Book Review/Compte rendu

Kevin Avruch, *Context and Pretext in Conflict Resolution: Culture, Identity, Power, and Practice*. 2012. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 228 pp., $34.95 paper (9781612050607)

Kevin Avruch introduced the concept of culture to the scholarly field and practices of conflict resolution in the 1980s. With his most recent book, *Context and Pretext in Conflict Resolution*, Avruch continues his contribution by bridging theoretical concepts and analysis with the more practical world of conflict resolution practitioners. By elaborating on his previous work and providing new conceptualizations of culture and power, Avruch successfully addresses the problems of *context* and *pretext* that peacebuilders face in the field, suggesting alternatives to render conflict resolution practices more effective. Using a cultural sociological approach to conflict resolution and theories of international relations, Avruch's publication focuses on how culture has informed the practice of conflict resolution, and makes the important claim for the adoption of new conceptualizations of concepts, such as culture and power.

First, throughout Chapters 1–8 — chapters previously published in the aftermath of the book *Culture and Conflict Resolution* (1998) — Avruch elaborates on his previous discussions of culture and conflict, and demonstrates how the *context*, which affects our understanding of concepts such as culture and identity, remains problematic for conflict resolution. The author thus suggests an alternative understanding of culture, where culture is a constructed, fluid, and changeable concept (p. 48). He is indeed sceptical of defining culture in a homogeneous, coherent and rigid way, demonstrated by his discussion of Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" (Chapter 6), where he makes the case that "a nuanced theory of culture has several advantages for advancing a coherent notion of conflict resolution" (p. 94). This need for a new conceptualization of culture is explained by the connection between culture and conflict, and where theoretical conceptualizations provide a *pretext* upon which the practice of conflict resolution is understood.

Avruch argues that theories of international relations and related theoretical conceptualizations influence the field of conflict resolution. For instance, our understandings of culture have affected post-conflict practices, such as human rights (Chapter 3), negotiation processes (Chap-

ter 7) and truth and reconciliation commissions (Chapter 8). However, despite a definition of culture that is nuanced and changeable, he still explains how this concept can be practically employed by peacebuilders, by demonstrating how being overly sensitive, or underestimating the role of culture in conflict resolution can be problematic for practitioners (Chapter 5). His argument that IR theories and theoretical conceptualizations are connected to the field of conflict resolution by influencing peacebuilders' practices is powerful and convincing, and leads to another main contribution of this book regarding the conceptualization of power (Chapter 9).

In Chapter 9, Avruch criticizes the influence that IR theories (realist and neorealist) had on providing an understanding of power as dominance and coercion, as the "Other." However, this conceptualization suggests that in cases where the conflict is held between asymmetric powers (which Avruch argues is the rule and not the exception), it becomes unacceptable to resolve the conflict from a realist understanding of power, which would allow the most powerful actor to dominate others (p. 144). According to Avruch, a new conceptualization of power is needed to render the practices of conflict resolution more effective. He is, however, aware that whilst mediators and peacebuilders "do not think of power in theoretical or abstract terms,… they still possess a tacit and implicit theory of power to guide their practice" (p. 151). Avruch does not provide a definite new conceptualization of power, but his claim that it remains important to broaden our understanding of power as a concept that influences conflict resolution is nicely made. This debate about the presence of different ontologies when discussing concepts such as culture and power is, however, at the core of the problems of *context* and *pretext* that conflict resolution practitioners face in the field. As he concludes, "given a poststructuralist world featuring multiple contexts of peace, what is our pretext for favouring some conception of peace over others?" (p. 167–8). Avruch thus suggests that conflict resolution practitioners should be transparent and clear about their external standpoint, despite the risk of being perceived as directive. This, he argues, "is hardly an entire ethics of practice, but it is surely the beginning of one" (p. 170).

Finally, *Context and Pretext in Conflict Resolution* is very successful in breaching the gap between theoretical analysis, theories of international relations (mostly realist and neorealist), and the practicalities of the field of conflict resolution. Perhaps because some chapters were previously published as articles, the book is not as fluid and continuous as it could have been, despite the overreaching theme of conflict resolution. For instance, there is a certain disconnect between discussions of

identity construction in refugee camps (Chapter 4), Huntington's concept of civilization (Chapter 6), and the role of truth and reconciliation commissions (Chapter 8) that make the book seem slightly like a collection of Avruch's previous work, instead of a more concise publication. Overall, *Context and Pretext in Conflict Resolution* contributes greatly to the sociological fields of cultural and political sociology, by successfully improving theoretical understandings of the role of culture in conflict resolution practices, and is also useful for the fields of international relations and anthropology. By providing convincing and substantive arguments that also contribute to the practical field of conflict resolution, this publication remains an important read for both academic and conflict resolution practitioners.

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