

George Mason University

From the Selected Works of Lester R. Kurtz

2008

Preface

Lester R. Kurtz, *George Mason University*



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/lester_kurtz/4/

PREFACE

The problem of violence poses such a monumental challenge that it is surprising that such an intelligent species has addressed it so inadequately. Much has happened since the publication of the first edition of this encyclopedia. The events of 11 September 2001 and their tragic aftermath have raised our security alerts to a new level and made this project even more salient and urgent. Millions have died because of structural violence. Nevertheless, millions have defeated authoritarian regimes through nonviolent struggle. Millions more – perhaps billions – have been cared for with love and affection.

Our hope is that this project will raise the level of inquiry and discourse, as well as the intensity, of our investigation of violence and its alternatives. Perhaps it might inspire some new ways of thinking about these issues and draw more talented people into the process of constructing a less violent world.

We have not made enough progress in learning how to cooperate with one another more effectively or how to conduct our conflicts more peacefully. We have increased the lethality of our combat through revolutions in weapons technology and military training. Moreover, the deliberate distortion of the truth by political forces spinning reality to further specific interests make the task of knowing, more complex for scholars and citizens alike. The *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace, and Conflict* is designed to help us to take stock of our knowledge concerning these crucial phenomena.

Editing this project has been like going back to graduate school – reading such a rich collection of perspectives and findings from many disciplines and parts of the world has been one of the most educational opportunities of my life. It has also been a pleasure to work with the hundreds of people who have made this encyclopedia possible. It has been a hopeful exercise, because it is encouraging to see that we really do know a great deal and that some very smart and capable people around the world are devoting their minds and energies to understanding the conundrum of violence and how to mitigate it.

The study of violence – especially war – is as ancient as the world's sacred texts, from the reflective insights of the *Mahabharata* and *Sun Tzu* in the East to the *Torah* and *Thucydides* in the West. It has an overwhelming advantage over the study of peace when it comes to research funding and institutional infrastructure. The conduct of war is so significant to those in power that its study has a privileged place in the production of knowledge. A large proportion of public expenditures on all research in both the natural and social sciences is, in fact, controlled by military establishments. In the United States, for example, the Army Research Bureau's annual budget exceeds the total combined funding for every other federally funded social science research program including such agencies as the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, and the National Institute for Mental Health.

Because of massive data gathering, we have learned, in recent decades, a great deal about a wide range of violent behaviors from war to patterns of crime. In these volumes, readers can find summaries of those findings; for example, David Singer's 'Correlates of War' project, criminological investigations and cross-cultural, anthropological studies of violence, psychological studies of combat and aggressive behavior, feminist studies, case studies of urban and youth violence, UN investigations of the causes of war, and so forth. We have gained a great deal of insight into specific types of violence and have some reasonable theories about what causes people to engage in them.

Of particular interest to those interested in the scope of large-scale violence and where it comes from is Christopher Scherrer's appropriately encyclopedic *Violent Conflict: Contemporary Warfare, Mass Violence, and Genocide Dataset 1985–2005, Typologies and Trends*. Parallel treatments of democide, genocide, trends in warfare, and so forth lay bare the enormity of the violence problem. If, in reading these pieces, you feel overwhelmed, be sure to read Professor Scherrer's companion piece on *Prevention of Violence through Structural Accommodation*. Indeed, we have – with some difficulty – tried to balance surveys of violence with studies about how to mitigate the effects of the means of destruction. Many in the human

community have been struggling to change the course of history from violence to nonviolence around the world and with some successes. Recent decades have witnessed the flourishing of conflict transformation and alternative dispute resolution as well as the institutionalization of peace cultures, nonviolent struggle, and governmental, quasi-governmental, and nongovernmental organizations explicitly established to address the 'scourge of war', as the United Nations Charter puts it.

The academic study of peace – a poor cousin to the science of war – is a relatively recent development. This encyclopedia encompasses both enterprises, along with an array of academic disciplines in neither camp that deepen our understanding of violence. Most of the Enlightenment philosophers – in the same intellectual movement that gave birth to the modern encyclopedia – incorrectly speculated that war would gradually disappear as humans became more rational and civilized. It was not until the twentieth century – in response to the horrors of modern warfare – that empirical research and systematic study oriented toward the construction of peace became a part of the academy. Indeed, the field called 'peace studies' remains marginal to the academy despite its remarkable growth worldwide since the 1960s with the creation of formal programs in hundreds of universities and professional associations. From the International Peace Research Association, the Peace Studies Association, and the Consortium on Peace Research, Education, and Development (COPRED), to organized groups of conflict-resolution professionals and sections devoted to peace studies in disciplinary societies, an increasing number of scholars are organizing the infrastructure of peace studies.

The purpose of this encyclopedia is to bring together in one place, a broad range of information and perspectives on violence, peace, and conflict in order to enhance our understanding of these crucial phenomena and to stimulate new research, insights, and better public policies. The encyclopedia's most significant contribution is in its addressing the problem of intellectual compartmentalization by including scholarship from diverse disciplines from around the world, from military and peace sciences, to the social and biological sciences, as well as the humanities.

What Do We Know?

It is impossible to summarize briefly the information contained in these three volumes; I would, however, like to highlight some of the themes that emerge.

One major insight, repeatedly underscored in these volumes, is that most people and societies have a profound ambivalence about violence, a simultaneous abhorrence of and reliance upon it. Consequently, we engage in contradictory behavior and are unable to transcend the traps that the violent solutions culture sets for us. The relationship between knowledge and practice is complex, of course; many moderns seem to have something like an addiction to violent solutions that is much like any dependency and escapes rational analysis. Novelist Kurt Vonnegut suggests if Western civilization were a person, it could go to the nearest meeting of 'War-preparers Anonymous' and face up to its addiction. Knowledge of dire consequences does not automatically promote constructive action or deter destructive behavior; like the smoker who wants to quit but cannot, we sometimes move ahead consciously along a destructive path. Many of the articles in this encyclopedia, while remaining rooted in academic research, attempt to explore the policy implications of those investigations. Although this collection is designed to take stock of what we know, rather than prescribe action, it lays a foundation for public intellectuals, concerned citizens, and activists to do the analysis that precedes strategy.

It is a sign of the subject's complexity that we do not even have a consensus on how to define the three core concepts. Rather than try in vain to impose one, we include a variety of approaches and a discussion of the debates. Some perceive conflict as a broader phenomenon that encompasses the other two: one can engage in either violent or peaceful conflict. Others perceive peace as something that reflects the absence of conflict. These conflicting definitions reflect salient domain assumptions and produce different theories and policies regarding how to manage the conflicts that seem to be an inevitable part of social life.

Scholars define violence in several markedly different ways here. Whereas some intend it to refer only to the deliberate infliction of physical harm, others insist that psychological harm must be included as well. Still others claim that we must include the injury caused by inequality (what Johan Galtung calls 'structural violence') if the definition is to be sufficiently inclusive. Indeed, the holocaust-like deaths caused by malnutrition can scarcely be seen as anything but violent, especially by its victims, although usually not inflicted deliberately. UNICEF estimates that six million children under the age of five die annually from malnutrition – as many each year as were murdered in the German death camps. How violence is defined is an issue with profound policy implications, as demonstrated in the elaborate taxonomy provided in the article 'Definition and prevention of violence to children'.

An adequate definition of peace seems as elusive as peace itself. The most basic concept, of course, is the absence of war, or more broadly the mitigation of violence. Some would insist, however, that one cannot have peace without justice. Whereas some, following Thomas Hobbes, view peace as something that elites must impose from the top, others claim that it will result only from the grassroots mobilization of the people demanding policy changes from those in power. Some contend that it is something that one must first find within oneself; for others, inner peace comes from living within a peaceful culture. As Linda Groff notes, peace has many dimensions and understandings of it vary over time and across cultures. Elise Boulding and Douglas Fry find that some entire societies and cultures institutionalize peaceful forms of common life.

Differing perceptions of peace within the academy reflect the participation of different groups involved in its study. Whereas scholars in the military sciences tend to see peace as primarily the absence of war, for example, many students of peace from the Global South (the 'Third World') will emphasize justice as a crucial component of peace; those in religious and cultural studies, as well as many psychologists, may include inner peace as a necessary condition for peace. We have included a range of these positions in this collection.

A second central theme that emerges in these volumes is that conflict has always been part of the human experience, but that the way in which it is carried out varies substantially across time and space, in different eras and cultures, and even by different genders within most cultures. Radical changes in our technologies and strategies of conflict in the twentieth century, moreover, distinguish our conflicts from those of past eras. Because they are more destructive in their scale and scope, some age-old wisdom may become inappropriate, whereas other elements of our shared ethical and cultural heritage may be revived.

Conflict can be carried out in a variety of ways from war and violence on one end of the spectrum to nonviolent struggle on the other. In recent decades, the means of violent conflict have changed so radically as to transform the very character of violence; dual revolutions in weapons technology and military training have made violence increasingly deadly in both interpersonal and large-scale conflicts. Warfare has been relatively limited in scale and scope until quite recently. Despite widespread destruction bordering on genocide reported in ancient scriptures, premodern combat was relatively inefficient compared to contemporary warfare, and it occurred infrequently. David Grossman observes that a significant majority of soldiers in World War II combat were reportedly not firing directly at the enemy. Modern training thus incorporates operant conditioning to help recruits to the military and police overcome what appears to be a natural resistance to killing.

A growing body of evidence suggests that violent television programs, movies, and interactive video games are providing the sort of psychological conditioning for violence previously reserved for the military and police, whose behavior is usually bounded by strict rules of discipline that are missing from the lay version of the process. Consequently, although it is too early to tell what the larger impact of video games might be on various cultures, the evidence suggests strongly that homicide rates and aggressive behavior – at least among males – increase with the introduction of violent entertainment media into a culture. What is less clear is the nature of human nature with regard to propensities to violence. Violent behavior, we know, is usually gendered. Although the relationship between violence and masculinity is probably more cultural than biological, it is no secret that men commit a majority of acts of violence. Moreover, societies with lower levels of violence tend to have less gender inequality. Although the empowerment of women may not be a panacea, it would likely lower levels of violence in a society.

A final theme of this compilation is that our understanding of peace and of nonviolent conflict has undergone a revolution that (not accidentally) parallels the transformation of violent conflict in the twentieth century. Whereas the change in combat is symbolized by the atomic bomb, the revolution in nonviolence is symbolized by Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the mobilization of nonviolent social movements. As with warfare, the basic strategies and tactics of nonviolent struggle have been used throughout human history but were transformed in scale and scope in the twentieth century. People in many cultures have employed methods of nonviolent direct action and conflict resolution over the millennia, but their development and elaboration in recent decades is unprecedented. Nonviolent struggles are not always successful, but neither are violent ones; they have been remarkably effective in country after country. Toppling unpopular dictatorships through mass mobilization and nonviolent tactics of resistance from 'people power' movements has been a major feature of the geopolitical landscape. They ousted US-backed dictatorships in the Philippines and Chile, and Soviet-backed regimes in the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia and the Solidarity movement in Poland. They constituted the core of the successful anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa and the 'color revolutions' of the last decade. They undermine a regime's legitimacy, divide its elites, and set in motion a process for democratization and sometimes increased justice.

Scholarly studies of both nonviolence and military combat converge in a surprising possibility, something perhaps never fully verifiable empirically but certainly suggested by the evidence: that human beings – like other species – have not only a capacity for aggression but also a natural resistance to killing their own kind. Humans may also inherit an

inclination toward nonviolent behaviors such as cooperation, affection, and so forth. This may be an unlikely theoretical convergence between the killologists and the Dalai Lama. How else could one explain the remarkable successes of nonviolent social movements in recent decades and the resistance to killing in combat addressed by modern military training? Human genetics seem to provide relatively broad parameters for potential behavioral choices, allowing for a strong influence by culture. The question of the inherent aggressiveness or tendency toward violence in human nature remains a key unanswered question at the turn of the century, one that has profound policy implications and poses complicated methodological dilemmas for students of violence.

Nature versus Nurture

Are humans inherently violent and condemned to periodic and increasingly destructive warfare? A review of our knowledge may produce more questions than answers. We do know that violent behavior is not universal among animal species (see Hanna Kokko's article on nonprimate animal behavior studies). We also know that humans exhibit a wide range of behaviors and that their language and tool-making abilities set them somewhat apart from other species in their use of violence and the extent to which their lives are limited by biological parameters. Certainly, some individuals and cultures engage in more violence than others; is that because of biological or cultural differences, or is the variation a result of some complex interaction between the two? Most of the violence caused by humans is carried out by the males of the species; is that a direct result of genetic differences or does it come from gender socialization that promotes the use of force by males in solving problems while females are taught to create less violent solutions?

Is war inevitable, given our biological makeup? A conference organized by the Spanish office of the United Nations Educational, Social, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) addressed just this question. An interdisciplinary group of scientists participating from around the world endorsed The Seville Statement of Violence that calls into question much popular wisdom about the inherently violent nature of humanity. In their evaluation of the available scientific literature on violence they concluded that it is scientifically *incorrect* to say that:

- we have inherited a tendency to make war from our animal ancestors;
- war or any other violent behavior is genetically programmed into our human nature;
- in the course of human evolution, there has been selection for aggressive behavior more than for other kinds of behavior;
- humans have a 'violent brain';
- war is caused by 'instinct' or any single motivation.

They conclude that "biology does not condemn humanity to war, and that humanity can be freed from the bondage of biological pessimism" that prevents it from seeking peace. "The same species that invented war," they contend, "is capable of inventing peace." Although the nature–nurture debate will probably not be solved, at least in the near future, one interesting development is recent attention – especially by UNESCO – to cultures of peace in human social organization.

Cultures vary dramatically in the extent to which they promote violent behavior; indeed, many societies can be characterized as having cultures of peace. An ongoing UNESCO project initiated in 1995 analyzes the elements of peaceful cultures in hopes that they might be incorporated elsewhere, such as in war-torn societies attempting to rebuild their civil societies. A pioneer in this field of peace culture, Elise Boulding, outlines some of those characteristics in her article 'Peace culture', noting that humans have a natural tendency to respond to other humans. They are capable of conducting their conflicts peacefully and developing cultures that nurture cooperation, democratic decision making, and nonviolent conflict. Comparative studies of conflict resolution demonstrate that human cultures can organize social life on a peaceful basis. In many communities, children are socialized to conduct their conflicts nonviolently, to cooperate with and respect others, and to create social environments that are not free of conflict but have relatively little coercion or violence.

If humans may not be genetically programmed for violence and war, but are capable of developing cultures of peace, why then is there so much carnage in human life? Although the evidence is far from conclusive, and there is clearly a biological component – especially in extreme sociopathic cases – current studies of violence suggest that it is a consequence primarily of the way in which we instruct our youth, construct our values and beliefs about violence, and structure our options for carrying out conflict. In short, levels of violence probably have more to do with cultural values and social institutions than with the biological parameters within which we operate.

Violence, Culture, and Society

In recent decades, we have witnessed an escalation of both violence and efforts to mitigate it. Most violence involves some denigration of the Other, from the devaluing, demonizing, to the dehumanization of other ethnic and communal groups, and seeing the other as evil. When conflict runs along established schisms in a culture, acts of violence set off cycles of revenge, counterviolence, and further polarization.

In addition to media coverage that proliferates stereotypes and infrastructures for massive violent conflict, many people have been constructing structures and cultures that broaden social circles to include the entire human species (and beyond), and that enhance our repertoires of nonviolent communication and conflict management. Despite disappointments in the functioning of the United Nations, it continues to provide a forum for international disputes and through its various branches and agencies, concrete ways to act out its peaceful ideals. The 'decade of peace and nonviolence' (as the General Assembly proclaimed it) got off to a rocky start, but it did raise the issues in a fresh way and inspire religious organizations and various grassroots and global movements to see the value of building up a peaceful civil society and constructing an infrastructure for nonviolence.

Moreover, transnational governmental institutions continue to flourish in a historically unprecedented way. After centuries of bloody conflict in Europe, perhaps the prime example of what can be done with peaceful social organization, the European Union, moves intra-European conflicts from the battlefield to the floors of parliament and, of course, the backrooms of political machinations which may still facilitate graft and corruption but move us away from war. Although without the same global attention, the African Union made great strides in recent years, notably with the formation of its new African Parliament with its representatives elected from every single African state and its election of stateswoman and veteran women's and peace movement organizer, Gertrude Mongella, as its first president.

The international infrastructure for human rights was greatly enriched with the faltering but nonetheless historic functioning of International Tribunals and the International Criminal Court that might some day provide alternatives to war and violent rebellion. Movements, institutions, and laws to protect women and children against domestic violence flourished at the grassroots and were supported and promoted by religious institutions that mainstreamed ideas about justice that were on the margins just a few decades ago.

Many of the articles in this encyclopedia outline aspects of the way in which societies are organized within what Robert Elias calls a "culture of violent solutions." The underlying assumption in such a culture is that violence must be used to solve serious problems, including the problem of violence itself. Consequently, we often declare war upon those who commit acts of violence, using 'legitimate' violence to put an end to their 'illegitimate' use of force. A great deal of time, energy, and money in modern societies and governments is invested in a sort of war over impression management, a struggle to gain the upper hand in how one's use of violence is defined so that ours is viewed as legitimate and necessary, whereas our adversary's is illegitimate and despicable.

This framing process often involves an effort to obtain hegemony in public discourse about violence, as states, social movements, and various interest groups all struggle to have the situation defined in their favor. The ruling ideas about violence in any given social context are, of course, profoundly influenced by the ideas of those who have the most power in that context. In cultures that emphasize the use of violence in their conflicts, the narratives used to differentiate between legitimate and illegitimate violence usually reflect the social structure: violence by the state and elites is considered legitimate. The poor and marginalized are made scapegoats and blamed for the violence in their society even if they actually perpetrate only a small proportion of it.

Even in societies where there is relatively free public discourse, a limited range of options for defining violence and its use are enforced, setting up boundaries around what is considered viable. This aspect of framing varies dramatically from culture to culture. In some societies the use of violence is so soundly condemned that it is seldom considered as a serious option for conflict management. In other contexts, the failure to use violence is condemned as weak and ineffective. Control over the narrative process defining these norms thus becomes crucial in determining whose violence is accepted and whose is rejected, which modes of conflict are considered useful and which ineffective. St. Augustine understood this when he laid the groundwork for Just War theory in the fourth century, just as did Clausewitz when he founded modern military science centuries later. The nature of those narratives and who controls them has varied widely over time and across cultures.

In most pre-agricultural and even pre-industrial societies, religious elites and institutions tend to control the defining narratives. The legends and stories of oral traditions and sacred scriptures provide the standards by which particular acts of violence or modes of conflict are evaluated. From the Hebrew *Torah* to the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Qur'an*, stories told around the campfire by village storytellers and recited in places of worship, people learn which styles of conflict are

considered ethical with regard to the use of force. The violence of nature, as well as that of foreign peoples, is often explained as an ‘act of God’, and remedies that can be applied to problematic situations are provided in the narratives.

In modern cultures, authoritative storytelling – like many other social functions – is wrested from religious institutions and given to the state in an effort to democratize political authority. Giving the state authority does offer some remedies to earlier abuses, but modern political elites claim a monopoly of violence for the state and use force so widely to back up their claims that state violence has caused an unprecedented number of deaths by war, genocide, and democide in the twentieth century, as Alan Grimshaw observes.

Now a new force is moving centerstage, the commercialization of storytelling, so that the narratives that have the most impact on popular culture are written by professionals, told in the media of the age – television, movies, and interactive video games, etc. – and sponsored by multinational corporations.

These new myths and legends regarding the appropriate use of force continue to reflect the interests of those in power and have three major themes. First, we find the age-old maxim that force is often necessary for serious problem solving. This idea is presented repeatedly in narrative form in the popular media and recounted by people who discuss the latest television shows and movies: a crime is committed and the police track down the criminals and drag them off to jail. They are brought to trial, convicted, and justice prevails. In the international arena, parallel narratives unfold as criminal heads of state and marginal groups lacking states are apprehended and brought to justice. Terrorists operating on behalf of a dictator or religious fanatic are hunted down and punished, and so on. We all know the stories and their various reincarnations – how security is threatened by criminals and then reestablished by proper authorities using necessary force within a framework of laws.

Embedded within these entertaining narratives are lessons to be drawn about how people are to solve their problems and recognize the necessity for legitimate authorities to use violence, thus raising the second theme, that is, that some violence is legitimate and other force is not. As with the first theme, a social problem emerges, a struggle ensues, and sooner or later, the problem is solved by force. Erich Fromm once observed that when individuals behave like nations do, we put them in an institution, either a prison or a mental hospital. When states kill, maim, or appropriate property, we hear stories about the honor of such acts. When the same acts are committed by individuals or groups not sanctioned by the state, or by enemy states, they are condemned as horrific.

The difference between the two kinds of violence is determined, of course, by the power of those who use it. The mechanism by which the violence employed by those in power is defined as legitimate is the cultural process embedded in the narratives of the culture. The monopoly of legitimacy still lies with the state even in postmodern culture, but it is not taken for granted; even well-established and popular regimes must now hire professional storytellers to frame their use of violence as legitimate and to counter the critics of their war-fighting, crime-fighting policies.

These for-profit stories about the necessity of fighting bad violence with good are not the only frame provided by modern culture. The major alternative to the good-versus-bad-violence frame is the innovative idea of the industrial age that consumerism can be used to solve problems as well, as told explicitly in advertisements and more subtly in the story lines of other genres. The paradigm here appears in fast food advertisements: within a 60-second story, an entire drama unfolds. A problem disrupts the routine of social life but is quickly and efficiently solved by having everyone buy fast food. Everyone sits around smiling and eating; conflicts are resolved and order is restored.

This example seems to have taken us far afield from the initial problem of violence. It is, however, extremely salient: the consumer alternative to brute force seems less violent, certainly, than the use of guns, and many claim that a peaceful future will result from world trade, the free market, and the creation of an affluent lifestyle for everyone. This vision, others argue, is only superficially benign. Hidden behind the smiling consumer faces, they claim, is a very elaborate story of structural violence and destruction. The apparently positive search for happiness through material consumption is globally seductive, the critics argue. It promises more than it delivers because the satisfaction it brings is elusive and temporary, and the process creates a global social system with the hidden violence of mass poverty held in place by a system of overt violence in the form of a military–industrial complex that protects the interests of the rich and powerful. This sort of violence is the object of more recent research, and we know little about its mechanisms because it is subtle, complex, and global, and its investigation often marginalized or politicized.

A final set of narratives in the postmodern era is also examined in this encyclopedia: those of nonviolent resistance from Gandhi and the Indian Freedom Movement to Martin Luther King, Jr. and the US Civil Rights Movement, as well as the pro-democracy and other nonviolent movements for social change that they inspired. These stories challenge much conventional wisdom but have their roots in ancient cultures and have taken their place in the dominant culture of the late twentieth century, legitimating what Czech president Vaclav Havel calls ‘the power of the powerless’. From this perspective, violence accentuates and forces hierarchy and embellishes inequality, whereas nonviolence facilitates equality and empowers democratic movements.

We know much more now about how to mobilize nonviolent struggles, although admittedly less than we do about training and employing military forces. After all, we have not been doing it very long. The strategies and tactics of nonviolent action have been examined historically and explicitly only in the twentieth century and are summarized here by the most prominent student of modern nonviolent action, Gene Sharp, as well as in Thomas Weber's broader discussion of nonviolence in theory and practice. An analysis of Freedom House data by Adrian Karatnycky and Peter Ackerman found that the many transitions from more authoritarian to more democratic regimes in recent decades was driven primarily by nonviolent 'people power' coalitions in civic society that undermine the pillars of power, divide elites and their enforcers, and erode the legitimacy of violent states.

We know even less about how to organize individuals, families, and nations nonviolently, but that too, is a subject of analysis that will persist into the next century. The future of nonviolence remains problematic, of course, especially given the domain assumptions of prevailing realpolitik theories of conflict and current structures for militarizing international conflict, but some remarkable changes have occurred in recent decades that are explored in this encyclopedia. Is anything clearer from the empirical data of global politics than the fact that social institutions – even the most powerful – are impermanent? The fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the apartheid system in South Africa, and the bringing down of dictators in country after country by nonviolent social movements, show the limitations of violence and the possibilities for change. These volumes attempt to bring into clearer focus, the options before us and the consequences of our collective choices, as we evaluate these debates and study our policies.

Our hope is that this work will provide us with a more comprehensive picture of our current state of knowledge about violence, peace, and conflict. This collection is broader in its coverage than any other currently available resource, but we cannot claim to raise all of the right questions, let alone provide the necessary answers to them. It is not as comprehensive as one might hope, however, and some caveats are in order.

First, despite our best efforts to broaden the authorship of the encyclopedia (and did improve over the first edition), the majority of the contributors are still Western, notably North American. Although this does in some sense reflect the current state of scholarship (because of Western dominance and resources), it does not necessarily reveal our best knowledge.

Second, the very genre of the encyclopedia – with its nonadversarial standpoint and objective tone – may ironically exclude some of our best insights into the subject matter. Indeed, articles by two very knowledgeable people were not included because their articles were inappropriate for the genre (they were too argumentative). Another piece was edited substantially but in the end was deemed too pejorative in tone. One prominent Latin American scholar declined our invitation upfront, suggesting that if we wanted an objective article on the topic we had asked the wrong person. The work by another author, who is a master of large-scale historical detail, was severely criticized by the reviewer and the article was scrutinized by several people and painstakingly edited by the author, in part because of inflammatory language that was understandable given the subject matter, but problematic for the tone of this project.

Finally, the publication of this sort of resource – which we hope will be relevant for some time – can give the misleading notion that knowledge about a topic is fixed and definitive. On the contrary, the truth about any topic – and especially our understanding of the truth – changes dramatically over time so that it can be misleading to interpret the contents of these volumes in a reified manner. Although this work reviews our current state of knowledge about violence, peace, and conflict, it is a snapshot of a rapidly changing area of inquiry into a constantly shifting set of phenomena.

Thank you for joining us in this ongoing investigation. I would be happy to receive comments, criticisms, or information about ongoing research or perspectives that are not adequately represented here.

Lester Kurtz
George Mason University