

Ethics and Peace Work – the Unbearable Lightness of Acting

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*‘Ethics may seem like an intellectual abstraction,
but we are all, in our own ways, ethicist’
Rethinking War and Peace, Diana Francis*

In societies where everything is relative, it is good’ to have a constant, even if the constant is this very thing: everything is relative and everything can be relativised. Thus even the red traffic light is seen as an option, to stop or not, depending on many factors.¹ What is then to be said about more difficult issues – are heroes heroes or war criminals?, are victims victims or manipulators?, and how many of them were there to begin with?, are non-governmental organisations defenders of democracy or foreign mercenaries?, is it citizens’ will or a hidden political agenda? and so on and so forth. The answers are, naturally, not easy and are often not of the ‘either or’ variety. In all of it, it is even more difficult that the ethics is not, or it shouldn’t be, relative or subjective.

Why isn’t there any?

In these regions, among people who are in peace work (and otherwise too), the words ethics, morality, ethical are seldom heard. They are not in the project proposals that are mostly written in a more or less universal language full of well known bits and descriptions, along with *copy pasting* parts of the previous

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1 “Possible options depend on the size of the car, shape and form of its plates, combination of the driver’s being underage and social status of his parents, etc” Father Metodij Zlatanov, *Essay, Nedelno vreme*, 12 March 2006

project proposals (which in itself should tell us something), even though the concepts of peacebuilding point to importance of ethical awareness and responsibility towards a community², as well as to the fact that establishing the rule of law in the post-conflict environments is tightly linked to establishing ethics, i.e. renewing social norms.³ There certainly are more complex and profound reasons for this situation that will, I hope, soon become of interest to some more encompassing and complex research, and become a subject of open discussion and questioning for those who are terrified by ‘theory’. A community that doesn’t become aware of the need for establishing an ethical framework within which it will work and act can hardly hope for a sustainable, constructive work; it will rather move in the direction of building and deconstruction, whereby it will not always be clear which is which, i.e. when something is built and when it is deconstructed.

Let’s take a look, somewhat superficially for the time being, which are the possible reasons for avoiding ethics. Several possible reasons are unveiled through conversations with people. Some of them are linked to the way in which activists themselves think about ethics, and some of them are linked to how the society we live in thinks about it and thus, in a way, indirectly influences the attitudes of activists, because we work with people from various groups and environments that, whether we want it or not, determine us in various ways.

Ethics is often perceived as, primarily, the Christian ethics, due to the long tradition of using the words ethics and morality in a religious context and alongside religious terminology (where they can, of course, be found nowadays as well). In these, ‘our’, regions, such perception that ethics equals religious ethics is frequent, and it rather hinders viewing its importance and significance to the full. On the one hand, there is a piled up experience of failing to respect religious ethical values by the very dignitaries of the church but also people who declare themselves as religious in general. On the other hand, there is a direct

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2 Eastern Mennonite University, Center for Justice and Peacebuilding – Core Values and Mission

3 John Hopkins University, School of Advanced International Studies – Approaches: Peacebuilding

involvement and responsibility of both Catholic and Orthodox churches⁴ in the wars and conflicts that affected countries of the former Yugoslavia in the past fifteen or so years. Due to all this, most of the activists from the region do not want to have anything to do with anything that bears religious connotations. Not even with positive potentials for peace work that every religion carries, not even individuals or smaller groups within those religious communities who have tried to oppose the 'main stream' and were marginalised for it... Major religious communities, at the time when they readily accepted the cries for war and tried to fight for their own murky interests, completely forgetting teachings and basic religious and ethical values at that, have lost the right to be adequate ethical role models in the society; what they say, even when it sounds correct, is taken with scepticism, and a lot of time will have to pass until cooperation becomes normal between non-governmental organisations and activist groups with various religious organisations or groups. Unfortunately so.

Then there is the opinion that, in order to address ethics, one should have some, preferably institutional experience; a school, a course, a certificate etc. Ethics is thus linked to 'academism', or its negative connotation, because academism here is opposed to activism, opposed to 'us' who deal with practical work (in fact the 'real' work, often *grassroots*, in poor conditions and in the field) and ethics is something addressed theoretically by various professors provided for at faculties and institutes and 'there's not much use of that'. On the other hand, theoreticians seldom, or insufficiently, recognise values of practical work, they don't recognise the need for systematic sublimation of knowledge and experiences attained in this way, and so they, for most part, deserve the aforementioned criticism. This gap between practice and theory is very destructive, because ethical judgement that is not valid in practice should also be debatable in theory, and practice that fails to raise everyday individual activities to some sort of a clear and, as much as possible, theoretically supported system of values

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4 By this I don't mean to amnesty instigators of war, members of Islamic religious community, who were also quite numerous and who are just as responsible for wartime events, but only to point out the possible link between perception of ethics and the Christian ethics by people living in the region of the former Yugoslavia.

will never manage to establish a mechanism of spreading ethical ideas in order for them to become normative.

Thirdly, ethics in our transitional societies are experienced as just another heritage from the past, an unfortunate system we need to distance ourselves from, sometimes in a deliberate and well founded way and sometimes by pure inertia. A system in which, at least seemingly, it made sense and significance to refer to someone's individual morality or someone's professional ethics (for example, a journalists' code or physicians' ethics). Nowadays, with all the characters who realise their personal interests as politicians, businessmen, journalists etc, to think in ethical categories, to refer to them, or, heaven forbid, call for responsibility of someone in a position or with certain power, not only sounds out of place but, even more horribly so, sounds naive and is met with ridicule. By choosing to be in peace work, activists rarely receive widespread support from their environment, so that once we have neglected offensive and disparaging titles such as 'thieves', 'mercenaries' or an explanation that what they are doing is 'idle work', what remains is a paradoxically, but truthfully so, better variant of being labeled 'naive', 'don quixote's', 'utopians', 'what sort of a profession is that?!'... Thus, by working and trying to balance these and other pressures, it is quite understandable that activists do not want to further burden their position by insisting on some sort of ethics, particularly if they haven't thought or are not quite clear about what the value of such ethics is (even though they will often openly defend some typically ethical values, but under different names).

Thus, ethics has become yet another word that has lost its contents, that has 'worn out'. It is unpopular because of its exaggerated (ab)use and manipulation in the past decades, it is unpopular because it needs to critically observe and look for different values, positioning itself in opposition to instant culture, consumerism, insensitivity towards others etc. It is also unpopular because, at the moment, in our societies, it carries very small comfort to those who are 'unsuccessful' and haven't managed to find themselves and sort things out for themselves in these murky times (and 'sorting things out for yourself' entails constantly doing all sorts of unethical things). We therefore face quite a journey

of re-introducing ethics into everyday vocabulary, going hand in hand with the difficulty of establishing and the use of the concept of social responsibility.

What it is about, or where there still is a bit of it...

In the past several years certain progress has been made in establishing ethical behaviour/work in peace work, even though discussions linked to the ethics of peace work have moved more towards defining relations between external and internal agents (or was it just heard as the loudest?) and the matters linked to 'ownership' over the process and results of the work itself, and not so much towards defining principles and ways of work or ethical principles. The ethical principles of peace work are largely not talked about, and nor are they questioned enough.

Ethical codes appear in organisations, here and there, as codes of professional responsibility – a sort of formal statement on the values a certain organisation advocates. They appear more often if it is about a particularly delicate field of work or fields that are in a way easier to define through the description of work, activities or specificity of groups, for example in work with children, the media etc. At the same time, since what is mostly defined are the values, it is bashfully hinted at that in cases in which there would be doubt about someone's work being contradictory to those values, there is an Ethical Commission (or another ethical body) that would deal with it. These ethical bodies, conceived in such a way that they have an advisory and/or supervisory role, are seldom heard of, even though the efficiency of these codes depends on the very extent to which they are supported or sanctioned. In practice it is often the case that there is no procedure if a violation of these values occur, so the impression remains that these commissions/bodies have not yet entirely begun to function.

What is talked about, however, and what does belong to the ethical body, are values of peace work, i.e. the question of what it is that we strive for in our work. We should thence move towards 'in what way do I strive for these values and what happens when there is a discrepancy in terms of the ways I work in the name of some values and the values themselves?'. There is mostly a

consensus, at least in terms of listing certain values. At the same time, even if it is relatively clear what it means to work on social change, to advocate inclusion and participation, cooperation, solidarity or non-acceptance of discrimination and violence, the very mention of democracy, tolerance etc. causes a mass of problems (both in the assumption that we all agree on and implicitly includes these terms and their contents, and in questioning how individuals or groups perceive them), so that due to the impossibility of a consensus they are more often than not avoided. Among the values that are usually listed, I find cooperation the most interesting, cooperation is so praised and so desired but very difficult to find in practice. This kind of discrepancy between value and practice smells of the enclosure of groups and individuals dealing with peace work, both among themselves and towards others. Furthermore, this enclosure leads to various groupings, most frequently on the bases of approaches to work, whereby organisations and individuals mostly stick to a narrow field of cooperation, often forgetting that different approaches do not necessarily lead to a drastic or complete discrepancy in terms of values.

One such discrepancy in terms of values, is not being aware of our partners' roles in the work. Participants, agents of peace work, often communicate with each other through superior and inferior relations, on the bases of differences in scale, resources, direct or indirect involvement, influence, etc. In this way, dominant negative social patterns are copied, positions of 'power over...' are established and the part of participants is reduced to mere implementers. Thus the field of peace work is often a competition, even though one of its main ethical values is to bring together and support jointly desired changes (working on social change is often listed as the priority value of peace work, and through acknowledging the importance of partner relations, the potentials of all participants who contribute to peacebuilding are developed and nurtured, regardless of how great this contribution is).

Another major discrepancy is in the different relations towards local communities. These differences can perhaps be seen in a superficial way through conflicts about the issue of loyalty. Mostly the people who work for major and/or foreign organisations say that it is necessary to be loyal towards

funders and/or matrix organisation, that it is a starting point and that it means to work in a responsible manner (which is most frequently more or less clearly written down in the description of the job position). A good many of the people who, mostly, work for local organisations say that even if we allow the concept of loyalty to begin with, we owe our work and our loyalty primarily to the people we work for and with, i.e. community. The third group will absolutely refuse to have anything whatsoever to do with loyalty, due to potential peril that it, in itself, excludes the possibility of criticism and self-criticism, i.e. loyalty calls for a sort of blindness and unquestioning. What is intriguing is the fact that even if there is some clear system of activities that could also be an ethical system (where one more or less knows what to do, what is desirable and what is not desirable and where there are some written materials about it, such as a 'work code'), it's these selfsame major and/or foreign organisations and people. Probably because of how numerous they are, because of how hierarchically positioned or the range of work they do, they come the closest to having a clear concept and at the same time a possibility of sanctioning, if that concept is not respected. It is quite another matter how much this concept is appropriate in the environments in which they work and how the 'local' agents relate to it.

Another problem that emerges in the relationship of ethics-peace work is lack of clarity about what peace work is, or rather, *all things that are peace work*. The answers to this question range from attempts to narrow down and clearly define it such as 'peace work is so and so...', to generalisations such as 'everything, peace work is every, even the smallest, action that influences, helps and maintains peace'. Additional confusion is created by the fact that a part of people who are perceived as someone who is in peace work don't experience themselves like that for all sorts of reasons – 'if you are paid, then that's not peace work, you're just doing your job like everyone else', 'if it's not clear what peace work is how can someone be a peace worker?', 'I don't see myself like that because it sounds too formal, somehow too Western', 'the field of peacebuilding is so wide and all encompassing that I can't define it like that, I only work on a small portion of it'...

Establishing a more universal system of values of peace work, or rather, the need to turn it into something tangible which we could refer to, seems quite important to me, because the real purpose of ethics is for it to be applicable and to manage practical behaviour. For the time being, most of us work according to our own feelings, according to our own ethical beliefs. People, certainly, know what is good or bad on an individual level, they will seldom do something bad and say, 'ok, this is not good, but never mind now...', they will rather do something believing they are doing something good, that that is how it should be done. By working in a certain way we believe to be the right way, we try to establish some sort of standards that we expect others to respect and implement, because they are 'right, desirable, good etc'. And that's exactly where the greatest discrepancy is found. A moral system hasn't been achieved, various organisations work in various ways, and there are often differences between work within a single organisation, which doesn't always or necessarily have to be bad in itself if it weren't for the personal or inter-organisation conflicts in which both sides act as morally correct and therefore, of course, superior. Thus various agents which deal with peacebuilding often point out to one another, with not much success, what is desirable way to work, thereby every now and again entering an antagonist relationship as if there were not enough problems in this field without that.

In such a situation there is almost no control mechanism that would help us to work better and prevent the unwanted consequences of certain peace work. We judge how we work and how others work on a daily basis, but since we don't have enough room for a constructive criticism and discussion about it, it is all reduced to private talks. Even when we think that someone or some organisation does counterproductive things under the guise of peace work, there is not much that can be done, not to mention the step back, i.e. *the most important* and real question is how come we are so sure that what someone else does is negative, how do we make such conclusions? In rare cases when it is about, for example, an obvious discrimination against a group or about open sexism etc, it is relatively easy to react or say that the way in which the work is done is bad. However, most of the problematic situations are by no means as

evident and clear. If it is left up to me and my consciousness, about how I am going to work or approach people in the community, certain groups or problems, it is by all means undeniably legitimate that everyone else has that right too, regardless of the ways they work or whether I agree with it (particularly not whether I agree with it).

A bit of demistification for the end

When people work on problems of peace work they deal with ethical issues at the same time (the other way round too, of course), often not knowing or not linking the two. If we look at what is, for example, relevant for applied ethics⁵ and what its contents address, we will see that a large part of it overlaps with the interests of the field of peace work or peace education, and there are certainly some shared points:

An ethical question is relevant if every thinking person has to face it. We face some of these questions every day, others fortunately don't include our everyday decisions, although they can come up at a certain point of our lives. They also represent a sort of question to which every active participant has to think about in the social processes of decision making. For applied ethics, such questions are: the treatment of ethnic minorities, equality of women, use of animals for food and research, preserving the environment, abortion, euthanasia, the obligation of the rich to help the poor, refugees and their treatment, civil disobedience, sexual differences and sexual equality etc.⁶ Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

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5 Applied ethics is a branch of ethics that attempts to practically implement ethical principles in specific social or individual problems. Peter Singer is considered to be one of the first philosophers to use the term 'applied ethics' as an expression for practical ethics. The fields and issues that applied ethics address are: human rights, social responsibility of economic subjects, bioethics, ethics of medium, education, research, computer, sports, military, international, marketing, ecological, legal ethics etc. Applied ethics belongs to a most expansive fields of humanities today.

6 Peter Singer, *Praktična etika* (Practical Ethics), Signature, Belgrade, 2000, Foreword.

When we look back a hundred years or so, we can easily get the feeling of immeasurable joy, wonder and excitement at what man has built. When we look back, we can just as much get the feeling of immeasurable fear, wonder and despair, at what a human being has done, but also what a human being failed to do. Therefore, it is important that we respond to the main alibi-statements of today about there being no tried and safe ethical patterns and therefore no patterns should be respected, by establishing some sort of patterns even if they are not tried, even if we change them. The world we live in, unfortunately, does not get any better, and the future is not at all safe and certain. Ethics offers answers to some of the question that trouble us. A global change for the better obviously takes much more of everything, and probably mostly recognition, support and linking of those who work on that change, as well as erasing imaginary borders between 'different' fields.