

# Peace, Temporality, and the Vivacity of Differences

Written by Hartmut Behr

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HARTMUT BEHR, SEP 22 2011

Throughout the history of Western political philosophy and international politics thinking about peace has been an important and constant effort. The spectrum of questions raised encompasses enquiries such as how to accomplish peace, how to justify the breaking of peace, and how to define peace; and relates to problems such as the relation between war and peace, 'just war', *ius in bellum* and *ius at bellum*.

All of these discussions have one characteristic in common, irrespective of the historical, political, and social circumstances they have been formulated in and were supposed to apply to: they all understand peace, more or less, as the abolishment, surmounting, and supersession of differences, those differences which are conceived of as causing or having caused a distinct conflict or which are said to be at the roots of political and social conflicts *per se*: such as religious, political, or identity differences. Thereby, the rationale which is supposed to serve this abolishment, surmounting, and supersession is provided by different, but nevertheless epistemologically similar versions of universal reason under whose imposition those differences are expected to be resolved or eliminated and to become united into one pacified and unified scripture of morality, ideology and rationality.

The conceptualization of such versions of universal reason for the production of what was then called 'peace' can be seen in authors and their political visions as divergent – historically and politically – as Marsilius of Padua, Thomas Hobbes, Immanuel Kant and Woodrow Wilson. We find the same universalism in documents such as the United Nations Charter and many peace treaties both historical and present-day. All writings or respective documents envision, in obviously well-intended ways, one principle superior to the conflicting parties under which they are supposed to unite and henceforward live in peace. This principle is of an ethical nature even though its reference must invoke some kind of reflectivity, understanding, and insight of those 'different' people into understanding their situation as somehow miserable. The universal principle invoked in fact represents itself as some sort of materialized political power, mostly envisioned in practices of 'sovereignty', 'territoriality', and 'borders'. These may lead to the institution of ethically divided zones and separating walls; or of, for example, the erection of joint sovereign authorities, often idealized in the form of nation building, carried out historically in Europe and obvious in the present-day in Western attempts to stabilize and pacify war-torn societies such as Afghanistan and Iraq – paradoxically through war fighting itself.

I want to present a very different approach to thinking about and practicing peace which is built upon the argument that those visions and practices which invoke some sort of universal reason – and there maybe many more than those mentioned above, and not only from Western political thinking – in fact contribute to, if not cause conflict and even war fighting in the first place. Thus the argument is that universalistic concepts of peace are actually not peaceful, but rather cause conflict and war. This is due to one party structurally and directly being dominated by another when referring to respective universalities or due to warring parties being dominated by an external party which invokes and superimposes universalities not acceptable to the warring parties themselves. Instead, this paper – which is drafted according to a book project currently being written by the author and due to be published in the near future – promotes a conceptualization and understanding of peace which is based upon a positive embracement of difference resulting in the vivacity of differences and "otherness" and the cultivation of their critical tension. Thus, not the abolishment, but the cultivation of differences is to be seen as a vision and practice of peace. This argument relates to theorems in the context of what is called "Agnostic Peace" (Shinko) and "Post-liberal Peace" (Richmond; also Walker) and will have much in common with critical discourses on power, violence, difference, and humanity.

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This concept of peace is built and rests upon two steps: *first*, difference and “otherness” have to be approached from a very different perspective than in “peace” concepts informed by universal reason, namely from a phenomenological and anti-essentialist view; and *second*, the phenomenological theorem of difference/“otherness” in conceptualizing and practicing peace must be applied: the above mentioned critique and deconstruction of traditional notions of “peace” is one result which finally informs a concept of peace based around living and acting *towards* differences.

The sociological and philosophical theories of Georg Simmel, Alfred Schuetz, and Emmanuel Levinas – not at all popular authors in the discipline of International Relations, however, highly recognized authors in neighboring disciplines – focus explicitly on the question of difference as represented in the figure of “the stranger” (Simmel and Schuetz; in Schuetz also the migrant) and “the other” (“*l’Autre*”, so Levinas). Their individual discussions take place before one common epistemological background which is the phenomenological thinking of the question of time (and history and historiography) and being, referring to the oeuvres of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger as the doyens of critical phenomenology. Irrespective of individual differences in their reception and references to Husserl and Heidegger and, irrespective of the fundamental departure of Levinas from the idea of ‘intentionality’, prominent in the others, there is one episteme to emphasize here which marks the opposition of phenomenological thinking to the ontological tradition of essentialism of which traditional notions of peace are a poignant manifestation.

This phenomenological episteme focuses on the question of time and being – becoming most prominent in Heidegger’s oeuvre *Being and Time* (1927), but also being reflected critically in Husserl, Simmel, Schuetz, and of course Levinas – and introduces a way of thinking about time, history, and being not as entities with fixed meanings, determined trajectories, and terminated identities, but rather as an open-ended processes of becoming, development, change, and transformation. Rather than ‘identity’ (of being and history, for example), we need to speak of ‘transformativity’ in an anti-essentialist way when talking about, describing, reflecting upon, and/or conceptualizing all kinds of political, social, economic and psychological questions. One consequence of this perspective, which appears to be its normative advantage over essentialist modes of thinking, is that phenomenological thinking does not allow or actually prevent us from assuming, presuming, and subsuming what someone *is*, i.e. to determine and fix someone else’s ‘identity’ and to conclude and regulate his/her ostensible essence of being, living, and acting; but instead to study and attempt to understand another human’s (or society’s) being as a being-in-time, i.e. as transformation and development whose purposes and ends can be foretold. According to Levinas this approach of anti-essentialist thinking enables the freedom of both humanity and individuals from the totalizing and totalitarian grip and seizure of becoming defined and dominated.

With regard to history this means that history can not be said to have a distinct meaning; one implication of this being that any kind of teleology which would, on the basis of such imposition of meaning, evaluate history from the present and posit that history as having produced this very present is to be decisively declined. We find here a strong argument against any Hegelian notion of history as well as against all variations of national historiography. The same applies when thinking about development politics, for example: it is anathema to phenomenological thinking to assume a distinct target and determination in the development of a certain society, or of humanity as such. Instead the meticulous study of cultural, societal, political, and economic dynamics as expressed by that society itself would be more appropriate. But: what is the main consequence of thinking about difference and how does this influence the conceptualization of peace?

*First*, difference is not present in an entity in any definable form, but needs to be understood through its own dynamics and articulations; and even if not understood or tangible, differences and “otherness” should not be negated on behalf of assimilating rationalities of the ‘Self’, but be acted *towards*.

*Second*, difference exists, is being experienced, and attempts should not be made to extinguish it. Differences should be kept alive in positive embracement, vivacity, and in relationships of critical tension: *Fatemini Pluribus Pluribus* (promoting difference on behalf of the value and dignity of differences themselves) instead of *E Pluribus Unum* (assuming and declaring the existence of one culture, ideology or nation to integrate differences).

And *thirdly*, further to the deconstructive power (as outlined earlier) of concepts of peace which invoke some form of universal reason to be imposed upon conflicting parties or to guide one party’s own vision of “peace”, the

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phenomenological approach to differences enables peace through the abstinence of attempting to deny their (and thereby the warring party's) right to live, act or think according to their own ways. This, so we must hope, would make the reason to fight, and ultimately the reason to go to war, superfluous and thereby increase the chance for peace in international politics.

Of course, such a concept of peace can not be put into practice straight away or be implemented by way of direct policies. Instead, it depends upon (peace) education, a learning process, and needs to be practiced through local discourses by those concerned rather than being implemented and forced upon conflicting parties or opponents directly by so-called foreign policy elites in national administrations.

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