

PEACE STUDIES AND SOCIAL CHANGE: THE ROLE OF ETHICS AND HUMAN AGENCY

Peace studies aims to analyse the existence of peace as an absence of violence and the existence of peace-promoting structures. In this article, **Iain Attack** will examine two critical issues for peace studies, one at the level of theory and one concerning its connection to action. He will address the relationship between positive and negative peace, and structural, direct and cultural violence. He suggests that the normative aspect of peace studies, with its inextricable connection to values systems, is an advantage that should be utilised in efforts to secure international peace. The article argues that responses to these issues of peace and violence can strengthen the link between theory and practice from a peace studies perspective.

Introduction

Peace studies aims for a critical analysis of war, armed conflict and political violence as deeply-rooted phenomena that affect the daily lives of millions of people around the world. The purpose of this analysis is not merely to improve our intellectual understanding of the sources or causes of these phenomena, but also to provide us with an informed basis for effective action to end or resolve them. Peace studies involves a dynamic relationship between theory and practice, and between peace research, peace education and peace activism.

This relationship between theory and practice reveals some critical issues for peace studies, such as the on-going tension between its academic or theoretical dimension and its engagement with current issues of war and armed conflict that have huge, immediate significance at the local, national and global levels. As with cognate areas such as development studies, however, these two dimensions of peace studies are also inextricably connected, in the sense, for instance, that effective intervention around specific issues requires a sound theoretical framework and understanding for action.

At the level of theory, one issue for peace studies is the essentially contested nature of its core concept, 'peace', and the relative underdevelopment of its theoretical framework and methodology. The

connection between peace studies and political activism also raises questions about the normative assumptions of peace studies and often provides a rationale for its marginalisation within academia and formal systems of education.

This article examines both these issues, the underdevelopment of peace theory and the normative dimension of peace studies. It begins with a critical analysis of Johan Galtung's three categories of violence (direct, structural and cultural) and the corresponding concepts of peace (negative and positive) that have formed the basis of efforts to provide a more sophisticated understanding and theory of peace. These concepts are important because they connect a narrow or specific concern with war, armed conflict and political violence with wider social phenomena such as poverty and inequality through a much broader understanding of the different elements of peace. When we expand the range of concerns relevant to peace studies in this way, the complementarity between peace education and development education becomes obvious, even if their entry point to issues such as global poverty and human development (or human security) can be different.

The article then moves on to discuss a second critical issue for peace studies, its normative or ethical dimension, through examining human agency and the possibilities for social change. The article concludes by suggesting that the normative dimension of peace studies, rather than being a weakness, can contribute to strengthening its theoretical basis through examining the requirements or constituent elements of social and political change. Furthermore, peace education (like development education) can provide an awareness of the significance of human agency in challenging the status quo, a critical analysis of the need for such change, and the skills and understanding required to achieve it.

Peace theory

The contested nature of 'peace' as a concept is demonstrated by the description of peace studies in the opening paragraph. Peace studies is defined in negative terms, by the central problems with which it is concerned: war, armed conflict and political violence. By implication, peace itself is understood primarily or initially as a negative, or as the absence of these phenomena.

It is this characterisation of peace as a negative phenomenon that prompted Johan Galtung to make his famous distinction between negative and positive peace in his article 'Violence, Peace and Peace Research' (1969). This distinction has since entered the lexicon of peace researchers and peace activists.

'Negative peace' is negative not because it is an undesirable goal, but because it is characterised by the absence or lack of these destructive social and political phenomena. 'Positive peace', on the other hand, is characterised by the presence of positive social and political phenomena such as justice, human rights, equality and well-being. Furthermore, it is suggested that positive peace provides the essential conditions of negative peace, because war, armed conflict and political violence result from the absence of positive peace. According to Ian Harris, '*Positive* peace is a condition where non-violence, ecological sustainability and social justice remove the causes of violence' (Harris, 2004:12).

This distinction between negative peace and positive peace did not originate with Galtung. Martin Luther King, for example, also employed it and said that, 'True peace is not merely the absence of some negative force--tension, confusion or war; it is the presence of some positive force--justice, good will and brotherhood' (King, 1957).

Categories of violence

Galtung famously characterises peace with reference to multiple categories of violence. The best known and most used of these categories are direct, structural and cultural violence, which are intimately linked to one another. Direct or personal violence involves an immediate relationship between the perpetrator and the recipient of violence, most obviously in the form of physical violence. Examples of direct violence include specific armed conflicts between combatant groups or human rights abuses aimed at civilians by state security forces or other armed groups.

Structural violence, on the other hand, is built into structures or systems of social, economic or political relationships at the local, national and international level. These structures result in harm to the recipients of such violence through poverty, inequality, lack of access to medical care and education, and so on. There is no direct relationship between the perpetrators

and the recipients of structural violence, as there is with direct (or physical) violence. The violence or harm results instead from structures of inequality such as huge disparities of income or wealth, or highly unequal patterns of land ownership.

For Galtung, the distinction between direct (or personal) violence and structural violence revolves around the issue of deliberate or intentional action. In the case of direct or personal violence, according to Galtung, there is an actor or an agent who commits the violence (1969:170). In the case of structural violence, however, no person directly harms another person. The violence or harm is built into the structures of a society (1969:171). Examples of direct violence might be armed conflict, terrorism, genocide, or gross human rights abuses such as torture. An example of structural violence might be famine or malnutrition resulting from developing country debt, unfair trading relationships or unequal access to natural resources, including land.

In this case, no one sets out deliberately to starve a section of the population, although this may result from economic and social policies aimed at debt repayment, for example. The violence or harm results from unjust or unfair economic relations between developed and developing countries, rather than the intended consequences of action.

Peter Prontzos refers to structural violence as harmful conditions ‘that derive from economic and political structures of power, created and maintained by human actions and institutions’. He refers to this as ‘collateral damage’ because it is ‘an unintentional side-effect of specific policies’ aimed at increasing the wealth or economic resources of specific groups or institutions (Prontzos, 2004:300).

Furthermore, structural violence can result from ordinary people (in their role as consumers, for example) going about their ordinary lives, if this involves participating in or perpetuating unjust social or economic structures. Consumer campaigns around fairly-traded tea or coffee can be seen as attempts to redress this sort of participation in or support for structural injustices.

An important implication of Galtung's argument is that it is not enough to focus on or deal with direct violence. We must also deal with

structural violence, for at least two reasons. Firstly, structural violence can be just as harmful as direct violence. The human suffering resulting from global poverty, for example, is as important and of a similar 'order of magnitude' as the suffering and destruction resulting directly from war (although comparisons at this level are difficult and perhaps meaningless) (Galtung, 1969:185).

The United Nations estimates, for instance, that as many as six million children under the age of five die each year from lack of food, and as many as 10 million die from preventable diseases, because of the conditions of absolute poverty under which they live. One estimate of the number of deaths each year from structural causes is 50 million, 'the total in almost six years of combat in the Second World War' (Prontzos, 2004:299-300).

Secondly, structural violence often depends on and perpetuates direct violence. One example might be the role of state security forces, 'death squads' and so on in enforcing the unequal distribution of land and other resources within a society. In other words, direct violence cannot be deterred or prevented unless the structural violence that engenders it is removed. Galtung claims that, 'Much direct violence can be traced back to vertical structural violence, such as exploitation and repression, for liberation, or to prevent liberation' (Galtung, 1996:270).

Galtung added a third major category to this original dichotomy in the form of cultural violence some years later (1990). One of the functions of cultural violence is to legitimise both direct and structural violence, through the values and attitudes of the members of particular societies.

Cultural violence includes the norms or values, attitudes and beliefs within a society that allow or facilitate the use of direct violence or the perpetuation of structural violence. It includes widespread racist or discriminatory attitudes or beliefs that characterise one social, ethnic or racial group as inferior to another. Such beliefs support oppressive practices such as slavery, apartheid or the caste system in South Asia, which incorporate the subjugation and exploitation of one group by another into the basic social, economic, legal and political structures of a society. Similarly, norms or beliefs about the use of coercive physical violence or institutionalised armed force to deal with conflict between social groups or political entities such as states can promote or justify the use of direct violence. An example of the

‘deep culture’ of militarism might be the Western belief in the efficacy of, and justification for, direct violence as the ultimate sanction, for purposes of punishment or deterrence.

Thus, the relationship between direct, structural and cultural violence within any society is one of interdependence and mutual support. Structural violence can provoke direct violence on the part of oppressed groups as a form of resistance and an attempt to achieve social and political change. Beneficiary or elite groups can also depend upon direct violence to maintain their position of power or dominance in highly unequal social and political structures. In Galtung’s view, it does seem that cultural violence, or the ideologies justifying widespread poverty and inequality and the use of armed force, is fundamental to the persistence of both direct and structural violence as basic characteristics of so many societies around the world today. This is the case in so-called developed as well as developing countries, and as part of the relationship between these countries at the global level.

Galtung uses the dichotomy between direct violence and structural violence in particular to support his distinction between negative peace and positive peace. According to Galtung, if we extend our concept of violence to include structural issues as well as direct violence, this leads to a corresponding extension of our concept of peace.

Negative peace involves the absence of direct or personal violence, while positive peace involves the absence of structural violence.

The absence of direct or personal violence refers merely to the elimination or lack of a certain type of behaviour, referred to as ‘negative peace’. ‘*Negative* peace by averting war or stopping violence implies the absence of direct, personal violence’ (Harris, 2004:12). Positive peace is the absence of structural violence, but this implies or requires the presence of positively-defined social conditions such as social justice, equality and human well-being. ‘Positive peace requires...the presence of social institutions that provide for an equitable distribution of resources and peaceful resolution of conflicts’ (Harris, 2004:12). Thus, for Galtung the role of peace studies is to help us examine the two aspects of peace (negative and positive), and the inescapable connection between direct violence and social injustice, or structural violence.

Some criticisms of Galtung

Galtung's categories of peace and violence are by no means uncontested, however, even within the field of peace studies. Kenneth Boulding, another one of the originators of peace studies, has referred to structural violence as 'anything Galtung doesn't like' (Boulding, 1977:84) and considered it far too broad to be analytically useful. Boulding also thought the depiction of the interdependence between direct and structural violence was too simplistic, and that the economic dynamic behind poverty, even as a structural feature of certain societies, was quite different from the political dynamic behind the use of violence to target specific social groups, for instance.

Boulding views 'structural violence' as a misleading metaphor, because the 'processes which create and sustain poverty are not at all like the processes which create and sustain violence' (1977:83) (i.e. economic as opposed to social and political factors). Such a broad and simplistic definition of violence, to refer to any and all sorts of harm against human beings, drains the concept of its analytical and ethical power. It is more a rhetorical device aimed at political mobilisation against perceived injustices, and does not really belong in academic discourse.

Boulding also criticises the term 'negative peace' as misleading. He claims that peace is never merely the opposite or the absence of war. Instead, peace and war are complex phases of an ongoing and dynamic system of warring groups (i.e. the international system), each with its own distinguishing characteristics (1977:78).

Ian Harris also makes the important point that: 'Peace has different meanings within different cultures, as well as different connotations for the spheres in which peaceful processes are applied' (Harris, 2004:7). In other words, the meaning of 'peace' as a concept reflects the cultural context from which it emerges and in which it is used. In some cultures it can have explicitly religious or cosmological connotations (such as the term 'shalom' in the Hebrew Bible). On the other hand, it can have an almost technical or instrumental meaning when used in a legalistic or political way in terms such as 'peace treaties' or 'peace agreements' in a secular Western context. Similarly, the meaning of peace can vary depending on the type of problem or level of analysis at which it is used. In some contexts, such as international relations, it can be connected to vast political and historical

forces or issues, while in others it can emphasise peace between or even within individuals (interpersonal and even intrapersonal, or inner, peace) (cf. Harris, 2004:7). Harris suggests:

“At the beginning of the twenty-first century controversies surrounding the word ‘peace’ in conjunction with concerns about a multitude of different forms of violence have led to five separate types of peace education: international education, human rights education, development education, environmental education and conflict resolution education. Each branch of this peace education family has different theoretical assumptions about the problems of violence it addresses, different peace strategies it recommends and different goals it hopes to achieve” (Harris, 2004:8).

There may be a resemblance between the meanings of peace employed by each type of peace education, but we cannot assume they are fully synonymous.

Boulding’s criticisms of Galtung and the multiplicity of meanings and educational strategies associated with its core concept indicate that the theoretical and conceptual apparatus of peace studies is still quite underdeveloped. This is partly because it is still relatively young (approximately half a century) as a distinctive field of study within academia and formal education more generally. It is also because peace studies is interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary, and represents an amalgam of different academic approaches applied to its core problems of war and armed conflict. These disciplines are drawn primarily, but by no means exclusively, from the social sciences and the humanities. As such, peace studies does not have its own distinctive methodology, but relies on methodologies derived from other disciplines. Peace theory is still very much a compilation of theories and concepts derived from other disciplines, such as international relations, political science, sociology, philosophy and theology.

The normative dimension of peace studies

Another significant issue for peace studies that affects its status within academia and also its political vulnerability is its normative or ethical dimension. This is partly connected to its core concept, ‘peace’, which in addition to being somewhat broad or vague and contested, is also inescapably

value-laden. This normative dimension is brought out, for instance, in Galtung's emphasis on the significance of cultural violence in his typology of violence (and peace).

Thus, peace is seen as almost incontrovertibly good, however we define it, and war and armed conflict as bad. Peace studies has an explicit agenda, the achievement of peace (instead of war) as a distinct social and political objective. Such an agenda inevitably involves challenges to the status quo, whether one is concerned about direct violence or structural violence or both. Bill McSweeney refers to the analogy between medicine and peace studies sometimes employed to justify such a stance. 'Like medical scientists in respect of disease and physical suffering, peace researchers saw violence and war as an evil to be controlled or eliminated, and made an ethical commitment to that end' (McSweeney, 1998:2).

This normative or ethical dimension of peace studies is connected to its concern with both theory and action, or even activism. It also suggests to its critics that peace studies by its very nature lacks the objectivity or balance required of academic or scholarly study. Boulding, for example, suggests that, 'Galtung's thought is very heavily normative, to the point perhaps where the description of reality suffers' (1977:77).

This normative dimension is one of the distinctive features and strengths of peace studies, however. The explicit acknowledgement of the role of values and ethics in the study of social and political phenomena such as war and armed violence can be one of the particular contributions of peace studies. The acknowledgement of this ethical dimension can take several forms, in peace studies and elsewhere. It can involve a recognition of the significance of human agency and choice, even when confronting vast and seemingly intractable or unchangeable social and political structures and forces. As McSweeney points out, identifying a role for human agency in both constituting and changing the social order is essential if we want to achieve 'alternatives to the established institutions of politics and to the security arrangements which are presented as their necessary outcome' (McSweeney, 1998:5). Human agency, however, implies a set of values or norms against which choices are made:

“Peace studies...rests on the claim that there are alternatives to any existing social order and that human agency and moral choice are fundamental...to their realization” (McSweeney, 1998:6-7).

Peace studies, in other words, is not merely interested in analysing or understanding the status quo, it is also interested in changing it. Such an objective implies a normative agenda.

The importance of human agency and the possibility of social and political change for peace studies is reflected, for instance, in the impact of the great Brazilian educator Paulo Freire on methodological approaches to peace education. Freire’s concern with the poor and oppressed, and their capacity to become agents of their own destiny through transformational processes of education, has been adopted and absorbed into central aspects of peace action, including peace education and conflict resolution (or conflict transformation) (cf. Harris, 2004:12). Freire’s emphasis on human agency as a source of significant social change is a central theme of his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, for instance.

“It is as transforming and creative beings that men, in their permanent relations with reality, produce not only material goods—tangible objects—but also social institutions, ideas, and concepts” (Freire, 1972:73).

The message here is that human beings shape and create not only the material reality that surrounds them and sustains life through economic production, but also the social and political institutions (such as the sovereign state or the market economy for example) that govern and regulate human communities.

Furthermore, the ideas and concepts, including norms and values, that create and contain our understanding of the social order also result from human agency and choice, even if they are so pervasive as to be almost invisible or to appear as unquestionable features of the social and political world in which we live. Such all-pervasive ideas and norms, affecting or influencing human social behaviour, concern attitudes towards or beliefs about social hierarchy or gender or the use of violence, for example. McSweeney refers to ‘a basic sociological assumption that the facts and institutions of the social order are socially constructed, cognitive artefacts,

which must therefore be unpacked, deconstructed, in terms of the interests, values and ideas which constitute them'. It is this dependence of the social world upon 'the standards and values of human individuals who constitute it [that means that] all social theory is normative' (McSweeney, 1998:5).

The important point here is that just as human beings can transform and change their material surroundings, they can also alter their social surroundings and also the conceptual framework and the ideas through which they understand the social order and what is possible within it. To an extent, this emphasis on the material, the social and the conceptual mirrors Galtung's concern with direct violence (or material forces in the form of weapons systems for instance), structural violence (in the form of social forces and political institutions such as the militarised sovereign state) and cultural violence (in terms of a fixation on both the inevitability and the acceptability of armed force as a method of conflict resolution, for example). It goes beyond Galtung's somewhat deterministic account of the relationship between different categories of violence, however, to identify the role of human agency at multiple levels (conceptual, structural and material) in achieving social change.

The importance of human agency and moral choice penetrates to a deeper level, beyond merely the assessment of the consequences of particular actions or policies. It also concerns our understanding of the meaning and significance of basic concepts that shape our understanding of the social and political world in which we live, such as community, society, the state and security. This normative dimension is an inescapable feature of our relationship with any social order, and one task of any social or political theory (including those that inform peace studies) is to acknowledge this and make it explicit. Such an understanding, achieved through transformational processes of education as Freire suggests, makes social and political change possible. While we must not underestimate the importance of achieving change at the institutional or structural level if we want to challenge the persistence of war, armed conflict and political violence, we cannot ignore the need and the possibility for change at the normative, cognitive and cultural level.

The explicit recognition of the ethical and the normative in this fundamental sense can be one of the strengths of peace studies, rather than a point of weakness. In order for this to be the case, however, we need to

return to our first point concerning the significance of theory, especially when trying to establish the links between theory and practice. In other words, the normative or ethical dimension needs to be an important component of a robust theory of peace because it helps to identify the constituent elements of social change, contributing insight and understanding at the intellectual level but also providing a solid basis for effective action.

Conclusion

The growth and development of peace studies requires strengthening or deepening its theoretical and conceptual framework and ensuring its relevance to effective action around the specific problems of war, armed conflict and political violence that are its core concerns. Both tasks can be accomplished, at least in part, through acknowledging (rather than suppressing) the explicitly normative or ethical dimension of peace studies, through the goals or objectives connected to peace activism and the role of human agency in achieving positive or beneficial social and political change. The example of Paulo Freire shows that peace education (like development education) plays a crucial role in providing an awareness of the transformative potential of human agency in achieving such change at multiple levels through critical, normative engagement with the social and conceptual worlds in which we live.

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