

# Peace-in-difference: A Phenomenological Approach

Written by Hartmut Behr

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Difference, not at least because difference and the perception of difference respectively are at the root causes of conflicts and violence, is a longstanding concern in peace studies (see *inter alia* Avruch and Black 1991; Lederach 1997; Avruch 1998; Miall, Ramsbotham, and Woodhouse 1999; Bargués-Pedreny 2017; in IR more generally see *inter alia* Gupta and Chattopadhyaya 1998; Hallam and Street 2000; Inayatullah and Blaney 2004), critical or more orthodox, while both streams tend to identitarian and substantialist constructions of difference through either the constitution of 'the non-Western local' or 'the universal Western liberal'. And when looking further back in intellectual history beyond the establishment of peace studies as a disciplinary branch in the social sciences and humanities, difference and the including question of political, social, cultural, etc. 'Otherness' even go back to Antique, Medieval, and Early Modern religious and philosophical authors, e.g. in the Western tradition to Aurelius Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Hugo Grotius, or Marsilius of Padua, just to name a few. And here the problem begins because as amongst others, the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas has importantly elaborated and made us aware in several of his writings, Western traditions perceive of difference and otherness mostly in hierarchical ways which is not conducive to peaceful relations. This is because hierarchies demand subordination or at best the assimilation of difference(s) under one universal script and identity. Therefore, the challenge arises of how to think of difference in non-hierarchical ways and thereby to free the conceptualization of peace from subordination and its imperial implications. A philosophical tradition called 'phenomenology' helps us to conceive of difference in a non-hierarchical way, to rethink peace, and to perceive difference as a positive force.

This phenomenological tradition includes the important philosophies from Edmund Husserl, to Georg Simmel, Alfred Schuetz, Martin Heidegger, Levinas, and to Jacques Derrida which I have been discussing in relation to critical and orthodox, liberal peace studies in a recent article called "Peace-in-Difference: A Phenomenological Approach to Peace Through Difference", based on my 2010 monograph *Politics of Difference. Epistemologies of Peace*. The main argument holds that we avoid hierarchies in construing difference and accomplish a more peaceful understanding of difference if we open politics and social relations up to non-essentialist and non-defining and thus to flexible, fluid, and transformative constructions of identity and difference. Rather than claiming knowledge of the other and his/her identity and defining peace, its aim, and the means to accomplish its telos, notwithstanding the violence committed in its name, a peace-in-difference is open to listening to, dialogue with, and experience of difference. Finally, one should avoid and erase the language of otherness as otherness is already a certain stigmatization and conceptualization of the primary experience of difference. Such a liberated notion of difference leads to the hypothesis that *the lesser the degree of essentialist attributions to difference(s) and the lesser essentialist perceptions and definitions of 'otherness', the less likely the outbreak of conflict and the more conducive this is for peace, conflict solution, and reconciliation*. This hypothesis generates questions for further research and discussion as:

- How are perceptions of difference and 'otherness' in peace-building, peace negotiation, and conflict reconciliation processes discursively framed?
- Are difference(s) and the 'other' seen as 'natural' enemies, are their characteristics essentialized (according to ethnic, national, religious, political, gender, etc. criteria), and are they stigmatised a priori?
- What patterns follow 'self'-'other' relations and definitions?
- Can distinct features of the 'self'-'other' relation be learned from successful peace formation, peace negotiation, and conflict reconciliation processes? And vice versa, can failed peace negotiation, peace-

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building, and conflict reconciliation processes be traced back to distinct perceptions and framings of the 'self'-'other' relation?

- How and through what channels can a phenomenological approach to peace practically be communicated with conflict and warring parties?

The discussion of these questions lends itself also to peace education for example through workshops with conflict parties, academic curricula, or peace days at schools. A peace day for example is an off-timetable day set aside to explore meanings and practices of peace with external partners and outside speakers – peace activists, from charities, and universities – over a variety of formats including workshops, plenaries, and question-and-answer sessions. A peace day's themes can include a variety of topics, such as on Peace And Art, Non-Violent Communication, Conflict Resolution, Film and Peace, the Military And Young People, or Understanding Everyday Boundaries, but would include importantly, too, a discussion of difference and how to think and perceive of difference.

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## About the author:

**Hartmut Behr** is Professor of International Politics at Newcastle University (UK). His areas of specialization are International Relations, Political Theory, Migration, and Critical European Studies. He is the author of *Zuwanderungspolitik im Nationalstaat* (1996), *Entterritoriale Politik* (2004), *A History of International Theory – Ontologies of the International* (2010), and *Politics of Difference – Epistemologies of Peace* (2014). He is the co-editor of the book series "Critical European Studies", *Routledge* and "Global Political Thinkers", *Palgrave*. He has published widely in journals such as the *European Journal of International Relations*, *Review of International Studies*, *Geopolitics*, *International Political Theory*, and *Zeitschrift fuer International Beziehungen*.