The Study of Peace and Conflict: in Need of (Intellectual) Insurgency?

https://www.e-ir.info/2018/04/26/the-study-of-peace-and-conflict-in-need-of-intellectual-insurgency/

JOHN GLEDHILL, APR 26 2018

Peter Wallensteen, a leading scholar of peace and conflict, has suggested that 'Peace research is concerned with the question of violence.' At first glance, this statement may seem odd — even paradoxical — since one might imagine that peace research is the antithesis of war studies. Upon closer inspection, however, Wallensteen's statement is not so odd. After all, if peace is the absence of violence, and vice versa, then we would expect peace researchers to explore the causes and dynamics of violent conflict. Given their commitment to studying peace, we would also expect them to investigate efforts to prevent and/or respond to violent conflict. And if peace researchers constitute a coherent community of scholars, then we would expect to see a lively exchange of ideas between studies of war/making and studies of peace/making. In this short opinion piece, however, I argue that these expectations often do not reflect the reality of contemporary peace and conflict studies — and that is a problem.

Based on (recently published) research that I have conducted with Jonathan Bright, I first propose that the field of peace and conflict studies is something of 'a divided discipline', since there is limited exchange between academic studies of war and research on peace. I also suggest that there is a 'violence bias' within the field, which sees scholars privilege the study of violent conflict over the study of efforts to peacefully manage conflict. I then argue that this bias not only creates an intellectual imbalance, it also runs the risk of normalizing the idea that political resistance and rebellion are necessarily violent pursuits. That normalization, in turn, may have problematic — and incendiary — consequences for the way that activists think about resistance, and the way that authorities respond to resistance. Thus, I conclude by calling for intellectual insurgency; a fundamental shift in the way that we collectively go about realizing peace and conflict research.

(The Weak) Symbiosis between Studies of Peace and Studies of Conflict

If, as suggested, peace and violent conflict are conceptual mirror-images, then there should be a close connection — to the point of symbiosis — between the study of peace and the study of conflict.

Symbiotic relationships of all kinds rely on contributions from, and exchange between, cooperating parties. In the natural world, for example, small 'cleaner fish' and larger sea species rely on one another; the 'cleaners' eat parasites and dead tissue off larger fish, and the larger parties benefit from the good wash they receive. Oxpecker birds, meanwhile, have more or less the same arrangement with zebras and hippos. In both cases, exchange is key; if the 'cleaners' were to exist alongside the species in need of a wash, but there was no direct engagement between the two parties, then neither would benefit.

Mutual exchange is also key to the success of academic symbioses. If the health sciences are to advance human well-being, for example, then there needs to be communication and exchange between research on the causes of disease and research into the efficacy of remedies. The same logic arguably applies to peace and conflict studies (see Galtung 1985); scholars can only collectively develop an understanding of how conflict can be managed peacefully if there is an exchange of ideas between research into the 'disease' of violent conflict and research that addresses 'remedies' such as conflict prevention, response, and resolution.

Despite the need for communication between studies of peace and studies of conflict, there has long been concern that exchange is rare, in practice (see, for example, Vasquez 1976; Buzan and Hansen 2009, Ch. 5). Still, until now, we have had no real way of knowing whether that concern is grounded in reality. Consequently, Jonathan Bright (from Oxford's Internet Institute) and I decided to 'map' published academic output on themes of peace and conflict, employing various methods — including a survey of scholars, (manual and automatic) coding of the substance 7000+ journal articles, citation analysis, automatic community detection, and network analysis. Our findings, and a detailed treatment of the methods we employed, have recently been published in the journal *International Studies Perspectives*.

In our article, which is titled 'A Divided Discipline? Mapping Peace and Conflict Studies', we pose two questions and give two answers. First, we ask 'What do we study, when we study 'peace and conflict'?' Here, our aim is to establish the distribution of work within the field; specifically, to what extent do we study the causes and dynamics of violent 'conflict', on one hand, and 'peace' and peacemaking, on the other? Our automatic coding of the content of thousands of articles suggests that a clear majority of studies of 'peace and conflict' focus on violent conflict, rather than processes aimed at making or maintaining peace.[1] Moreover, we find that studies of violence and war tend to receive around 50% more citations, on average, than studies of peace and peacemaking — possibly because they dominate the top-ranked journals. Thus, our first conclusion is that there is a kind of 'violence bias' in the field, although we recognize that there is also a sizable volume of work that focuses on peacemaking and outcomes of peace.

In a second line of investigation, we ask whether there is communication and exchange between studies coded as 'peace' and those coded as 'conflict'. To answer this question, we look at patterns of inter-citation between the articles in our sample. Specifically, we look at whether articles coded as 'peace' and 'conflict', respectively, cite one another — or whether 'peace' articles tend to cite other 'peace' articles, while articles on 'conflict' cite other 'conflict' articles. Overall, we find limited evidence of cross-citation; less than one fifth of all citations, from all articles, link across the peace/conflict divide. We also find that studies of violent 'conflict' tend to be particularly insular (i.e. they mainly cite other 'conflict' studies), while studies coded as 'peace' tend to do a better job of citing across the divide.

The Violence Bias in Peace and Conflict Studies

Our effort to map peace and conflict studies is not academic navel-gazing. Rather, we documented output in the field in order to provide an empirical basis for reflecting on the 'state of the discipline' — specifically, whether scholars of peace and conflict are realizing the underlying normative goal of their discipline, which is to understand violent conflict in order to contribute to peacemaking and peace. With that goal in mind, what might we take from these findings? In my view, the trends we observe give reason for pause, reflection, and reorientation.

Here, I want to focus on our finding that scholars of peace and conflict tend to study violence — a lot. This is not inherently problematic; as suggested above, we need to understand the 'disease' of violent conflict if we are to devise and prescribe appropriately pacific 'remedies'. However, as also argued above, studies of violence can only contribute to ameliorative goals when they exchange ideas with studies of peace and peacemaking, and there is only limited evidence of this at present. In the absence of sufficient peace-conflict communication, the study of violence becomes, at best, a purely academic pursuit. At worst, the 'violence bias' could be inadvertently promoting the (potentially dangerous) misperception that resistance and political change are inherently violent activities.

Consider the terms *insurgent, rebel,* and *radical*. Broadly, each of these concepts refers to individuals or groups that are interested in bringing about significant change in the socio-political status quo. A quick check of the Oxford English Dictionary confirms that there is nothing inherently violent about groups that can be described in any of the above ways; they can seek reform through violent or nonviolent means. And yet it is fair to say that, in both academic and non-academic circles, each of these concepts is now typically associated with groups that use violence as a means to their ends; think of the terms 'violent insurgency', 'armed rebellion', and 'radicalized terrorists'.

Why do we associate resistance with violence, despite the fact that nonviolent revolt is common (and far more effective than violent insurgency) (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011, p. 7)? While there may be various factors at play, it

is hard to get past the idea that our collective penchant for studying violent conflict is contributing to a discursive and, thus, cognitive link between the ideas of resistance and violence. After all, if most of our treatments of political conflict focus on the violent forms thereof, and studies of violence are disconnected from considerations of peace/making, then it should not be surprising that we — and those outside of academia who read our work — would come to associate resistance with violence. Such a cognitive association, I want to argue, is problematic; not only is it empirically blinkered but, more ominously, it runs the risk of narrowing the way that political activists think about resistance (i.e. as violence) and the way that governing authorities think about responding to resistance (i.e. with violence).

A Need for Intellectual Insurgency

If the 'violence bias' within peace and conflict studies is a point for concern, then perhaps it is time for intellectual insurgency, rebellion, and/or radicalism from scholars. That is, maybe it is time to rethink the way that we collectively approach the study of social and political conflict — in a way that puts the 'peace' back into peace and conflict studies.

Such reform need not, and should not, involve shying away from studying violence and war. But it could, and should, involve a greater emphasis on studying forms of nonviolent resistance. It could also involve studying peace as a positive and observable outcome unto itself, rather than starting from the position that peace is simply the absence of violence, which is an assumption that immediately brings empirical investigations back to a focus on war. And when scholars of conflict do explore violence, those explorations could, and should, be accompanied by efforts to actively connect treatments of violent conflict to considerations of conflict prevention and/or response.

Signs of such a shift in approach are already beginning to circulate. Witness recent reflections on the 'state of the discipline' from Patrick Regan and Paul Diehl, for example. Also witness the growth of the Peace Studies Section of the International Studies Association over recent years, the explosion of work on nonviolent resistance in light of Chenoweth and Stephan's ground-breaking work on that topic, and the creation of new data-based projects (such as the Global Peace Index), which document and report on the correlates of (positive) peace. Going forward, more reflection is needed. I hope that our study of 'a divided discipline' might help guide that reflection in some way.

Note

[1] Our manual coding of a smaller sample of articles suggests a somewhat more even distribution between studies of 'peace' and studies of 'conflict', although we still observe many more of the latter.

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