Postcolonial Theory and the Ideology of Peace Studies

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Peace, peace—but there is no peace (Jeremiah 6:15)

THE EVOLUTION OF PEACE STUDIES

The origins of ‘peace studies’ (including conflict resolution, conflict studies) as an academic discipline can be traced to the late 1940s, and the field has been developing steadily since then. By 2000, the number of academic peace studies and conflict resolution programmes numbered in the hundreds, located all over the world, and organized in professional frameworks such as the Peace Studies section of the International Studies Association and the Political Studies Association (UK). As of 2005, there were approximately 250 such programmes in academic institutions in North America alone.

The peace studies approach to international relations and conflict was founded by a group of scholars with backgrounds in economics and the social sciences, including Kenneth Boulding, Howard Raiffa, and Anatol Rapaport. The backdrop of the Cold War and the political reaction to the threat of nuclear war provided a major impetus for the growth of peace studies, which many people saw as an antidote to programmes in strategic and war studies that had been founded on many campuses during this period.

This process was also reflected and amplified by the policies of the US government under the Kennedy Administration, through the creation of the US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA). ACDA was seen as a means of ‘balancing’ the influence and power of the Defence Department and Pentagon. In the context of increasing emphasis on arms control negotiations, and the transformative game theory approach developed by influential academics (many of whom served as government advisors on these issues) such as Thomas Schelling and Roger Fischer, the links between government and academia in the area of peace studies were strengthened. The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, and the concern that the policies of strategic deterrence had brought the world to the brink of...
nuclear annihilation, accelerated the growth of peace and conflict resolution studies in academic frameworks.

In parallel, research on peace and disarmament was highlighted in Scandinavia through the establishment of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO), and related programmes at a number of universities. Alva Myrdal, a prominent Swedish diplomat, who wrote *The Game of Disarmament*, played a central role in the founding of SIPRI and the promotion of this area of research and analysis.

In addition, the controversies and political upheaval over the Vietnam War, including large-scale protests centred on university campuses contributed to the growing support for peace studies. The late 1960s and early 1970s saw a major increase in research projects and courses related to ‘Problems of War and Peace’, and these often evolved into full-fledged degree programmes. One of the first, at Colgate University, explicitly noted the link between the founding of a peace studies programme on campus and ‘the continuing nuclear arms race and the protracted war in Indochina’. In other instances, the role of religious institutions in the development of academic programmes was central. For example, the Department of Peace Studies at Bradford University in England was established in the early 1970s, under the influence of the Quakers (Society of Friends).

Funds from philanthropic organizations such as the Institute for World Order, and the Ford and McArthur foundations were allocated to the development of courses and research programmes on conflict resolution on many campuses, particularly in the United States. The dominant ideology that surrounded peace studies in this environment led to the promotion of an *a priori* approach that viewed international conflict largely in Marxist terms—the developed West exploiting the undeveloped Third World. On this basis, the next stage in the ideological development of peace studies—postcolonialism and the *a priori* selection of favoured victims (i.e., Vietnamese, Palestinians, people of colour) and hated oppressors (the West, and the United States in particular)—was within easy grasp, as will be demonstrated in detail below.

This trend continued during the era of détente in the 1970s, including the SALT (Strategic Arms Limitation Talks) processes and agreements, as well as the Helsinki process, with its emphasis on confidence building measures (CBMs) and links between the three baskets—security, economic interdependence, and civil society (democracy, human rights, press freedom, etc.). In these processes, the level of academic involvement in the negotiations was quite significant, including participation in unofficial ‘track-two’ meetings and publication of analyses. Quasi-academic peace groups such as Pugwash (involving scientists from different countries) provided informal and unofficial frameworks for discussions that were
designed to influence public policy. At the same time, the research community published analyses, developed theories and held conferences based on these activities.

Major universities in different countries opened such programmes; some based on the discipline of international relations or international law, others in the framework of political studies or psychology and yet others as interdisciplinary programmes. Over the years, these programmes became independent, offering advanced degrees and hiring specialized tenured faculty. In addition, a number of journals in this field have been established, such as the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, the *Journal of Peace Studies*, and *International Negotiation*. The creation of the government-funded US Institute of Peace (USIP) in the 1980s, and the allocation of significant funds to support academic research, marked a further step in this process.

During this period, a number of conflict resolution theories and peace studies models have been developed and are used widely in research activities. These research frameworks include approaches based on game theory, ‘reconciliation’, pre-negotiation, ‘ripeness’, intercultural communication, and mediation. A vast literature has developed focusing on these frameworks and their applications. Many researchers have also sought to apply the models and analytical frameworks to examples of international conflict, such as Israeli–Palestinian conflict resolution, India and Pakistan, Cyprus, and Northern Ireland. However, as will be demonstrated below, many of most popular texts in these programmes are based on anecdotal use of evidence, as distinct from in-depth studies and falsifiable methodologies. References and claims are often based on anecdotes, unverifiable ‘eyewitness testimony’ and small numbers of personal narratives, rather than standard academic documentation and references.

Furthermore, the field of conflict resolution and peace studies is also characterized by the dominance of ideological positions that go far beyond the boundaries of careful and value-free discourse. As will be shown, this field often reflects the central impact of subjective political positions and objectives, and, in particular, postcolonialism.

PEACE STUDIES AND POSTCOLONIAL IDEOLOGY

As noted above, the field of peace studies and conflict resolution developed in the context of a highly politicized environment. This background has helped to create a situation in which the programmes, publications and research in this area reflect a dominant ideology that is rooted in postcolonialism. Perhaps even more than anthropology and sociology (two of the more fertile areas for the spread of postcolonialism in academia), peace studies provides fertile ground for the growth of this ideological influence.
In the curricula and syllabi of many peace studies and conflict resolution programmes, the influence of radical ideological frameworks stands out. Many of these programmes focus on theories and approaches that are based on socio-psychological concepts and models such as reconciliation, dialogue, forgiveness, historic justice, empathy for victims, etc. The normative models, publications and simulation exercises of academics such as Kelman, Montville, Kriesberg, and Lederach, are featured centrally in the reading lists and case studies. The realist approach to international conflict and conflict resolution and models based on deterrence, the security dilemma, and the use of force to prevent or resolve conflict, are all but ignored, or, in some cases, explicitly rejected on ideological grounds. (Students in peace studies programmes rarely encounter the analyses of Hobbes, Morgenthau, E.H. Carr, Waltz, and other realists.)

In contrast, peace studies programmes emphasize the goal of defining and furthering ‘ways of working toward a just and harmonious world community’. Primary emphasis is placed on normative claims in the resolutions and reports of the United Nations and its ancillary groups, such as the UN Commission on Human Rights, supported by the powerful NGO community. Ignoring the highly problematic nature of ‘international law’ in the absence of a legitimate legal process (in contrast to the court systems and legal structures of duly constituted nation states), this approach allows advocates to pick and choose among a wide range of norms and quasi-legal (or pseudo-legal) texts to promote particular political and ideological agendas.

This process was extended through the addition of core texts from postcolonial ideology to many reading lists in peace studies and conflict resolution courses—particularly through publications by Edward Said and Noam Chomsky. Said’s Orientalism, for example, fits in well with the political foundations of peace studies after the Vietnam War. This is particularly true for Said’s claim that Western approaches to ‘the East’ and non-European peoples and cultures were demeaning and stripped individuals and society of substance. Said also helped to reify the existing biases through the ideological prism asserting that relations between states (and ‘liberation movements’) were not among equals, but rather conducted entirely on the basis of perceived power differences between the West and amorphous and alien ‘others’.

In this context, the identification of the postcolonial ‘other’ has been combined with the centrality of power relationships, as epitomized by Noam Chomsky’s political ideology. Chomsky’s publications, as well as derivatives, frequently occupy central positions in the reading lists of peace studies and related programmes around the world, including the University of Sydney, Notre Dame, the University of Pennsylvania, Stanford, Berkeley, and the Programme on Human Rights and Justice on his home campus of MIT.
This ideology emphasizes power imbalances as the root of war and evil, making the United States, as the world's major military and economic power, also the central obstacle to world peace. Likewise, in the Middle East, it is Israel's status as a regional superpower (real or imagined) and its relationship with the United States that confers its status as a postcolonial aggressor, and perceived Palestinian, Arab, and Moslem weakness (real or mythical, as in the case of Said) confers preferred status as postcolonial victim. At the same time, the process of empowerment of the victim and the removal of the aggressor are portrayed as the path to peace and justice.

The link between opposition to US policy in Vietnam and the rapid growth in university peace studies courses, related journals and other activities, is also a central foundation of postcolonialism. Chomsky's anti-Americanism is strongly reflected in his 1974 book, *Peace in the Middle East*, and is widely adopted by many others in the realm of peace studies. (In addition, many powerful NGOs that use the rhetoric of peace and human rights, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch automatically blame the United States for much of the violence, warfare and injustice.) And his view of empowerment of the victim leads him to support and romanticize terrorists as ‘independent nationalism and popular forces that might bring about meaningful democracy’; while the totalitarian regimes in the postcolonial third world are viewed as virtuous pillars of the United Nations and other bodies. Furthermore, although Said is quick to contemptuously reject any attempt to characterize Arab societies and political culture as patronizing ‘Orientalism’, he has no such inhibitions in making blanket characterizations of Israel and the United States.

Thus, postcolonial ideology in peace studies programmes promotes an agenda based on Chomsky’s ‘empowerment’ of Said’s legendary ‘other’—the outsider, the refugee and the postcolonial victim. This agenda extends to political advocacy and action, including at times support for terrorism and violence, in the name of this subjective social justice.

**IDEOLOGY AS METHODOLOGY: IDENTIFYING OPPRESSORS AND VICTIMS**

In the field of peace studies, postcolonial ideology is often accompanied by the pretence that criteria exist by which to distinguish between aggressor and oppressor, or victim of injustice and perpetrator. Postcolonial peace studies—including dimensions such as reconciliation, apology, rebalancing of power relationships, and historic justice—does not acknowledge the inherent subjectivity of these central dimensions, but inherently assumes—following Chomsky’s Manichean division, that weaker parties and instances of historic injustice can be readily identified.
The danger of distortion from subjective judgements was enhanced with the spread of critical theory, particularly in its Marxist versions, and the enthusiasm with which it was embraced and propagated. ‘Critical theory’, in its various forms, easily descends into aggressive political correctness, which claims to distinguish between justice and injustice. Adherents of the critical theory approach seek to empower the disenfranchised and oppressed, or at least to rebalance an asymmetric power relationship. But justice and power relationships are subjective, and when transferred from the philosophical to the political realm, are readily manipulated.

This problem is particularly acute in consideration of the Arab–Israeli conflict in the context of peace studies programmes. In general, this dispute is truncated into its Israeli–Palestinian component, and in this very limited and artificial context, Israel is automatically portrayed as the more powerful or dominant party, whereas the Palestinians are depicted as perennially powerless victims of historic injustice. For example, in a chapter on terrorism that is assigned in many peace studies and related courses, Shannon French writes: ‘Terror is the tactic of the weaker power, the basis for asymmetric warfare. . . . The Israeli Defense Force (IDF) is an organized, disciplined, and well-funded modern army trained to use advanced technology and weapons, whereas most of those who fight for the Palestinian cause are poorly funded, ill equipped, and under no effective centralized control.’

This assessment is highly subjective, based on a narrow and generally self-reinforcing restriction of criteria, which erases the impact of Palestinian terror and the explicit and continuing threats to Israel’s security and survival from the region and the wider Islamic and Arab world. In addition, the standard claims of historic injustice focus on Palestinian refugee claims, Israeli settlements, etc., but these are based entirely on the Palestinian narrative, which ignores responsibility for central historical events, such as the longstanding Arab rejectionism beginning with the 1947 UN Partition resolution and the violence that resulted, or the context of the 1967 war, which led to the Israeli ‘occupation’. In this and in many other cases, historic injustice is a matter of perception and interpretation, often depending on the determination of a particularly starting point, and therefore outside the realm of useful academic analysis.

Although many publications in peace studies highlight the case of South Africa as a paradigmatic example, the clear moral and normative distinctions between the apartheid regime and the Black majority are entirely exceptional. Efforts to learn and apply lessons from the South African experience to other conflict situations create distortions and reflect political and ideological biases. In this context, the use of the term ‘apartheid’ in different contexts is politically and ideologically judgemental, rather than academic, and the demonization of Israel becomes part
of the conflict, rather than contributing to its management or resolution. Furthermore, the emphasis in the academic literature on the role of apology, restorative justice and reconciliation (based on the White leadership’s acceptance of moral culpability) also reflects the dominance of a Christian theological and cultural prism.  

These factors, resulting from postcolonial ideology and postmodernist critical theory are reinforced by the relative lack of systematic investigation and empirical evaluation of the relevant theories and models. Although descriptive case studies and normative articles have been published dealing with conflict resolution efforts, particularly with respect to protracted ethno-national conflicts (the Middle East, Cyprus, Northern Ireland, and others), critical evaluations of failed peace processes are generally lacking. Evaluative and comparative methodologies, such as the single analytical framework approach developed by Alexander George, and based on empirically observable variables that are derived from the theories and models in the peace studies literature, are necessary to remedy this weakness in the field. (For a notable and insufficiently cited exception, see Fen Osler Hampson, Nurturing Peace: Why Peace Settlements Succeed or Fail.)

This overall absence of useful empirical analysis that can ascertain the applicability of the various theories and approaches to peace studies is illustrated in the case of the treatment of the Oslo process in the literature. Following the initial agreement in 1993 (the Declaration of Principles), many scholars ‘explained’ this apparent success and failed to predict the subsequent failure. Most theories and models appear to be tautological in nature, without independent and externally measurable variables with which to determine the link between cause and effect or to measure success or failure. This constitutes a major weakness in the academic approach to peace studies.

ADVOCACY: TALKING PEACE WHILE PROMOTING CONFLICT

As a result of these factors, in recent years, academic peace and conflict studies programmes have also drawn increasing scrutiny and criticism, both from within and from external analysts. George Lopez, Senior Fellow and Director of Policy Studies, Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, University of Notre Dame, has acknowledged the ideological nature of peace studies. This ideology enhances the tendency inherent in peace studies to move from academic inquiry and research to advocacy, and without careful navigation, it is all too easy for peace studies programmes to be drawn into the conflicts that students and faculty claim to be studying.

Furthermore, the postcolonial framework condemns the use of military force in self-defence by non-postcolonial state actors (the West and Israel). In a major departure from academic norms of conduct, and in a manner
that undermines the credibility of peace studies, faculty members encourage their students to participate in political rallies, boycotts, and similar activities.\textsuperscript{21} Although a detailed analysis of this negative phenomenon is beyond the scope of this essay, a few examples of such abuse provide indications of the wider trend. The Peace Studies programme at the University of Colorado at Boulder includes a course on ‘Facilitating Peaceful Community Change’ which includes segments on ‘American cultural imperialism, the religion of consumerism, white and male-caused oppression’, ‘Power/Empowerment’, ‘Leadership’, ‘Solidarity Work’, and ‘Building Alliances’.\textsuperscript{22}

In a particularly blatant example of the political abuse, Stuart Rees, the head of the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (CPACS) at the University of Sydney has long championed a pro-Palestinian position and ideology, disguised within the postmodern jargon of support for the ‘disempowered’. In November 2003, Rees and the Sydney Peace Foundation (which he also heads and which is closely linked to CPACS) awarded its annual peace prize to Dr. Hanan Ashrawi, a member of the PLO hierarchy and a former minister in the Palestinian cabinet. Ashrawi has been a major figure in the political campaign against Israel (for example, at the Durban conference in 2001), and in the strident Palestinian organization known as MIFTAH (The Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue & Democracy).\textsuperscript{23}

The peace studies programme at Bradford University in the UK has also become the setting for anti-Israeli propaganda. In a recent example, the UK peace studies association, which is hosted by Bradford University, advertised demonstrations against the Israeli separation fence. In their ‘call for action’, the ‘facts’ were particularly one-sided, and the context (of Palestinian terrorism) was entirely absent.\textsuperscript{24} Under the umbrella of peace studies, this programme, as in the example of Sydney University, is, in fact, promoting conflict.

Other examples are found in the publications of Mohammed Abu-Nimer, who has been on the faculty of the Program on International Peace and Conflict Resolution, American University, Washington, DC, the Rockefeller Visiting Fellow at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame, and active in other programmes as well. Abu-Nimer published an essay entitled ‘Another Voice against the War’ in the December 2001 Newsletter of the Peace Studies section of the International Studies Association. On its masthead, this publication notes that:

The aim of the PSS/ISA is to seek a better understanding of the causes of war and violence and of the conditions of peace in the international system. To this end, the Peace Studies Section links scholars of various disciplines and methodologies, develops, encourages, and disseminates research, and facilitates research-based teaching in peace and conflict studies.
Abu-Nimer’s essay begins by focusing on the terror attacks of 11 September 2001, stating that this ‘was a horrible act and everyone should agree that there is no religious or political motivation that justifies such a crime’. However, he then goes on to address the question of possible causes for Islamic anger and violence, including US policy in the Middle East, and turns the essay into an anti-Israel polemic that is entirely inconsistent with the mission statement of PSS/ISA, as noted above. Abu-Nimer refers to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict as ‘the main thorn in the Middle East and in the relationship between western countries and Islamic countries’. In particular, in this analysis, the conflict is based on the denial of self-determination to the Palestinians. Furthermore,

Every Muslim believes that the US and European governments, if they want, are capable of placing enough pressure on Israel to withdraw from the occupied territories and allow Palestinians to live in freedom. This might not be a totally accurate belief, however it is derived from the fact that such governments act as suppliers of weapons and protectors of Israeli interests and policies in every international setting; the recent decision to pull out of the conference on anti-Racism in South Africa is a prime example of such policy.25

Elsewhere, in a policy brief published by the Kroc International Peace Institute, Abu-Nimer’s language is even more clearly framed in the ideology of postcolonialism. Although claiming to promote non-violence, he uses terms of incitement and demonization—an indirect form of postcolonialism’s obsession with ‘the other’. Thus,

The loss of human face and connection is one of several factors which allows soldiers, leaders, as well as people in the streets, to engage in atrocities and violence, and gives credence to the presumption that the larger conflict can eventually be resolved by humiliating and killing Palestinian leaders and people or by killing Israeli children in the streets. Efforts to develop alternative approaches are essential before both sides forget that there is any other way to exist.26

PEACE STUDIES AND POSTCOLONIALISM AND MODERN ALCHEMY

In the long term, societal support for academic activities, including research and teaching, is based on the outcome of these activities—on the utility of the product. Disciplines such as alchemy and astrology that do not produce useful or reliable results are eventually dropped from the curriculum. And the dominant ideologically saturated version of peace studies and conflict resolution programmes is the modern equivalent of alchemy and astrology.
Peace studies has not produced peace, or brought this outcome any closer to reality, despite the tremendous volume of programmes, courses, publications, and conferences. And practitioners—diplomats and political leaders—are increasingly aware of the false promise of the main themes of this literature, including power rebalancing and reconciliation. When these approaches were tried in the mediation efforts related to the Israeli–Palestinian negotiations (the ‘Oslo process’), they failed to produce positive outcomes, and prepared the ground for greater violence. Similar efforts in the case of Sri Lanka (another ‘Oslo process’), the Balkans, and elsewhere have resulted in similar failures. (Conflict management in Northern Ireland and the ‘Good Friday’ agreement appear to be exceptions, but it is too early to declare that peace has triumphed, or to identify the factors that led to this outcome.)

As highlighted in this essay, the distorting impact of postcolonial ideology on peace studies is clearly a contributing factor in the record of failures in this field. This ideology has replaced research with systematic biases that select favoured ‘victims’ and rejected ‘oppressors’, and empirical methodology based on testable hypotheses with political formulae and incantations. If the field of peace studies is to survive and provide a useful and realistic foundation for understanding and responding to international conflict, the postcolonial bias will have to be discarded quickly. Indeed, peace studies—as it is currently practised—is part of the problem, and not part of the solution.

NOTES

1. Claims for earlier origins are far-fetched and lack continuity with the more recent programmes. The first post-World War II Peace Studies programme was established in 1948 at Manchester College (Indiana), by the pacifist Brethren, but this was also an isolated example. ‘Peace Studies: Past and Future’, Special Issue, Vol. 504, Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science; Ian M. Harris, Larry J. Fisk and Carol Rank, ‘A Portrait of University Peace Studies in North America and Western Europe at the End of the Millennium’, International Journal of Peace Studies, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1998), available at www.gmu.edu/a-cademic/ips/vol3_1/Harris.htm.

2. Available at www.earlham.edu/~psa/history.html.


7. See the analysis posted on www.ngo-monitor.org.

9. See, for example, Amnesty International’s Annual Report for 2006 (available at www.amnesty.org/ailib/aireport/index.html) and the comments Secretary General Irene Khan (available at www.huffingtonpost.com/irene-khan/).

10. Available at www.hrw.org.

11. It is interesting to note that two of the most pervasive influences on peace studies—Said and Chomsky—gained their academic influence in fields far removed from politics, international relations, or related disciplines. Said’s position and research was in literature, and Chomsky is a linguist. Their impact on the study of politics and peace studies resulted from publications outside their areas of expertise. Although such academic cross-over is not unique, Chomsky is essentially an essayist, and his publications and claims are not documented. He chooses his ‘evidence’ to fit his ideology and argument, exploiting his academic position as a linguist to publish scattered thoughts in support of political and ideological positions. And Said’s notoriety and influence was enhanced by the myth he created for himself as a Palestinian refugee from the 1948 war, while erasing his true background as a member of the Arab elite residing mostly in Cairo, and with only a distant connection to Jerusalem, which has been carefully documented by Justus Weiner.

12. This was a frequent theme in Said’s numerous political publications and speeches. For example, Edward W. Said, ‘Who’s In Charge? A Tiny, Unelected Group, Backed by Powerful Unrepresentative Interests’, *CounterPunch*, 8 March 2003.


22. Available at csf.colorado.edu/peace/syllabi/pacs3302.html.

23. Available at www.ngo-monitor.org/editions/v1n02/v1n02–1.htm.

24. On the anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, members of Leeds Coalition Against the War will demonstrate in graphic form, with the aid of cardboard boxes, what they believe needs to happen to the wall that the Israeli government is erecting between Israel and the Occupied Territories. ‘Palestinians are being cut off from their livelihoods and families, and Israelis are being separated from neighbours with whom they have lived in peace. This symbolic action is taking place to draw the attention of the Leeds public to the conflict in Israel-Palestine, in order to mobilize the voices of peace.’
