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The Political Economy of Conflict and Peace

By Jake Lynch

In this article, I trace some of the connections between the two areas of study brought together for this unit, namely Peace and Conflict Studies, on the one hand, and Political Economy, on the other. Underpinning concepts in Peace and Conflict Studies are defined and discussed, and implications raised, for considering issues in Political Economy and whether the effects of particular economic policies can be construed as more, or less 'peaceful'.

Key words:

- Value-explicit;
- Definition of peace;
- Violence;
- Typology of violence (direct, structural, cultural);
- Human needs;
- Negative and positive peace;
- Inequality;
- Relative deprivation.

Peace and Conflict Studies is value-explicit

Peace and Conflict Studies is a value-explicit, trans-disciplinary area of scholarly research and teaching. Its exponents do not collect ideas about peace, as, say, gentlemen of leisure in Victorian England would collect interesting geological specimens. Peace is not merely for cataloguing and contemplation: the point of studying it is to be in favour of it, and to help bring it about. Among the

subjects taught in universities, perhaps its closest equivalent, in spirit if not in conceptual or methodological background, is medicine: medical students are not interested in learning about disease for its own sake, but to help cure it and/or alleviate its effects.

One of the principal figures of the field, Johan Galtung, founded the Peace Research Institute of Oslo and the *Journal of Peace Research*, in the early 1960s. Contributors were asked, he has recalled, to "add some policy implications" (Galtung, 2002: 173). This was a revolutionary idea of its time, because, as he goes on to explain: "the demand met resistance given the prevailing trend in social sciences – don't mix science and politics".

Since then, the tide has gone out on claims to 'value-free' theory and practice in social science, with the rapidly spreading influence of structuralism, then post-structuralism, as dominant critical discourses in large areas of academic scholarship – and the growing awareness they have brought, of the invariably self-serving nature of complaints that particular forms of research should be lesser regarded because they are "politically motivated". After all, as Galtung points out, the (by then already well established) discipline of security studies had been "delivering premises and conclusions for the military option" for many years, with no apparent hindrance.

Carolyn Stephenson contrasts Peace and Conflict Studies with traditional disciplines such as International Relations:

“Peace Studies is value explicit, with both a positive valuation of peace itself and a commitment to examine trade-offs between values, while values tend to be more hidden in much International Relations research, with some IR scholars still claiming that research can be ‘value-free’, a conception that social and even natural science has rejected” (1999: 810-811).

This does not, perhaps, fully capture the nuance. The IR scholars to whom she refers may, if pressed, acknowledge that ‘value-free’ research is, strictly speaking, impossible. But they proceed without engaging in any critical examination of the values implicit in their own research, apparently taking for granted their ability to speak to a ‘consensus’ on the basis of ‘common sense’ – going on, perhaps, to count instances of observed phenomena, without interrogating the perspectives from which they have been observing them.

One milieu in which a homologous debate has taken place recently is a branch of Peace and Conflict Studies, namely peace journalism. My former BBC colleague David Loyn, a critic of peace journalism, says that journalists “share a language and certain assumptions with their audience”, who need to know, when they tune in or open their newspaper, that “there is no other agenda” than a “report of the facts”. Although the idea of journalistic objectivity – value-free reporting – is “chimerical”, he argues, this rough-and-ready approximation will do, as a basis for practical decisions by editors and reporters.

The words are from David’s contribution to a debate staged by a scholarly journal, *Conflict and Communication*. In my response, I argue that this stance is what leaves so much journalism open to propaganda: “propaganda sets out precisely to penetrate and transform shared language and assumptions. It does ideological work, in the Gramscian sense of ideology as a set of ideas and symbols made to appear natural, or ‘common sense’” (all in Lynch, 2008: 8).

To push the case further still, an aphorism coined in the same context of critical media research – in a pioneering study of newsroom practices – says “the acceptance of representational conventions as facticity makes reality vulnerable to manipulation” (Tuchman, 1978: 109). It is the very practice of ‘carrying on’ as though values – in academic research as in journalism – do not need to be opened up to critical scrutiny, that can turn those endeavours into unwitting accomplices of powerful interests intent on manipulating reality, in the form of propaganda: for wars, to take one prominent example.

The problem of ‘war journalism’ is well known, in cases from the Rwandan genocide – with indictments for media executives on war crimes charges, at the UN special tribunal in Arusha – to the invasion of Iraq, with the front-page apologies published by the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. What is perhaps less widely recognised is the support for social violence, through the unduly uncritical acceptance of assumptions crucial to warmaking, from sections of the academic profession.

James der Derian, in *Virtuous War*, recalls a presentation he made to a joint media/academic seminar on the eve of the illegal invasion of Iraq, in 2003, highlighting the risk of civilian casualties from the much-trailed “shock and awe” of the planned attack. Military officers present were “out for [his] blood”, der Derian recounts, but “possibly the most worrying aspect was the agreement or acquiescence [to this hostile reception] of just about every other academic in the room” (2009: xx). Most professional International Relations scholars in the US were in favour of the war. Henry Giroux and Chronis Polychroniou call for “a campaign [to] be waged against the corporate view of higher education as a training center for future business employees, a franchise for generating profits, a research center for the military, or a space in which corporate culture and education merge, thereby conflating citizenship, militarism, and consumerism” (2008: 44).

To dip back for a moment into the literature on peace journalism, Oliver Boyd Barrett writes about “as though” journalism: “framing an event *as though* it could be read without reference to alternative angles, often available in other media, which undermine the significance and/or credibility of the primary frame” (2010: 41). The torrent of research published by der Derian’s fellow IR academics, earnestly analysing the particular, exogenous causes of wars fought by the US and allies – while ignoring the general, endogenous causes arising from the military-industrial complex – may be a good example of “as though” scholarship. (The continuing

hegemony, in mainstream economics and public policy alike, of assumptions over the primacy of GDP growth, in the face of mounting awareness of environmental constraints, may be another).

In both journalism and academic research, to proceed by ignoring obvious alternative angles is to take a position, even though its exponents may disavow the idea that they are thereby doing anything ‘political’. The effect may be to naturalise the founding assumptions of the position by camouflaging them as ‘common sense’. The opposite of value-explicit is not value-free, but value-concealed.

It was at roughly this point that both Peace and Conflict Studies and – at the risk of being presumptuous – Political Economy, ‘came in’. Both criticise the underlying propositions of adjacent ‘legacy’ disciplines for hiding value judgements behind spurious claims to ‘scientific’ legitimacy. *Political Economy Now*, the account by members of the Political Economy department at the University of Sydney of the struggles involved in establishing it, argues that the “key assumptions” of Economics serve an “ideological” purpose: offering to resolve “all the contradictions of liberal social philosophy... in the *deus ex machina* of an atomistic, self-regulating market economy” (Butler et al, 2009: 105-6). Mary Lane relates how SSCIPS, the Staff-Student Committee for the Introduction of Peace Studies, grew out of a class at the University of Sydney in the mid-1980s, and succeeded in setting up the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies despite “the Vice Chancellor and the other hierarchy

[being initially] unconvinced about the academic credibility of peace studies” (Lane, 2009: 176).

So: what is peace?

If an academic subject could be established on the basis of a value-explicit commitment to peace, it begs the obvious question: what is peace? Peace is a notoriously ‘polysemic’ concept: it can mean many things to many people. “We’re gonna disarm Saddam”, George W Bush intoned, “for the sake o’ peace”. I once saw a Ford Transit van passing by, on a street in the Indonesian city of Yogyakarta, with a meticulously detailed spray-painted picture of Osama bin Laden on the side, and the single word underneath: *Damai* (diminutive of *perdamaian*, meaning peace).

An influential formula is supplied by Johan Galtung: peace is the absence of violence. That, of course, begs another question, what is violence – and Galtung, who trained as a mathematician, has formulae for that, too. Violence is, he declared,

“An insult to human needs” (1990: 9).

And violence can be recognised as taking place when

“Human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential” (1969).

This is where Peace and Conflict Studies locates some of its ontological foundations. Human needs were codified by Abraham

Maslow (1943), who arranged them in a “hierarchy of pre-potency”, often represented by a pyramid. At the base of the pyramid are absolute physical requirements – we all need air to breathe, food to eat and water to drink. Once those are met, the argument goes, we then naturally seek to satisfy our security needs – safety and shelter. As if in response to that ancient wisdom, ‘man cannot live by bread alone’, Maslow then moves into more controversial territory by proposing that our needs for the intangibles of life are, in their turn, equally pressing. We need to feel love and a sense of belonging, in our family and community. We need to feel we are esteemed, perhaps by achieving status and reputation. And – at the top of the hierarchy – human beings need “self-actualisation”: to fulfil our potential through personal growth.

The Australian peace researcher, John W Burton, observed that, these being needs, we cannot do without them and they are, in effect, non-negotiable. They can be satisfied in different ways, but people involved in a conflict cannot, by definition, trade them away: our needs are not a bargaining chip we take into social transactions, but something we are made out of. Burton’s approach to conflict resolution was based on sifting out, from the mass of statements made and positions adopted by the parties involved, what were their real needs. By working out ways to meet those, you could then identify the bits ‘left over’ as issues capable of being negotiated, and thus map out the potential for agreement.

Forms of violence

Galtung's second formula makes the important conceptual innovation of separating out the phenomenon of violence into its two component parts: the form it takes, and the effect it brings about. The distance, between our potential and our actual "realizations" (nourishment, safety, belonging, esteem) may be increased in any one or more of a myriad of ways, at any given moment. The Palestinian family on their way to visit a hospital may be seeking to make somatic realizations, but if they are prevented from doing so by an Israeli military checkpoint, then the threat of force – if they attempt to cross without authorisation – is holding these actualizations below their potential. If they become frustrated, and run the gauntlet of the soldiers' guns, then countless past shootings indicate all too clearly that the distance will most likely increase still further.

The use or threat of force is called Direct Violence, because it clearly embodies a direct subject-action-object relationship: *a* does/did *b* to *c*. In all but a handful of cases, Israeli soldiers who shoot Palestinians at checkpoints, or hold them up for so long as to cause, say, would-be hospital patients to die in ambulances, face no significant consequences. Investigations, when carried out, are generally handled by the military themselves, and usually prove perfunctory: it is often just a matter of the soldiers involved showing they have followed prescribed procedures. There is, in other words, a system of impunity, and this may incentivize further violence. If there is no perceived 'risk'

on that side of the equation, then the trigger is more likely to be pulled. This system is attributable to no one individual, but it has the same effect on the victim. Social practices and forms of social organisation, which hold people's actualizations below their potential, are examples of Structural Violence.

Then, Israel's military occupation of Palestinian territory is justified, by some Israelis and supporters of the Israeli government, on the basis of claims to a Jewish homeland: the settler movement is a branch of the wider political movement known as Zionism. These claims give rise to statements – "a land without a people for a people without a land" – that could be classified as Cultural Violence: cultural forms that "make direct and structural violence look, even feel, right – or at least not wrong" (Galtung, 1996: 196).

Among the present 'hot spots' in the conflict is the struggle being waged by the Palestinian community of East Jerusalem, to stay in their homes, in the face of an onslaught of structural violence, in the panoply of legal and bureaucratic means being used to evict them, and direct violence – the use or threat of force if they do not comply. Jerusalem, of course, is a multi-dimensional conflict issue because within its Old City lie holy sites with enormous significance to followers of three major world religions: Judaism, Islam and Christianity. Which is to say, the strong feelings of allegiance felt towards Jerusalem, by billions of people around the world, long pre-date our modern system of nation states.

Zionism itself is a phenomenon of this system: the notion that a Jewish homeland should take the form of a state, with controlled borders and all the matching accoutrements, notably a strong military, was being nurtured and developed at roughly the same time that other modern nation-states were emerging: Germany, unified under Bismarck; Australia, attaining Federation, and so on. Most were attended by significant social violence. Tilly goes so far as to claim that the history of European state-making and war-making “qualify as our largest example of organised crime” (1985: 169), such is the symbiotic relationship that exists between the state and the instruments of violence on which it depends to function.

Zionism was, to be sure, a response to centuries of persecution in Europe, which inflicted suffering on the Jews through all three forms of violence discussed here; and of course it attained unstoppable political momentum as the world grew aware of the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust. But Zionism itself took the form of structural violence by virtue of being conceived in the context of the nation state system, in which every square metre of the earth’s surface has to belong to someone (with the accent on ‘one’). All territory is either on one side of a line, or the other. Viewed in this context, Jerusalem can only be Israel’s “eternal, indivisible capital” (to quote another cherished phrase of modern Zionism) if it is not also someone else’s capital.

So the situation facing the Palestinian family held up at the Israeli army checkpoint today is produced by the operation of violence in all

its three forms, both historic and present-day. All have the same effect, of holding their actual somatic and mental realizations below their potential.

This conceptual framework can be extended to a broader analysis of pervasive violence in the systems and structures that govern our lives, and the assumptions that hold them in place. The world has enough for everyone’s need, Gandhi said; just not for everyone’s greed. The fact that so many of our fellow citizens perish for want of access to food, clean drinking water and basic medicine, when we have the resources and the technological capability to provide these for all, captures well the sense that Galtung is driving at in his formula of violence as an “insult to human needs”.

The relativity of human needs

The notion of war giving way to peace is a familiar one: in peace agreements, perhaps, usually presaged by a ceasefire. An absence of direct violence may be understood as a condition of “negative peace”: a state we can enter, simply by ceasing to do something.

Another important institution founded by Johan Galtung (with a group of colleagues) was IPRA, the International Peace Research Association, and at one of its first general meetings, in 1967, an Indian scholar, S. Dasgupta of the Gandhian Institute of Studies at Varanasi, proposed that hunger and poverty – then, as now, afflicting many in the majority world – should be regarded as conditions of “peacelessness”.

This proved an important building block for Galtung's conceptual innovations around the notion of violence. To conceive of structural and cultural violence is to re-conceptualise peace as positive: peace requires the presence of justice, where justice means – to start with – fair(er) shares of (at least) basic goods, to alleviate hunger and poverty. Then, Maslow's model of human needs put intangibles, such as esteem and belonging, on the same ontological footing as air, food and water. Crucially, these are not absolute needs but relative needs. We tend to gauge the esteem in which we are held, for instance, by comparing the treatment we receive with the treatment enjoyed by (or meted out to) others.

Burton argued that, because these are needs, if we human beings find ourselves in a system that denies them to us, we are fated to struggle against that system: we cannot simply 'put up with it'. "If conflict resolution is to be taken seriously", he declared, "if it is to be more than just introducing altered perceptions and goodwill into some specific situations, it has to be assumed that societies must adjust to the needs of people, and not the other way around" (Burton, 1998).

Stuart Rees (2003) proposes that human needs predicate human rights: because I need food, I have a right to it. And something of the same sense is captured in the famous preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "it is essential, if man (sic) is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law".

These insights were drawn together in a landmark study of social psychology, *Why Men Rebel*, by Ted Robert Gurr, in 1970. He coined the term, "relative deprivation": the discrepancy between what people think they deserve, and what they think they can get. Gurr identified this as a prime cause of frustration and aggression. "The potential for collective violence varies strongly", he declared, "with the intensity and scope of relative deprivation among members of a collectivity" (1970: 24).

This is where a trans-disciplinary approach, cross-referencing concepts from scholars with an avowed orientation in peace research, as well as other disciplines, foregrounds an analytical factor that I want to propose as key to forging connections between Peace and Conflict Studies, on the one hand, and Political Economy, on the other: namely, the impact of inequality. "The quality of social relations is better in more equal societies where income differences between rich and poor are smaller", Richard Wilkinson finds. "Community life is stronger, and homicide rates and levels of violence are consistently lower" (2005: 33).

If violence is an insult to human needs, and some of our needs are relative, then increased levels of inequality may in themselves constitute a form of violence. And they are likely to lead to other forms of violence. The arguments adduced here, from Burton and Gurr, may simply formalise an insight many of us learn from 'life lessons', that is present in many cultures, and recognised in Australia in the formula of 'a fair go'. If people do not get a fair go, there is

going to be trouble. If the way society is organised exposes some of its members to relative deprivation, the potential for collective violence, in response, will exist: if people find themselves trapped in a “structural iron cage”, Galtung says, do not be surprised if they resort to drastic measures in attempts to break out of it. “Violence”, Erik Paul says, “is an expression of social maladjustment to capitalism and the concentration of power. Positive peace requires social, political and economic equality within nation states and the promotion of positive regionalism and globalism” (2010: 3).

This instinctive preference is also inscribed in John Rawls’ famous “veil of ignorance” test. Imagine you are to live in a society which has a degree of inequality built into it, as all societies do. What degree would you prefer, if you do not know, in advance, what your station in life will be? Some of us – instinctive gamblers, perhaps – would prefer a society with a high degree of inequality since, if we are lucky enough to find ourselves ‘on top’, we will be very well off indeed. But most of us opt for a society with a lesser degree of inequality, since, if we end up ‘at the bottom’, our plight will not feel all that bad.

Rawls’ first principle of social justice is well known: “Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive scheme of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar scheme of liberty for others”. My freedom to swing my fist ends where your nose begins. His second principle is less well known: social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both:

- (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged... and
- (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity.

Peace is the absence of violence. To reduce direct violence, we need negative devices: ceasefires, obviously, but also the deterrent effect of law ‘n’ order. To reduce structural violence, we need positive measures to build social justice, where social justice includes a clear orientation towards reducing inequalities. That is the minimum that human needs require, since some of them are relative. Barriers standing in the way of fair equality of opportunity are likely to incentivise other forms of violence, and Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) collate evidence that such barriers are lower – and social mobility therefore higher – where the overall levels of inequality are less. A peaceful society is a society where social and economic inequalities are minimised: a condition Galtung called, “positive peace”.

Selfish jeans: the political and economic reaction of the 1980s and beyond

Jeans: the defining fashion statement of western modernity. But the apparently democratic credentials of a pair of denims can be deceptive. Cotton is a highly destructive crop, requiring huge quantities of pesticides if it is to be successfully cultivated; to the ruination of land and water systems that people in poor countries depend upon for their livelihoods. The great cotton fields of the southern United States were, of course, developed with slave labour, and the indigo

dye sent back to England from faraway dominions in the British empire came from fields previously used to produce food – resulting in the starvation of millions of colonial subjects, Davis has shown (2001).

But the garment underwent a significant makeover in the 1980s, with the launch of Vanderbilt Designer Jeans. Other fashion labels followed, and this most egalitarian form of apparel now acquired a new cachet: rather than uniting people in one image, jeans now divided them into the haves and the have-nots; those who could afford the new labels, and those who could not. It's a symbol of what Daniel Dorling characterises as a moment in history when “the tide turned”, and gradual progress in reducing inequalities gave way to deliberate attempts to increase them.

By 1981, in the UK, he records, “the richest 10% held an all-time low of ‘only’ half of the marketable wealth in that country” (2010: 256). Progressive income tax, effective inheritance tax and the action of trade unions to raise wages had all played a part in “redistribution from rich to poor”, both in the UK and the US, in the previous few decades. The Thatcher government in Britain, elected in 1979, and the Reagan Administration in Washington, which took office eighteen months later, sent this process into reverse, however, by “follow[ing] the teachings of economists such as Milton Friedman”.

At the time, advocates of free-market policies used phrases that rapidly became part of our political lexicon. They effectively penetrated and transformed the shared language and

assumptions used to discuss political choices, with considerable – if largely inconclusive – effort having been expended, in the years since, to analyse why the appeal succeeded where and when it did. Republican presidents were elected by blue-collar ‘Reagan Democrats’; Conservative governments in the UK swept into office after winning, from Labour, the allegiance of ‘Essex Man’ in working-class electorates in the south of England – voters seduced with promises to cut direct taxation, thereby allowing them to “spend more of their own money”, and join a “property-owning democracy”.

Equality did not even benefit its supposed beneficiaries, the argument went, because measures to equalise outcomes deterred free enterprise. If wealth-creators were incentivized by being able to enjoy the full fruits of their labours, and freed from obligations arising out of restrictive practices (like job security for their staff), then the overall “size of the pie” would increase more rapidly, so everyone would ultimately get a bigger slice. The “rising tide”, we were told, would “lift all boats”. There would be a “trickle-down effect”, in which wealth accumulated at the top would also benefit those at the bottom.

Critics pointed out that the rhetoric was not matched by the reality. Inequality certainly increased, and the already rich got dramatically richer. “Two thirds of the wealth increases in the US in the 1980s and 1990s were in assets held by the richest single percentile of the population”, Dorling records (ibid.). However, Ha-Joon Chang shows that

the application of free-market economics actually lowered the per capita rate of income growth: in the US, from an average 2.6% a year in the 1960s and 1970s to an average 1.6% in the period 1990-2009, and in the UK from 2.4% annually, in the former period, to 1.7% on average in the latter (2010: 19).

The supply of goods and services previously provided by branches of the state – housing, water, electricity, telephones, roads – were monetised, marketised and privatised, in the name of releasing value and enabling enterprise. “The government”, Friedman and Friedman declared, “is the major source of interference with the free market system” (2003: 128). Allowing the free market system to operate unhindered should be to the benefit of everyone. However, the value thereby released was sucked into asset markets, notably residential real estate. So the real value of wages did not necessarily increase, given the now much-increased cost of meeting a key safety need: keeping a secure roof over one’s head.

Given that these changes had the effect of making societies deliberately more unequal, the political rhetoric deployed to win backing for them could be said to be a form of cultural violence: making structural violence look, even feel right; or at least, not wrong. It rapidly gained converts. Peter Mandelson, one of the architects of Britain’s New Labour government, which unseated the ruling Conservatives in 1997, said his party was “seriously relaxed about people getting filthy rich”, as the party forsook efforts to promote greater equality. And George Bush (the elder)

went from criticising the “voodoo economics” of Reagan, when he opposed him for the Republican nomination, to “read my lips: no new taxes” when he succeeded him in the White House.

Dorling presents the latter-day equivalents of such rhetoric: beliefs, pervasive but generally tacit, which “uphold injustice” and perpetuate policies that go on widening inequalities. “While no-one would claim to be on the side of injustice, without the continued spread of beliefs in support of injustice it would not survive long in its present form... the five tenets of injustice are that: elitism is efficient, exclusion is necessary, prejudice is natural, greed is good and despair is inevitable”. Those in power “do not believe that there is a cure for modern social ills” and accept that “the poor will always be with us” (2010: 1).

It is, indeed, the generally hidden nature of these beliefs, and the values on which they are based – hidden by discursive endeavours including both journalism and academic research – that contributes to their continued hegemony by making them seem like ‘common sense’. It is not coincidental that both CPACS and the Department of Political Economy, as exponents of challenger paradigms, are among the departments within the University of Sydney that do most to engage the broader community with the insights of their scholarship.

CPACS’ constitution obliges the Centre to “pursue its objectives by as wide a variety of means as possible”, including “the organization of conferences [and] the advocacy of peace with justice” for both the

University and the community at large and “the promotion of widespread participation in its activities”. When I applied to be its first purposely-appointed Director, I responded to an advertisement for the post, which said the incumbent would be expected to “provide leadership on peace and justice issues”. CPACS’ first campaign, in the 1980s, was in favour of universal health care provision, in partnership with the Maritime Union of Australia. Since becoming Director, I have contributed over 100 articles to public media and made over 100 contributions to public events (see our Annual Reports stored at http://sydney.edu.au/arts/peace_conflict/about/annual_reports.shtml).

It is part of the mandate of peace research to be active in challenging consensus, where that consensus upholds injustice. In that endeavour, the challenge of value-explicit scholarship is one that it is committed to spreading and making available to the students of other disciplines. Hence our course: the Political Economy of Conflict and Peace.

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