

Peace Studies: An Alternative Perspective on International Security

Written by James Whitehead

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JAMES WHITEHEAD, AUG 30 2013

Why Might it be Argued That an Intellectual Focus on the Conditions of Peace is More Appropriate Than a More Traditional Focus on the Conditions Giving Rise to War?

With the traditional approach to international security stemming from a Realist, state-centric focus, and being developed with the rise of Strategy Studies during the Cold War, it is clear that the emphasis on power politics and military security has dominated the field of Security Studies in the last century.[1] From an alternative viewpoint to the traditional empirical focus on the balance of power and the conditions giving rise to war, Peace Studies has been established in the post-1945 period with a normative re-conceptualisation of violence, attempting to concentrate on conflict resolution and peace-building.[2] As an important dimension to Security Studies, the focus on Peace has advanced in the post-Cold War era, maintaining a global and multicultural outlook and becoming largely interdisciplinary, forming a bridge between the fields of Sociology, International Relations, History, Politics, and Economics, to name but a few.[3]

With this in mind, it is important to assess the value of Peace Studies in the twenty-first century, and the relevance of its agenda as a response to the challenges to international security. As the nature and impact of conflict has evolved in recent decades, particularly in a globalised context, it becomes necessary to understand how an alternative perception of peace and war can provide balance to the debate surrounding stability and security. This essay, then, will begin with a brief background to Peace Studies, summarising its origins and evolution in becoming a recognised academic field. In doing so it will be possible to assess Peace Studies' contribution in the twenty-first century as a sub-discipline within Security Studies and International Relations and, in turn, consider the benefits of a more positive approach to peace in contrast to a negative conception of peace as the absence of war.

Providing a concise introduction to the reasons behind the increasing focus on peace in the modern era, Brunk asserts that, since the twentieth century has been described as the bloodiest in recorded human history, with not only two World Wars and the Cold War, but also ethnic, religious and revolutionary conflicts in addition to border wars between smaller states,

“surely one of the most important tasks for humanity in the new millennium is to learn how to handle individual, social and national or international strife in more constructive and peaceful ways.”[4]

Through understanding the nature of human conflicts and the reasons behind them, Peace Studies academics attempt to address not only peaceful resolutions to these crises, but also to redefine and determine a positive conception of peace as a condition which can be worked towards, as both a process and a goal.[5]

With the origins of thinking about peace rooted in all religious traditions, the development of Just War Theory and Christian pacifism can be seen as examples of the early objections to war and the consideration of the morality and justification of violence. For instance, we can observe the Quakers playing a key role in founding the early peace societies during the seventeenth-century.[6] However, secular rationalism in eighteenth-century Europe can be seen as the basis of modern Peace Studies, with theorists such as Rousseau and Kant producing critical reflections on the

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question of the international organisation of states to secure a permanent condition of peace.[7]

Kant's "Perpetual Peace" can be regarded as the origins of twentieth-century idealism, and an innovative proposal for the relationship between republican states operating within a wider federation, bound by treaties and sets of norms which promote enduring peace and stability. To highlight this, we can draw from a few of the preliminary articles by which Kant anticipated the eradication of war between states:

"No treaty of peace that tacitly reserves issues for a future war shall be held valid. For if this were the case, it would be a mere truce, a suspension of hostilities, not peace, which means the end of all hostilities." [8]

It is clear that Kant's work contains elements of modern thinking around peace in terms of both its conceptualisation and the mechanisms in place to preserve it. As a further point of emphasis, Kant states that:

"a nation is not a possession. It is a society of men whom no one other than the nation itself can command or dispose of. [It follows, therefore, that] no nation shall forcibly interfere with the constitution and government of another, [and] no nation at war with another shall permit such acts of war as shall make mutual trust impossible during some future time of peace." [9]

As we can see from this, Kant's thinking on the subject of peace is today rooted in both liberal thought on international society, and provides the fundamental basis for positive peace, which is embraced by Peace Studies. It is this active promotion of peace and recognition of sovereignty which is embodied in international and intergovernmental organisations such as the United Nations.

To fully understand Peace Studies in the twenty-first century, and the relevance of its approach to international security, we should first look at its development as a post-World War Two school of thought in contrast to Conflict Studies, which had concerned itself with a scientific understanding of war. To draw a parallel between the two academic principles, it is worth noting that they share a common origin in the instability and fear of nuclear conflict in the aftermath of World War Two. With the growth of the international scope of interdisciplinary study,

"it is not an exaggeration to say that some analyses of International Relations in the 1950s accepted that, if a power-politics model of International Relations were adopted nuclear weapons might be used. It was partly a response to this mode of analysis that there developed the search for an alternative conventional wisdom." [10]

Whilst Conflict Studies was preoccupied with understanding peace through an empirical study of war, that is to say in 'negative' terms by which peace can only be achieved through a prevention of war, Peace Studies on the other hand attempted to look for a new way of understanding human conflict through a redefinition of peace itself and a focus on the active pursuit of security and stability. [11]

Gathering pace in the latter part of the twentieth-century, peace movements and large-scale mobilisations against war (for instance those in response to the Vietnam War) consequently led to the increase in disarmament activism and a more effective organisation of campaigns, presenting a more institutionalised opposition to conflict and the methods of war. [12] With the momentum from pacifism's principled objection to war, the need for greater research around the strategies and proposals for peace became embodied in academic institutes. To take a brief look at the role of pacifism in establishing a background to peace research, it is worth noting that "the concept of pragmatic pacifism bridges the gap [between pacifism and just war tradition] and provides a more holistic framework for understanding peace advocacy." [13] When we consider the spread and deepening of democracy, the conditions for the generation of pacifist movements arise since "pacifism is by its very nature an activist commitment that depends for its expression on the right of people to assemble and speak freely." [14] As we have seen in recent decades, the amalgamation of human rights and strategies for peace are epitomised by advocates seeking more vigorous international action, which even go as far as justifying the use of force "as a necessary means to ending oppression and securing peace with justice." [15]

Looking back to the early Cold-War period, we can see that Peace Studies emerged as an academic discipline in its

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own right in the late 1950s, as a response to the traditional focus of a state-centric balance of power in a climate of nuclear stalemate, which threatened to escalate at any given moment. To highlight the establishment of this new approach of creating societies with a culture of peace, in which peace can be nurtured, we can observe the institutional bodies which make Peace Studies more than simply academic, but also active in promoting international peace and stability. For example, although the initial cornerstone for Peace Studies was within universities and research departments, this was extended (particularly in Europe) through dedicated peace centres and institutes whose aim was to actively research peace, and influence government policy to encompass the wider agenda of human security. Founded in 1959 by Johan Galtung, what is now known as the Peace Research Institute of Oslo (PRIO) was initially formed as part of the Norwegian Institute of Social Research, but became independent in 1966 and started a specialised journal publication, the *Journal of Peace Research*.^[16] Similar to the Norwegian example, two of the largest Peace Studies centres in the world were founded in the UK and Sweden. Set up in 1966, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) has established a global reputation for its research around arms control, arms races and disarmament. The British equivalent, the Department of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford, was created in 1973 and is now the world's largest university peace studies centre.^[17]

As is clear, the growth in size of Peace Studies as an accepted discipline and school of thought around conflict and security demonstrates the shift in thinking (from certain perspectives) on global issues. But it is now important to explore the characteristics which set Peace Studies apart from a traditional focus within International Relations.

To begin, the underlying principle of Peace Studies is its normative commitment to peace. Defining this as 'peace creation' as opposed to 'war reduction', Francis Beer acknowledges that these theories "go beyond buffering existing international relations. They focus on balancing and restructuring of the world system."^[18] By balancing, Beer refers to the "attempt to rearrange the importance of, and relations between, the different levels of the system."^[19] Thus, Peace Studies moves away from the traditional state-centric focus and aims to shrink and soften the nation-state to enhance the protection and development of human rights, including the premise that "a strong healthy system grows through the growth of its component parts, rather than at their expense."^[20]

With regards to 'restructuring', Beer asserts that it is a major task of peace creation, and seeks to "restructure processes and activities *within* different levels of the international system."^[21] With the focus on demilitarisation, and the promotion of equality and stability at the international, domestic, and individual level,

"this means less emphasis on the law of war, international military peacekeeping, international military alliances, domestic military regimes, military expenditure, and military themes in media and culture."^[22]

As just one example of some of the theories and propositions inherent within Peace Studies and Peace Theory, Beer's suggestions demonstrate how the school of thought has been labelled at the radical end of international theory moving away from the earlier, more liberal, approaches to peace.

As demonstrated by the justification for the use of force in humanitarian emergencies being advocated by some pragmatic pacifists and peace activists, we can observe that the nature of peace is undergoing significant change in the twenty-first century. That is to say, we are sometimes willing to forego the immediate prevention of conflict to preserve a wider balance of human security and peace. On this note Peace Studies has pursued a redefinition of both peace and violence to challenge this idea, and formulated its fundamental theories around Johan Galtung's observations on structural and cultural violence in addition to positive and negative peace.

In terms of redefining violence, as well as its intrinsic relationship with peace, Galtung differentiates between actual and potential, negative and positive. With regards to actual and potential, Galtung refers to avoidable and unavoidable instances. "In other words, when the potential is higher than the actual is, by definition, avoidable and when it occurs when it is avoidable, then violence is present."^[23] With regards to the nature of violence itself, Galtung introduces the idea that we can refer to violence even when no individual person is committing a direct act. That is to say, 'structural violence' occurs when the effect is avoidable, and yet the structures of the state or within the international system have created a situation which allows a person to suffer. To relate this to positive peace processes, Galtung establishes that a lack of structural violence is the presence of equality. Comparatively, we can

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note the difference in terms of negative peace, which takes a lack of structural violence to mean an absence of exploitation. Similarly, concerning direct violence, taken to mean intended harm by an actor, negative peace denotes an absence of conflict in the form of a ceasefire, whereas positive peace is more operational in its pursuit of cooperation to actively prevent violence.[24]

Defining 'cultural violence', Galtung states that it is a product at the societal level of a culture, which "legitimizes direct and/or structural violence." [25] This form of violence is, perhaps, the most perturbing as it goes beyond the structures of the nation-state, to being embodied by the very nature of the society within which it exists. With this in mind, we can see a massive widening of the scope of Peace Studies if it is to tackle the creation or pursuit of peace, since these injustices are a consequence of either an absence of culture/human nature or an active pursuit of discrimination. By fostering a culture of peace and encouraging dialogue through building structures of reciprocity and equality, and human autonomy through education, literacy and the creation of a stimulus for new ideas, Peace Studies and, in turn, peace-building in post-conflict societies, represents the very core of humanitarian ideals and unity in the international system which constitute security issues in the twenty-first century.[26]

By applying the concepts of positive and negative peace to all three, direct, structural and cultural violence, Galtung determines that:

"this gives us six peace tasks: eliminating the direct violence that causes suffering; eliminating the structures that cause suffering through economic inequity, or, say, walls once placing Jews, now Palestinians, in ghettos; and eliminating cultural themes that justify one or the other. The task known as ceasefire is only one-sixth of a complete peace process." [27]

By broadening the definitions of peace and violence and, as a result, the scope of Peace Studies, Galtung has also enabled the school of thought to widen the agenda of Security Studies itself. When we consider that the traditional focus in the twentieth-century has been on an East-West basis, particularly during the Cold War, it is true to say that Peace Studies has been "quick to embrace major issues of the North-South wealth/poverty divide and the potential effects of global environmental constraints." [28]

Incorporating inequality and injustice at both a structural and societal or cultural level, Peace Studies is able to take into account both physical and psychological needs of the individual, asserting that people have the fundamental human right to mental freedom and freedom from institutionalised discrimination. A key British theorist, Paul Rogers has determined that the central principles of Peace Studies have allowed it to remain flexible and evolve over time by embracing a "strong interdisciplinary outlook, a consciously global orientation and a determined linkage between theory and practice." [29] By searching for non-violent, peaceful ways of settling disputes and mitigating actual violence or preventing potential violence, Peace Studies has balanced the debate surrounding the legitimacy and justification for the use of force. It has maintained its moral and ethical focus and challenged the status quo through comparative study of peaceful and non-peaceful processes of political and social change.[30]

However, it is important to question the viability of Peace Studies to respond to the changing nature of conflict in the twenty-first century, and how its agenda can remain as a relevant alternative to the traditional focus on war. Rogers has recognised that two broader issues are framing the global system and the conflicts within it, which will ultimately mean that Peace Studies becomes even more relevant as opposed to losing its scope. Since...

"the deep and enduring inequalities in the global distribution of wealth and economic power [are] likely to ensure that, within thirty years, one seventh of the world's population will control three-quarters of the wealth," [31]

...it can be argued that Peace Studies' unique re-conceptualisation of peace and human insecurity will allow it to embrace the resultant socio-economic polarisation.[32] The second impending issue which Rogers envisages is that the environmental crisis will increase the difficulty for conventional economic growth to improve human well-being at both a regional and global level. He identifies the potential for resource conflict on issues such as food, land, water, mineral and fossil fuels in addition to increased migratory pressures, particularly since nationalist tendencies and cultural conflict "are often most pronounced in the most vulnerable and disempowered populations within the

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recipient regions.”[33]

The increase in violent responses of the disempowered in the form of transnational movements and revolutionary retaliation to oppression, taking for example the Arab Spring, along with the growing pressure of globalisation, post-colonial fragmentation, sectarian and factional exploitation, and increased internal political tensions, hold widespread repercussions for the international community and International Relations as a discipline. The sub-disciplines of Peace Studies and Security Studies are facing the challenge of responding to these situations to provide both short term and long term solutions for resolving conflict.

In direct response to the shift in socio-economic divisions and environmental constraints, Peace Studies retains its relevance as it proposes co-operation on the matters of sustainable development, debt relief and development aid and trade reform. With regards to issues that fit more closely with a traditional idea of security, such as conflict and revolution, coupled with the global fight against militant Islamic terrorism, Rogers highlights that many of the solutions considered by the international community draw directly from peace research terminology. Ideas such as “crisis prevention, peace-keeping, peace-making, [as well as] ethically based intervention and regional and global arms control and demilitarization,”[34] highlight the importance of the academic community in formulating peaceful responses to regional and global conflict.[35]

By acknowledging a wider global security agenda, placing the security of the individual on a par with that of the state, it can be argued that Peace Studies is a highly valuable discipline in the twenty-first century. Encompassing more than just physical violence, but rather taking into account climate change, poverty, and financial inequality, to name but a few, Peace Studies, and therefore Security Studies itself, has evolved beyond the traditional International Relations theories of Liberalism and Realism, and their conception of what signifies a security issue. Its multidisciplinary focus is, perhaps, what distinguishes it from traditional methods and arguably allows it to retain its relevance in addressing world issues which go beyond a single given issue area. Peace Studies’ ability to link directly to other disciplines within International Relations for example Critical Security Studies and Conflict Studies is, perhaps, testimony to its longevity. The need for any academic discipline to evolve and adjust is pertinent to its endurance, and whilst many of the biggest challenges remain to be seen, for the most part Peace Studies provides an essential alternative to the focus on power-politics and state-centrism which has dominated International Relations.

As this essay has shown, whilst the focus on peace has challenged the status quo in International Relations theory, presenting an alternative to the emphasis on the conditions giving rise to war, it has provided valuable insight to conflict resolution and post-conflict peace building. In particular the research and data developed from Peace Studies, along with the re-conceptualising of the relationship between violence and peace itself has provided an insightful balance to the debate surrounding the nature of inter-state relations.

It is clear that when we consider the evolving agenda in the global community, and the rise of globalisation and complex interdependence, that Peace Studies will continue to provide a necessary emphasis on human nature, equality and peaceful measures to resolve crises which becomes even more pertinent as the scope of Security Studies is broadened.

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Date written: April 2013