

Peace Studies and Justice: A State of the Field Address

Matt Meyer

Bookend Seminar, February 18, 2016

Matt Meyer is an educator-activist, author, Founding Chair of the Peace and Justice Studies Association, and UN representative of the International Peace Research Association.

Seven years ago, in 2009, peace research pioneer Johan Galtung wrote that the U.S. empire had a short life span; it would end around 2025, its life extended a few extra years by the election of Barack Obama.¹ He asserted that there were only two fundamental paths that could emerge from the diminution of U.S. status globally: either a blossoming of peoples' movements towards decentralized "beloved" communities, or big government fascism. Several decades before that, Professor Bertram Gross detailed the "friendly fascism" spreading across the U.S., as the beginnings of the neoliberal agenda swept the country during the Reagan era—a backlash that attempted to erase all the gains of "the Sixties" (1954-1976) with a great deal of success.² Leaders of the most radical, cutting-edge sectors of those movements were hounded, convicted of often-bogus conspiracy charges, framed, imprisoned with extremely lengthy sentences, assassinated, forced into exile, or, occasionally, bought off. For three decades, the decades when peace and conflict studies grew as an interdisciplinary field, academics and activists alike have been trying to catch up, learn and teach our own lessons, rebuild, and sometimes fight back.

Today, the right and left poles of the 2016 presidential campaigns seem to cry out the truth in Galtung's predictions about fascism and socialistic endeavors. The Ferguson Truth Telling Project, the Dream Defenders, Moral Mondays, and the idea (and movement) audaciously asserting that Black Lives indeed must Matter suggest that we are facing a precipice from which we will either fall deeply in decline or soar, rise, and fly based on the ideals of peace and justice, which so many of us struggle for. I say all this to say, "Keep on doing what you're doing!" but also to say, "We must do more!"

We must be bolder in thinking outside the box, in imagining the impossible, in understanding that every radical movement in world history seemed for many decades utterly impossible until just before it happened. There are, as combative pacifist Grace Paley has reminded us, enormous changes that take place at the last moment, just before we expect them not to. Then, after major changes take place, it often

seems as if they were absolutely inevitable. We must be bolder in supporting the most challenging and visionary ideas of our students, and we must learn from them. In the words of a young Martin Luther King, Jr., in *Why We Can't Wait*: "'Wait' has almost always meant 'Never.' We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that 'justice too long delayed is justice denied.'"³

Today, the Peace and Justice Studies Association, or PJSA, the leading organization in North America of professors and students interested in peace, is one of the most fiscally-sound, organizationally-stable, cautiously-growing professional or political associations I know of. We do it by not biting off more than we can chew, but we are also down in our membership. Our annual budget is far less than the budget of small projects taken up by many grassroots block associations. We have a tiny infrastructure compared to our output and influence. Many peace- and justice-loving people who feel themselves a part of PJSA in at least a peripheral way nevertheless fail to renew their membership, or give even a \$25 contribution every once in a while. The International Peace Research Association, of which we are a regional affiliate (and for whom I proudly serve as a United Nations representative), is in an even more precarious situation, with no office or permanent staff or secretariat. We need your ideas, your energy, your money, and your active membership.

But, we persevere. On September 22, 2016, PJSA will convene our next annual conference in the British Columbia region of Canada, hosted by Selkirk College, in conjunction with indigenous leaders and local war resisters. On November 27, 2016, the International Peace Research Association, or IPRA, will boldly hold its next biennial conference in Freetown, Sierra Leone, part of an effort that will not be cowed by fear of Ebola or war, but determined to make a difference in matters of both development and security. We know that without justice and solidarity there can be no peace, so we carry on—to bring together activists and academics across our ideological, cultural, and geographic distances to dream big dreams and make incremental but meaningful change. We must do no less here, at Juniata College, in Pennsylvania, in all of our public and private spaces and places.

There were three of us from an organization called COPRED (the Consortium on Peace, Research, Education, and Development) and another three from PSA (the Peace Studies Association; the Baker Institute's own Andy Murray was one of those three). At a certain point, many people in the field—students, grad students, adjunct faculty, and some tenured professors and leaders in the field—were beginning to ask, "Why do we have two organizations? Why do we have two conferences every year?" Some thought COPRED was more of an activist space and PSA was more of a professional association with institutional members, except there was a lot of crossover. There were many obvious contradictions. Six of us began having a conversation, hearing from our individual members and then beginning to hear

from some of our board and institutional members, that this was making less and less sense. We began to have a series of summits, taking walks at one conference or another and asking, “What’s up? What’s happening here? Why can’t we be friends?” Eventually, we laid to rest these two particular organizations in what has been one of my proudest moments. In progressive movements globally, and in the U.S. left in particular, you don’t hear about mergers—you hear about splits. In New York, it’s always clear that for every six people, you have seven different organizations. But we found a way to come together at a crucial time, creating the Peace and Justice Studies Association.

Now, one of the greatest things about PJSA is that more and more, especially in the last three to five years, it’s become a truly bi-national organization, working with institutions and individuals throughout Canada in what is a growing field there. Our Canadian colleagues are making substantial connections to grassroots movements, including to the indigenous movements. The fact of the matter is that there’s very little direct work that PJSA in the US has done in terms of indigenous issues, but we’re happy to report that the inspiring author, hip hop artist, politician and activist Wab Kinew, of the Onigaming First Nation of northwest Ontario, will be one of our keynote speakers. The personal connections we make—like the ones developed at conferences— help to shape our institutions and politics. It’s vital that we push for our individual connections to make long-range institutional transformation.

The type of transformations we need to make through organizations like the PJSA, again, can’t wait. There is a lack of attention to the Global South and to race-based injustice because of a blinding systemic lens through which we see the world.⁴ When we merged, one of COPRED’s leading scholars, for example, a board member whose main work was solidarity with Native Nations in the United States, brought a certain consciousness around issues of indigeneity into the center of the organization. It was wonderful, but had no lasting institutional effect. Kelli Te Maiharoa, a current IPRA council member from Australia, is an indigenous woman finishing her doctorate on indigenous roads to peacemaking. The IPRA itself has indigenous activists from Africa, Asia, and Latin America making cutting-edge contributions to the field. Too often, however, those of us outside of the Global South are slow students, not paying enough attention to the lessons being written in action and practice by our very own colleagues. We have a Social Science Attention Deficit Disorder of the Global South.

There is a lens through which both U.S. and Canadian PJSA members need to utilize to understand these dynamics and our history, especially if we’re looking at making long-term institutional transformation and long-term social change in the world. The lens of white supremacy—the role that institutionalized “whiteness” plays in the world and in our work—needs to be challenged at a very basic

level. It's not just about interpersonal racism, or even indigenous rights or sovereignty, or so-called civil rights. Theologian and MLK associate Vincent Harding asserted, "We don't want to call it the Civil Rights Movement anymore. It was a Black-led Freedom Movement, based in the U.S. South. It began a process that has not been completed: a movement for true democracy in America, which still does not yet exist." I use Harding's words as a frame of reference to help us grapple with the fact that white supremacy is a system, part of a larger system of imperialism, which is essential to examine if we're going to do more than just tell stories about our attempts to make change.

We need to sharpen our vocabulary, to clarify and dignify some words whose meanings have been lost or confused. When I think of white folks, even "great white scholars" and their relationships to indigenous peoples, peoples of African descent, the growing immigrant population, people of the South (in both national and global terms), I want to sharpen our uses of and sensitivity to concepts such as sovereignty and self-determination. We have much more to learn than to teach our sisters and brothers from historically oppressed groups. The time is past due when we must become better students, better listeners, better scholars of the Freirean sort. The time for paternalistic retelling of the stories of our own youth or our own conceptions—of Gandhi or King or violence or nonviolence—must be muted in favor of active learning about and from the new movements coming up today.

When I think of Galtung and the nature of empire, I want to move away from rhetorical flourishes and get very specific. Let us, for example, look at what is happening in Puerto Rico today. Puerto Rico is a direct colony, one still under annual review by the United Nations Committee of 24, the Decolonization Committee. It is facing an extraordinary debt crisis, with politicians across the political spectrum calling for massive civil disobedience in terms of not paying back a debt accumulated not by the people of Puerto Rico, but by the many U.S. and multinational-based companies, which have long used Puerto Rico's "special status" to reap unprecedented profits from a cheap labor pool and tax breaks. Throughout the island colony—where for decades (up until today) young men could be drafted into the U.S. armed forces while not being eligible to vote in U.S. presidential elections—there is a unified cry for the release of political prisoner Oscar López Rivera, held behind bars in a U.S. maximum security prison for the "thought crime" of seditious conspiracy. This charge, the same for which Nelson Mandela served twenty-seven years, came with no accusation of any violent offense or the harming of any human being, but López Rivera has served now for over thirty-five years, essentially for organizing for independence for his people. There is no rhetorical flourish here; this is Colonialism 101.

But then, in these Black Lives Matters times, what must we think about the Black nation? The Nation of Islam had and has one conception of nationhood. Black Arts Movement icon Amiri Baraka,

when he called out, “It’s nation time,” had another, while those suggesting that the five states in the “Black Belt” South come together to form a Republic of New Africa embody still another strand of revolutionary nationalist thinking and action. Peace and justice scholars had best at least understand these words, and become fluent in these concepts, even as we ponder the cross-sections between nationalism and internationalism. We need to sharpen our vocabularies so we know what sovereignty means—what George Bush didn’t know—but also way beyond that. We need to understand nationhood *vis-à-vis* this empire we have here, which does seem rapidly to be devolving, but which has within it these internal colonies, these settler-colonialist spaces that will get free in different ways and that will require solidarity in different ways that we had best be prepared for.

I was not an activist from childhood. I wasn’t a red-diaper baby or pink or any of those colors. My parents were not activists. My dad did a little bit of union organizing as a high school teacher and my mom did a little bit of neighborhood community work, but I grew up in that era where we began to see full-color images of body bags coming home from Vietnam, and earlier black-and-white images of dogs being unleashed to attack Black children. It didn’t make sense, all those people being hurt and killed. And then the assassinations: JFK, Malcolm, RFK, King. The fall of LBJ, then of Nixon, and this Watergate thing, it seemed like the United States was becoming unraveled. It was a time of great political tumult, but the activist component—as a child growing up—wasn’t yet clear to me. I guess at some point I described my parents as knee-jerk pacifists. They weren’t coming from a theological perspective or political perspective, but they sort of felt in their bones, “Ooh, this is bad: racism, war, bad.”

In my early years of activism, first as a draft registration resister in 1979 when I turned seventeen, I gravitated towards the War Resisters League (WRL) because as a radical, nonviolence-oriented, secular organization, it left things very open. It wasn’t anti-religious, but it wasn’t specifically religious. It wasn’t anti-socialist or anarchist. It left things open. It was a good space to do radical support of anti-draft and, anti-militarist work without saying, “You have to define things this way.” It was a comfortable place, and yet, the more I felt comfortable in this nonviolent space—the more I loved all these broken rifles I saw everywhere—the more I also heard many, many voices from feminists like Grace Paley, this incredible woman who fed me apple strudel when I was about to speak and then facilitated that first press conference to declare at age seventeen that I wasn’t going to register for the draft. Grace Paley and others said, “Don’t make the mistake of those guys in the sixties who kept the focus on an all-male movement.” Black veterans, especially from a group called Black Vets for Social Justice and the Black United Front said, “Don’t do what those guys did. Don’t make it be an all-white-boy movement.” And then many people after that said, “Understand the connections to Central America, understand the connections to

South Africa.” All these things were happening in the early ’80s, when I got to be the student representative on a lot of early delegations to Central America and Southern Africa.

The more work I did, the more work I’ve done, the more pieces of history I examined and dissected, the more it became clear that my young thoughts about violence and nonviolence, about the spaces between a movement led by white men and other possibilities about how best to organize for lasting change, weren’t just the wishy-washy, fuzzy-headed notions of a confused teenager. It wasn’t me, it wasn’t a personal thing, it was an aching to become free of the historical, organizational trappings of an extremely under-developed progressive movement, a movement stunted by government repression and by our own inability to learn the lessons of the past. In fact, the dichotomization of Malcolm and Martin was in some ways the product of a force that was trying all along to divide us. These are individuals, forces, ideologies, movements that likely would have and still can come together. Maybe on August 28, 1963, when Malcolm was saying, “That march is a bit of a sellout thing,” and Martin was saying, “I have a dream”—maybe on that very day you had to make a choice: “Do I get on the bus or not?” But now, not only is there no reason not to make that choice, there’s a reason to refuse to choose. Now, there’s a reason to say, “We must understand the great legacies of both of the Martin and Malcolm traditions, understand how a radical interpretation was leading both of these iconic figures towards one another.” And we must understand how to not fight our grandmothers’ and grandfathers’ battles. That, to me, calls not only for a practical coalition building amongst our organizations, but for a philosophical and theoretical examination of where we are.

We have, I think, from a philosophical level, not looked carefully at the way twentieth century nonviolence and twentieth century revolutionary movements, armed struggle and otherwise, contribute certain lessons that, alone, don’t answer the question of what to do now. Neither absolute pacifist nor militaristic revolutionary concepts get us where we need to go without a deep understanding of feminism. Neither philosophical pole understands where we need to go without a sharpened understanding of what the gender-binary system means. Unless we examine patriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism, and the dialectics of strategy and tactics, we will not be able to build effective twenty-first century movements of any kind. We need inter-generational, diverse ideological, trans-national, cross-tactical spaces to think through these frameworks on deep philosophical and practical new levels. It’s amazing, once this conversation starts, how many reverberations there are.

In the late 1980s, I was mentored by a man named Bill Sutherland, an African-American World War Two conscientious objector who got out of jail at the end of war. He didn’t foresee the great U.S. movements of the fifties and sixties coming, and when he worked with some of his comrades traveling

throughout Europe—leading figures like David Dellinger and Ralph DiGia—he met with some African students who said, “You gotta come to the continent. Stuff is on fire.” He left in 1953, to what was then the Gold Coast becoming Ghana, and gave his life to the African freedom movements. Bill was an incredible bridge between African and African-American movements. He was the person who invited King to the independence celebrations in Ghana; he was Malcolm’s chauffeur in Tanzania six months before he was killed. Throughout the sixties, seventies, eighties, and nineties, Bill was this bridge. I became Bill’s student and then eventually his coauthor, and time and time again, we would see these same issues, these same questions, these same nuances being ignored by some and shrewdly understood by others. Our book, *Guns and Gandhi in Africa: Pan-African Insights on Non-violence, Armed Struggle, and Liberation*, came out in 2000; it was a book of explorations with African leaders from throughout the continent about these questions of nonviolence and armed struggle, of peace and militarism. We met with Mandela; with Albertina, Zwelakhe, and Walter Sisulu; with Oliver Tambo, Ela Gandhi, Kenneth Kaunda, Graca Machel, and Julius Nyerere. We discussed Amílcar Cabral as someone very important to engage with. Barbara Deming, the great feminist, lesbian activist, and nonviolent theoretician—in perhaps her greatest work, *Revolution and Equilibrium*—engaged directly with Frantz Fanon, about the nature of nonviolence within transformative, radical settings.

Nonviolence, if anything (as Deming often noted), is an experiment that’s really just begun. We need to continue working on that experiment and see where it leads us in all its different facets. The deeper one goes, the more one can see that our current period of great crisis provides us an extraordinary opportunity to build the field and grow the profession even as we work as humble students to serve the interests of the burgeoning Black liberation movement in the United States, the indigenous movements in Canada, the grassroots movements across every corner of this fragile but resilient planet to reclaim our common spaces, places, names, and humanity. Many reforms will surely be needed, but reform alone will not cure the ills of governments and societies built on greed, oppression, hatred, and violence. Love-force, the passion to care for something (for people) so intensely that one is willing to work harder than one ever thought one could, to transform oneself and one’s world more than is comfortable or easy, must be our motivator. We must lean on and push one another for sustenance. And together, we must build a more resilient, deeper, international movement for the twenty-first century. Together we can.

NOTES

1. Johan Galtung, Johan. 2009. *The Fall of the US Empire—And Then What?: Successors, Regionalization or Globalization? US Fascism or US Blossoming?* (Oslo: Transcend University Press, 2009).
2. Bertram M. Gross, *Friendly Fascism: The New Face of Power in America*. (New York: M. Evans, 1980).
3. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010)
4. The Global South generally refers to the nations making up Africa, Asia/Pacific, South and Central America and the Carribean, and most of the Middle East.