and oppression” that the authors provide a deeper analysis of the systemic changes taking place within USA. In examining how Donald Trump was able to come to power alongside the rise of White racism, they see two important determining factors: (1) the loss of blue collar jobs in the manufacturing and coal mining constituencies, and (2) by immigrants accepting low pay jobs, they undercut the bargaining power of Whites and draw more out of the welfare

system. Trump promised his supporters - ‘the forgotten working people’ - that he would bring back jobs in manufacturing and coal mining as well as stopping the flow of immigration across the border with Mexico. He played on their fears and their perception that crime is carried out by Blacks and immigrants.

In attempting to understand the attraction of populism and the Trump phenomenon, Bernie and Jackie turn to the Fisher and Ury theory of looking not just for the interests beneath positions but the interests beneath interests. Trump offered to voters what seemed to be tangible simple solutions to complex systemic problems. These turned out to be unrealistic and undeliverable. This begs the big political question: “Why do people so often seem to act **against** their own interests or believe patently false promises about dealing with the problems they face?” They cite the Affordable Care Act as an example and Trump’s efforts to dismantle it when in reality it went against the interests of blue collar workers.

Here is the authors’ answer to that big question of voters going against their interests: “They are defending their sense of belonging, what gives meaning to their lives, and the community that has nurtured and defined them.”

Identity considerations certainly take us to a new level of depth in understanding conflict. Such an answer is not news to students of the binary identity conflict of Northern Ireland, who know that emotional political narratives go back generations because of cycles of violence, hurt and pain. Those narratives have been used by political leaders to mobilise the green and orange communities against each other. Pioneering work by Michael Hall in Belfast [Island pamphlets] has shown the way to bring together local community activists from both sides to engage in dialogue about the deeper issues of identity and sectarianism.

The authors turn to Ezra Klein (2020) to explain the increasing polarisation taking place in the USA due to the growing ‘stacking’ of identities and clustering into opposite political allegiances. Whereas before, people’s stance on one issue like gun control was less predictive of their stance on other issues, that is increasingly not the case. Klein argues that this clustering phenomenon turns the political process into an ‘us versus them’ and leads to politics being viewed through the prism of whether your group is winning or losing: “As our many identities merge into single political mega-identities, those visceral, emotional stakes are rising – and with them, our willingness to do anything to make sure our side wins.”

### **Strategic disruption**

The final chapters of the book put forward the case for strategic disruption and disciplined nonviolent strategies to support the movement for social change. They describe such a disruption strategy as taking a system “to the brink of, but not over the edge into chaotic and even violent dissolution”. They accept that there will be push back not only from the power structure but from more established groups.

One example of such nonviolent action in the Northern Ireland context is the Civil Rights movement in 1968 in Derry, which opened the can of worms in the system but unfortunately triggered 30 years of ‘The Troubles’. While the Good Friday Agreement (1998) has recognised the two identities of Irish and British as equal, allowing everyone to have both passports, it has been a slow process to bring inter-communal relationships to the level of ‘parity of esteem’. Demographic change and the educated new generation of the ‘sons and daughters of the Troubles’ are slowly undermining systemic privilege and entitlement. The reality experience of



Northern Ireland is that system change is a slow process involving inter-generational culture change and the healing of old wounds of hurt and pain.

At this point, I get a bit confused about where Bernie and Jackie are positioning themselves regarding their favoured role in social change and the tension between the two strategies of strategic disruption and constructive engagement. These are two very different types of intervention and it is hard to see how you can combine the two at the same time.

My sense is that you have to choose between being an activist in polarising political situations or being a facilitator of deep dialogue between polarised groups. So does Bernie see them as two sides of the same coin of social change or is he saying they are two phases of social change where disruption comes first and connection comes second? Perhaps the roles can be played at different times in the life of one person – say being an activist in your young adult years and a facilitator in your middle age. Or perhaps the other way round: becoming an activist in your later years and drawing on all your wisdom gained from working with people and groups.

But I don't believe you can be a dialogue facilitator without being impartial or multi-partial (a variation of neutrality). You have to create a safe emotional and relational space for those who enter the talking circle.

In the many Irish-British political dialogue workshops I facilitated at the Glencree Centre for Reconciliation after the ceasefires of 1994, it would not have worked if I was a disrupter. It helped that I was a southern Protestant married to a Catholic who had worked in London for a short time and thereby could connect with Catholic nationalism, protestant unionism and British political parties.

What I discovered in the Glencree workshops was the difference between storytelling dialogue, where participants were changed through the ‘humanising of relationships’, and problem solving workshops where new understanding was more cognitive and had arisen from opportunities for interactive conflict analysis. There were times we moved into the second domain but it always arose from a solid engagement of first hearing each other’s political realities and why such concerns and principles were important for them and their political party.

### **The three essentials**

I have found that three ingredients are essential for meaningful dialogue and found it very helpful that the authors put these into words that echoed my own experience. Nevertheless, I prefer a different order to that used by the authors. I would start with ‘Telling our Stories’ to increase understanding of where each is coming from and the values that have shaped their lives. Secondly, ‘Naming the Elephant’ is crucial in enabling participants to name the important issues of concern, hear the language used in describing their reality and the constraints they are under. However, the third essential of ‘Attending to Power Dynamics’ that are embedded in the inter-group interactions is a much more difficult and a sensitive task that cannot be rushed.

Waiting for the ripe moment to throw a light on power imbalance is an acquired skill so that it is not misunderstood. It is best, in my opinion, not to attempt it until the third or fourth session of a weekend residential workshop. It is best done at the moment it arises in the dialogue circle when it is possible to support a focused dialogue between two people and go a bit deeper to unpack what has just been said.

To conclude, Bernie and Jackie are to be congratulated in twinning their different experiences of working with a dialogue process in situations of social change and challenging all of us to think through what it is we are doing in terms of building new relationships grounded in mutual understanding.

As politics becomes more polarised, mediators involved in the process of disentangling conflicts such as racism, climate change and contested spaces, need to have clarity as to their role when they come up against unequal rigid systems and power structures. But the biggest challenge is probably, in the first instance, to engage protagonists and get them to agree to actually come into the room to talk to each other. That takes a lot of time in building relationships within their own turf. Only when that has been achieved, will both sides trust you and move on to the dialogue process.

So maybe neutrality is all about trust.

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