# *Introduction*

In polarized societies like the contemporary United States, communication seems both necessary and ineffective. We need passionate activism that can build coalitions, encourage cooperation, and challenge the myths that stand in the way of a more just social order. Silence favors those in positions of power; division favors the status quo. If society is to be reformed, let alone transformed, people will need to strengthen the bonds of fellowship that make democracy an effective check on totalitarianism.

The need for communication is evident, but actual communication between opposing groups seems fruitless. More than in recent memory, arguments seem to convince only those who already agree with the conclusion, and shared premises seem few and far between. Political advocacy tends to drive people further into their ideological camps. Like pressing on the gas pedal when your car is stuck in the mud, the more passionately we champion our viewpoints, the more mired we become in the inertia of polarization.

As I define it, polarization is not principally a matter of disagreement over policies. It is a social climate in which people perceive there to be two groups in zero-sum contention with one another. In polarized societies, individuals feel social pressure to identify with one of these groups and overcome the other, and this pressure inhibits critical reflection on what is actually true and just, as well as making it seem as though

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cooperation across the cultural-political fault line is hopeless.[1]

Scholars of conflict transformation remind us that not all social conflicts are polarized, and that conflict does not need to be alienating, frustrating, or antagonistic.[2] Conflicts can be waged in either constructive or destructive ways. Social psychologist Susan Opotow explains the distinction:

> Destructive conflict is characterized by competitive processes, antagonistic interests, impoverished communication, suspicion, and harsh tactics. Efforts to maximize one's own gains can justify disregarding others' goals or well-being. Constructive conflict, by contrast, is characterized by cooperative processes, a focus on mutual gains, open communication, and trust.[3]

In constructive conflicts, opposing groups try to resolve problems together, even though there may be significant disagreements about how to frame and address these problems. The competitive urge to defeat one's opponents takes a back seat to the desire to achieve outcomes that benefit everyone involved. Since constructive conflict can be a catalyst for positive change, we should not avoid conflict but engage in it with courage, humility, and a recognition of our interdependence.[4]

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[1] For a survey of different types of polarization, see Russell P. Johnson, "The Gospel in a Polarized Society: Newbigin and Roberts on Ephesian Protest," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 57.3 (Summer 2022): 332–338.

[2] Louis Kriesberg offers this definition: "a social conflict arises when two or more persons or groups manifest the belief that they have incompatible objectives." *Constructive Conflicts: From Escalation to Resolution*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 2.

[3] Susan Opotow, "The Scope of Justice, Intergroup Conflict, and Peace" in *The Oxford Handbook of Intergroup Conflict*, ed. Linda Tropp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 82. One of the best recent attempts to create a model for constructive conflict is Jason A. Springs, *Healthy Conflict in Contemporary American Society: From Enemy to Adversary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[4] See Ellen Ott Marshall, *Introduction to Christian Ethics: Conflict, Faith, and the Human Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2018), 1–5; John Paul

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I believe that constructive conflict is a worthwhile ideal, though I have serious concerns about the way many ethicists and pundits try to regulate it. The dominant mode of thinking about morality in social conflict is to insist upon a set of rules for all parties to abide by, regardless of their convictions or goals. Whether one is fighting for libertarianism or democratic socialism, the reasoning goes, one should be civil in one's speech and respectful in one's actions. This approach – prescribing norms that all parties should follow – has its merits, but also profound limitations. The language of civility serves to stifle dissenting voices and preserve the stereotypes that allow injustice to continue. Guidelines for rational deliberation make it difficult for people to express their strongest convictions and most urgent protests. Commitments to respect and honesty get routinely abandoned in polarized social conflicts, and rules of civility not only fail to restrain this tendency but can actually facilitate it.

In the chapters that follow, I argue that *how* one communicates is integrally related to *what* one communicates, and so activists' goals provide resources for thinking morally about the rhetorical tactics they employ. Rather than insisting that all parties follow a set of rules, disputants should hold themselves and one another accountable to their own visions of a better world. By thinking simultaneously about the ends we hope to achieve and the means we use to get there, we can discover a new logic for thinking about ethics and effectiveness in social conflict.

The prevailing mode of thinking about communication ethics is to see moral norms as a matter of restraint. For the sake of moral decency or the survival of the democratic polity, partisans should hold back from using all of the rhetorical

Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation* (New York: Good Books, 2014).

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weapons at their disposal. This picture of moral norms as constraints is shared by those who insist we obey the rules of civility and those who insist we defy them. My goal in this book is not to argue for one side or the other, but to offer a different picture. On this picture, participants in social conflicts should engage with their opponents dialogically and critically *precisely because doing so will be conducive to their goals*. For the sake of their own deepest convictions, activists should take up this form of struggle, which has the power to cut through the distortive and ironic effects of polarization. By doing so, people with strong moral commitments can embody an alternative way of addressing social problems, one that depends upon truth rather than violence.

### THE DILEMMA OF DIALOGUE AND CRITIQUE

Dialogue is often treated as a communicative ideal, but it is just as frequently deemed naïve and unrealistic. In a perfect world, it is said, we would happily recognize and affirm one another and seek to understand different perspectives. We would listen patiently to one another before sharing our own commitments. But this is the real world. There are real social problems, real disagreements, and real evils that need to be resisted.

For many, dialogue has become synonymous with compromise. Even its proponents often treat dialogue as something tentative, skeptical, and yielding. For some, to engage in dialogue means to give up the goal of persuasion; in dialogue one tries to understand rather than to convince. For others, dialogue involves a mutual agreement to follow certain rules of order, to refrain from judgments, or to treat the relationships between dialogue partners as more important than the topics being discussed. Appeals for dialogue also tend to be ignorant of power inequalities between would-be dialogue

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partners; as communication theorist Julia Wood notes, "Why should a CEO engage in dialogue with a line worker who wants better working conditions but cannot afford to risk her or his job?"[5]

Even further, many argue that it is dangerous to engage in dialogue with proponents of ideologies deemed beyond the pale, because listening to these views grants them a degree of legitimacy they do not deserve. Calls for dialogue are also viewed with suspicion because "dialogue" can be a pretense for those in positions of power to silence those with dissenting views. Conservative theologian R. R. Reno writes,

> Let's be honest: Crusaders for doctor-assisted suicide and gay rights are not interested in dialogue. Secular progressives demand unconditional surrender. "Dialogue" has become one of their many tactics for neutralizing opposition. In my years as a theology professor, as a rare conservative in higher education, I became accustomed to calls for dialogue on this or that issue. In almost every instance, it was a set-up for mandatory public capitulation.[6]

Despite their differences, Wood and Reno express what many have come to believe: dialogue with one's ideological opponents is a pipe dream. Even when it's possible, it's at best ineffective and at worst capitulation. Dialogue is seen as antithetical to the kind of disruptive protest that challenges injustice and exposes false ideologies.

While dialogue is not a panacea, neither is critique. Monologues that castigate those responsible for social problems cannot, by themselves, sustain a body politic. Rhetoric that antagonizes opposing groups tends to be well-received

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5 Julia Wood, "Foreword," in *Dialogue: Theorizing Difference in Communication Studies*, eds. Rob Anderson, Leslie Baxter, and Kenneth Cissna (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2004), xix–xx.

6 R. R. Reno, "Against Human Rights," *First Things* (May 2016), www.firstthings.com/article/2016/05/against-human-rights.

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among one's own ideological camp, but among opponents, it is treated as further evidence that they have been unheard and misrepresented, and among the unpersuaded, it is often an occasion to distance themselves even further from the political fray. Josina Makau and Debian Marty speak for many when they observe that "the fabric of our communities is at risk of being shattered by polarization, acrimony, demonization, and other forms of fracture. Being heard, known, and understood have become increasingly rare experiences for individuals and groups, creating disabling obstacles to people's abilities to work together in pursuit of common purpose."[7] As Martin Buber argues, when "seeing-through and unmasking" become the dominant modes of dealing with political opponents to the point where each side takes for granted that the other is not genuine in their convictions, then the result is spiraling mutual suspicion and "existential mistrust."[8] In its most extreme forms, critique ceases to be about addressing problems at all and instead becomes a cynical attempt to score points as the clock winds down on democracy.

For some, it is a prerequisite for critique and protest that one must have absolute certainty about the rightness of one's cause and the wrongness of one's opponents. If one can only engage in dialogue when one is open-minded, it is assumed, one can only engage in critique when one feels no ambivalence and perceives no ambiguities. Concerning oneself with opponents' feelings shows a lack of conviction. Admitting that other viewpoints are credible cedes ground to the forces of evil. Taking people's self-reported motivations seriously is a sign that one has not comprehended the

[7] Josina M. Makau and Debian L. Marty, *Dialogue and Deliberation* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2013), 1.

[8] Martin Buber, "Hope for This Hour," in *Pointing the Way* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), 221.

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way of the world. Spirals of mutual recrimination have led many people to see political argumentation as the domain of self-righteous ideologues and self-interested demagogues. It is a game that is far too exhausting, far too unkind, and far too alienating for most people to want to play beyond occasionally retweeting something that confirms their preexisting beliefs. Partisan rhetoric may serve to mobilize the base for a particular election, but at the cost of further entrenching people in their echo chambers, rendering them increasingly incapable of listening to a voice that calls their assumptions into question.[9]

The popular perception is that dialogue is insufficiently critical and critique is insufficiently dialogical. This contributes to the fragmented nature of communication ethics in polarized societies. People across the political spectrum want communication to be more dialogical and will chastise opponents for using dismissive rhetoric, bad-faith arguments, straw men, and *ad hominem* attacks. But the same people will also insist that the bitter realities of their present situation render dialogue either a pale alternative to forceful rhetoric or a spring-loaded trap designed to stifle dissenting voices. The same could be said of respect, listening, compassion, and cooperation – people will sincerely insist that they value these, while also approving of manipulative and dehumanizing rhetoric in certain cases. This result is widespread hypocrisy and self-deception. Partisans switch back and forth between ethical logics like settings on a fan, often without realizing they are doing so. In polarized political cultures, each side criticizes its opponents' inconsistency while justifying their own. According to

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[9] I still find the language of "echo chambers" helpful, though recent research has challenged the typical picture people have about the media's role in polarization. See Chris Bail, *Breaking the Social Media Prism: How to Make Our Platforms Less Polarizing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021).

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conservatives, liberals preach tolerance and compassion but
will nonetheless resort to rhetoric that mocks, silences, and
attributes malicious motives to conservatives. According to
liberals, conservatives preach morality and virtue but will
nonetheless resort to rhetoric that misleads, demeans, and
stereotypes. Even if many of these accusations of hypocrisy
are exaggerated, there is some truth to them; it is difficult
for people to maintain a consistent communication ethic
while actively participating in social conflict.

How can we speak and act in ways that effectively over-
come the distortive and ironic effects of polarized social con-
flict? This book is an attempt to clear up the misconceptions
about dialogue, critique, and ethics that contribute to this
fragmented moral landscape. I argue that rather than treating
dialogue and critique as opposites, they can be pursued simul-
taneously. Dialogical critique combines, on the one hand,
charitable attention to people whose views one disagrees
with and, on the other, an uncompromising commitment to
the truth and a willingness to challenge ideas and actions that
are dangerously misguided. On this approach, the critic seeks
to understand the interlocutor's views on their own terms,
takes the possibility that the interlocutor might have insights
that are valuable and truthful, and then leads their interlocu-
tor – working simultaneously with and against them – toward
a different way of thinking and acting. Dialogical critique can
help activists subvert zero-sum "us versus them" frameworks
and cultivate a collaborative problem-solving framework.
Arguments for dialogical critique as a form of communication
in social conflict, I contend, do not need to rest on abstract
principles but can be rooted in the specific goals and commit-
ments of the participants in those conflicts. One seeks to be
dialogical, not *in spite of* one's strong moral convictions, but
*because* of them – because one wants one's audiences to
realize the vision of a better world one is striving to achieve.

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For a wide range of goals, dialogical critique is not only a moral form of communication but an effective means of achieving lasting change.

Dialogical communication is not limited to interpersonal encounters where all participants agree to listen receptively. In contrast to some theories of dialogue, the vision of dialogical critique I offer here does not require the participation of the other (though it does invite it). We can engage dialogically with another person even if they refuse to be dialogical in return. If we understand dialogical communication as principally a matter of responding thoughtfully to an interlocutor and inviting a response from them, speaking *to* or *with* others and not merely *about* them, then a person can give a speech or write a book in a dialogical manner.[10]

Thus, I am not suggesting that we can resolve all of our disagreements by calmly discussing the issues that divide us. As nonviolent direct action illustrates, we can confront injustice in a dialogical way, working simultaneously with and against others in an effort to bring about revolutionary change. Instead of bracketing our convictions for the sake of sustaining a façade of peace, we should struggle passionately for a better world and do so in a way that dramatizes problems, invites constructive responses, overcomes misunderstandings, and enables people to focus on what's right rather than who's winning.

[10] Barnett Pearce writes, "My own work uses the adverb 'dialogically' more than the noun 'dialogue.' This usage signals a conceptualization of dialogue as a quality with which we perform the whole gamut of speech acts that comprise social life." "Foreword," in Kenneth Cissna and Rob Anderson, *Moments of Meeting: Buber, Rogers, and the Potential for Public Dialogue* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002), ix. See also Josina Makau and Debian L. Marty, *Cooperative Argumentation: A Model for Deliberative Community* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 2001), 180. My account of dialogical communication beyond face-to-face dialogues is indebted to Mikhail Bakhtin.

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### AUDIENCES

While this book contributes to scholarly debates within the fields of rhetorical theory and political theory, it is written principally for four overlapping audiences:

### People Who Want an Effective Strategy for Positive Social Change

My primary hope is that it will be useful to people who are striving to work to make the world a better place and want to communicate – through words and actions – in ways that make positive social change possible.

According to Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., the *means* one uses to effect social change must be consonant with the *ends* one hopes to achieve. I defend a version of this principle, arguing that communication practices will be more effective at bringing about positive social change when they are expressive of the vision of a better society they advocate. For King, since the ultimate goal is the creation of the beloved community, the form and the content of one's symbolic actions need to work together to convey the same message of peace and justice for all. "Love your enemies" is not only a biblical commandment but the foundation of a practical model for advocacy in polarized societies.[11] The fact that this nonviolent form of communication is not the product of armchair moralizing but has been the working principle of social movements should give activists reason to consider making their protests and

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[11] "Love your enemies" has often been described as an ethic for interpersonal relationships, not applicable to large-scale political conflicts. I find this puzzling, because it seems to me readily applicable to large-scale conflicts but difficult and painful to apply to relationships broken by manipulation and abuse. There is a relevant distinction between the opponent-enemy in a social conflict and the offender-enemy who has directly harmed another person. The arguments of this book apply directly to the former, and only indirectly – with many qualifications about boundaries and power dynamics – to the latter.

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