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Thinking about Peace, Conflict, and War: An Introduction to the Special Issue

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Thinking about Peace, Conflict, and War: An Introduction to the Special Issue

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This special issue had humble beginnings. As a matter of fact, odds were stacked against it, especially given that the original plan for this topic was for a panel discussion based on submitted work to the 2009 Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP) Conference. However, not one abstract was received for this topic. I found this quite curious and alarming since at that time this country was engaged in two wars, there was continuous media coverage around “terrorist” activities, and we were experiencing frequent changes to our daily routines based on new security measures. Anti-war protestors were growing silent. It has been said that “sometimes no action is an action.” The lack of peace talk, or discussion of ending conflict and war was shocking—at least to me.

I am old enough to remember Vietnam. I remember the protests and hearing plans from older “boys” to cross to Canada. I remember the activism on college campuses across the county from students organizing and shouting their views. I remember the news reports showing the destruction and disruption

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of everyday lives. I remember the picture of the young girl running naked down the barren street of her town after being burned by the explosion of a bomb. I remember all of this vividly ... and this was at a time when there was no internet or instant access to images from cell phones or web-cameras.

Given these experiences and adding many more that have occurred over the last 30 or so years, I still think about peace. What would it look like? Can we ever achieve it? Why is there so much conflict and war? What stops us from peace? When I shared the news with my colleagues at the SSSP that I did not receive any abstracts for the proposed session on Peace, Conflict and War, I was heartened to hear encouragement from my colleagues and Robert Leighninger, the Editor of this journal. He offered to print a note to readers requesting that they write about this topic. From this note, Dan Liechty emerged as a fellow thinker on this topic. Together we proposed a special issue on the topic of peace, conflict and war that was accepted by *JSSW*.

Our call for papers went out last year. The responses were slow to trickle in, making us wonder even more about the silence surrounding this topic. Another email blast went out to various academic disciplines, including peace studies departments. Manuscripts came pouring in towards the end of the submission period. Through a peer-review process, Dan and I selected diverse, and perhaps unconventional, scholarship for this special issue.

The contributions included in this collection cover a broad range of material, which we present in thematic pairs. The first essay introduces the topic and invites readers into a reflective and philosophical consideration of the subject. Michael Allen Fox notes that too often our reflexive understanding of peace actually presupposes the priority of war and conflict as constants, with peace as an absence of war, or at least in contrast to war. Fox challenges us to be more creative in our concept of peace, approaching peace as an imaginative concept in its own right, quite apart from our customary pairing of peace with war. As we do this, many of the commonplaces about human nature and social institutions are called into question, which in turn yields a clearer picture of the hidden trade-offs we make by supporting war and war preparations.

The pair of essays following Fox's article draws attention to concrete experiences in global peace work. These essays serendipitously prove to be very timely in the context of world affairs. First, Joseph G. Bock highlights some of the unanticipated partnerships, alliances and programs that have emerged as human service focused NGOs have gradually contoured their guiding philosophies toward peace and justice concerns in the wake of the passing Cold War era. Then Shaazka Beyerle examines the connections between political and economic corruption that occur in areas of armed conflict and military government. This corruption is felt at the popular level as a basic denial of human rights and freedom. This type of oppression has been successfully ameliorated through movements of civil resistance and grassroots efforts to combat corruption.

The next pair of essays focuses on peace education and activism within academic institutions. One of the byproducts of recent U.S. political history has been a pervasive identification with patriotism and militarism among the populace. One result of this is that military recruiters have been given a degree of access to adolescents not seen for an entire generation. Scott Harding and Seth Kershner report on efforts to challenge such access through organized counter-recruitment programs in secondary schools. Following this, Eric Swank and Breanne Fahs describe their studies to better understand and articulate the complexity of factors involved in decisions of undergraduate-level social work students to become politically engaged in antiwar activism.

The next two contributions focus generally on the issue of religion and conflict. As these essays are written from the perspective of advocate-believers, it might surprise some that they were chosen for inclusion in a journal of social sciences. Therefore, a bit of explanation is in order. Each is worthy in its own right. However, pairing the two yields, we believe, even more than the sum of the parts. Whereas many in our society, and even in the academy, may associate the Islamic faith with coerced religious conformity and Buddhism with high levels of social tolerance, these essays drive home the point that in concrete historical situations, both of these religions have served to justify coercion and violence, as well as peace and social tolerance. In both of the articles, the authors, Liykat

Takim, who looks at Islam, and Masumi Hayashi-Smith, who addresses Buddhism, suggest that the deepest and original "core values" of the religion grow out of and support attitudes of peace, pluralism and social tolerance. However, through sudden or gradual co-optation of the religion by the governing powers, both religions lent themselves to interpretations supporting warfare, coercion and social intolerance. In each of these essays, the author makes the case for concerted disentanglement of the religion from the legal and political assumptions of state and government, and to once again allow believers' attitudes and ethics to be contoured by the original core values of the religion. Social observers will notice in these essays the emergence of concepts and ideas that directly echo the experiences of other great religions, especially of western Christianity, which became the religion of state and subsequently transitioned into institutions within democratic societies in which religion and state are formally, legally and constitutionally separated. Most specifically, we see the employment of an historicist hermeneutic for reading sacred texts which retains the communal authority of the text itself while simultaneously criticizing the ossification of particular interpretive traditions around the text.

The contribution of S. Elizabeth Snyder was chosen to end this collection because this essay brings together many of the themes present throughout the collection. The summary vision of this collection is that we must transition from being cultures of war into becoming cultures of peace. Elizabeth Snyder contends that German society, in conscious reaction to its significant role as a perpetrator of war during the 19th and 20th centuries, developed a deep vein of antimilitarism among its people and a sincerely held desire to create a culture of peace. At the same time, Germany also endeavored to maintain itself as a full and active member in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. This entailed significant commitment to maintaining a military force and relatively high levels of military spending. While these competing social trends of becoming a culture of peace and maintaining NATO involvement coexisted successfully, if at times uneasily, during the time when NATO focus was primarily within the European Theater, it has become increasingly difficult to maintain as NATO, at the prodding primarily

of the U.S., is expected to supply troops and treasure for wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. There is clear evidence of open dispute between those in German society who seek to continue movement in the direction of a culture of peace and those who want to see more dutiful support for NATO and its U.S.-led policies. Snyder's essay ends, in effect, posing to German society the ancient perennial question. "*Quo vadis?*" Where are we heading? Will we move forward in creating world cultures of social peace and tolerance, or will we lose ground and continue to be defined by forces of fear, militarism and war?

Although social scientists are rightfully hesitant in much of their work to step out of their roles as objective observers and into the roles of advocates, in terms of the question Snyder's essay poses—of whether or not we move forward toward building a culture of peace—we are all actively engaged and the role of (disinterested) objective observer seems mightily out of place.

Thus, we end this collection with a commentary by Michael D. Knox. Knox's credibility and reputation as a social science researcher has been firmly established over a long career, yet Knox has now clearly and unapologetically moved into the role of peace advocate. Employing his wealth of knowledge about human social processes, Knox outlines the very concrete steps being taken by a peace advocacy organization he leads to raise the profile of peace education in the U.S. Whether or not readers feel animated by Knox's particular project, his work reminds us that as social scientists we do not live in a vacuum. Our accumulated professional knowledge places an even greater burden of responsibility on our shoulders than would otherwise be the case.

This special issue of *The Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* is conceived and offered in the expectation that we can move forward toward greater social peace and tolerance, as citizens of our respective nations, as world citizens, and as a collective species.

