

STILL THE WHITE MAN'S WORD? PEACE IN A TIME OF SOCIAL DISCONNECTION

MICHAEL WILSON BECERRIL

“Peace isn’t the answer,” Kwame Ture spells out lucidly in the 1968 documentary, *Tell Me Lies*. “Liberation is the answer,” he explains so serenely that it is almost a whisper. “So that’s what you should talk about, never peace. That’s the white man’s word, ‘peace.’ Liberation is our word.”

Few people have been so famously disillusioned from peace, nonviolence activism, and liberal paradigms for social change as the late Kwame Ture, formerly known as Stokely Carmichael. The chair of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, a grassroots voting rights organizer, and one of the Freedom Riders mentored by Ella Baker and Bayard Rustin, Ture would eventually transform into a leading advocate of revolutionary socialism in the pan-African struggle.

Of particular relevance today, he was increasingly critical of the Democratic Party, especially after the 1964 convention, when the party sided with the illegally appointed segregationist delegation from Mississippi over the democratically elected members of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, represented by Fannie Lou Hamer and other civil rights activists. He arrived at the realization, expressed during a speech in 1966, that “For nonviolence to work, your opponent must have a conscience; the United States has none” (cited in Svensson, 1997).

Nearly 60 years later, what can peace scholars learn from this transformation, and why does it matter? To answer this, it’s important to think about what characterizes the present moment and our likely future, as well as how Peace Studies has been complicit in getting us here. Answering these difficult questions can shed important light about how our field must

transform and assert its undoubted utility in times of social disconnection. Where are we headed, and is peace still the white man's word?

Liberal virtue and academic complicity with colonialism

The field of Peace and Conflict Studies has historically buttressed white supremacy, colonialism, and capitalism in scholarship and pedagogy—even while thinking of ourselves as “the good ones.” The field has been rightly criticized from within and without for reproducing colonial norms of power and knowledge, for example through its thematic foci, frameworks and approaches, case selection bias (overwhelmingly focused on case studies from predominantly white communities, especially in Europe and the U.S.; see Buzan and Little, 2000; Barkawi and Laffey 2006), and its makeup as a small-but-growing community of scholars.

The field of Peace Studies has largely coalesced inside Western academia in the global North, and many of its significant operations, such as conferences and publications, are still based in these privileged spaces. Peace and Conflict Studies today remains dominated by wealthy people, especially men, trained in and based in elite, private universities in the global North—as evinced by who gets published in major PCS journals (Gleditsch, Nordkvelle, and Strand, 2014; Pesch and Mucha, 2020).

This is not meant to further diminish the contributions made outside of such small quarters by marginalized scholars, especially across the global South; nor is this to deny the terrific work of the giants on whose shoulders we stand, regardless of where they were born. Rather, this is a call to grapple with the eurocentricity inherent to such foundations, following the crucial challenge posed by Māori scholar Dr. Kelli Te Maihāroa and Cherokee scholar Dr. Polly O. Walker, among others, to “decolonize Peace Studies” (2020). (See the full Summer 2020 issue of *The Peace Chronicle*.)

Whiteness and false innocence

Whereas Peace and Conflict Studies has an institutionalized sympathy for research about activism, hierarchies of knowledge continue to be reproduced within PCS, for example through the mainstream favoring of some methodological approaches over others. Dominant publications in our field, such as the *Journal of Peace Research* and the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, remain highly selective in publishing mostly positivist and quantitative work.

As in academia more broadly, especially in Western contexts, studies that conform to traditional positivist assumptions and models are much more likely to receive funding, prestigious grants, media attention, and publication contracts. However, statistical analyses of many cases—which requires a degree of superficiality and sometimes dubious coding—cannot elucidate the subtleties of language. Even worse, positivist social science tends to leave unchecked many assumptions about the power relations embedded in social structures, and how these relations might be reproduced within the research process (for example, in the unequal relationship between the researcher and their chosen research subjects).

Such overrepresentation of positivist, wealthy, white, and cis-men’s perspectives is not merely superficial, as it translates into the content and the impact of our work, which overwhelmingly remains focused on the stories and frameworks of privileged movements and thinkers. The resulting narrow perspectives have granted primacy to eurocentric norms and frameworks like liberalism; they have downplayed our field’s complicity with capitalism and imperialism; and they have contributed to the academic erasure of marginalized people resisting colonialism and neocolonialism, especially in the global South—either because their tactics were not approved by privileged academics or because their concerns were not of interest to the scholars who have dominated the field.

These narrow lenses have granted primacy to eurocentric norms and frameworks like liberalism, downplayed the responsibilities of privileged academics participating in capitalism and imperialism. In fact, these lenses have ultimately reified privilege and inequality, for example by paying undue loyalty to a legal-economic regime built on anti-Blackness (see Alves, 2021, p. 109). The structural whiteness of PCS has downplayed the contribution of movements by marginalized people resisting colonialism and neocolonialism, especially in the global South—either because their tactics were not approved by white academics or because their concerns were not of interest to the scholars who have dominated the field—tacitly legitimizing oppression and normalizing state violence.

As long as Peace and Conflict Studies remains dominated by wealthy people trained in and based in elite, private universities in the global North—as evinced by who gets published in major PCS journals (see Pesch and Mucha, 2020)—we will fail our mission as an action-oriented, problem-focused field of study. The content of our work will continue to focus on the stories and frameworks of privileged movements and thinkers; it will continue advocating for false solutions like technological optimism or “(neo)liberal peace”; it will serve merely as an

uplifting, “feel good” space for rich students being trained to become either cheap labor or, in the best cases, the new managers of global capital; and it will simply not resonate with most people.

Therefore, PCS will largely remain disconnected from the lived realities of marginalized people (Behera, 2023), especially impoverished people of color, trans and queer people, and people in the global South. If these biases persist, then PCS will remain a privileged echo chamber, inaccessible and therefore mostly useless to anxious activists eager for answers about what is driving injustice in our world, how various forms of violence are linked, and how to confront them.

The time is ripe for peace, justice, and –above all– liberation

As someone who believes in the potential of Peace and Conflict Studies, these are some hard truths we need to face. Just as academia conceals the violence that surrounds and sustains universities (Nair, 2011), PCS scholarship has perpetuated eurocentricity in our curricula, means of research production and publication, and research approaches. It has often taken for granted and legitimized the settler state, even while advocating for incremental reforms. It has whitewashed the overt white supremacy of figures like Immanuel Kant (Mills, 2017), as Prof. Sabeen Ahmed has noted in our conversations. It has decontextualized analyses of war and (de)militarization from the history of colonialism, blurring power dynamics and perpetuating hegemonic discourses. It has overwhelmingly ignored capitalism in its criticisms of violence—or outright advocated for “liberal peace” as the universally desired solution to global conflicts, foreclosing our capacity to imagine and practice different means of building justice. And it has encouraged students to engage in extractive voluntourism, inherently classist unpaid internships, CV-inflating opportunism, and transactional careerism over relational organizing.

The point of PCS is not to make rich people feel better about themselves, or to teach them how to manage conflict and depoliticize exploitation. In a time of social disconnection, we need Peace Studies more than ever, especially with a theory of change, a material analysis, and a dedication to praxis. Many traditional disciplines de-radicalize students, channeling their interest in politics into the ascetic study of, e.g., corruption in political parties’ management of municipal budgets; by contrast, one unique strength of PCS is the value-forward, engaged practice of social change tactics. We should strive to do more of the latter, instead of replicating the mundane aspects of our peer disciplines just to seem more

“respectable.” The goal is neither to feel good nor to appear respectable. The answer is liberation, as Kwame Ture instructed, and we do not have much time.

The martyred environmental organizer, Chico Mendes said that “environmentalism without class struggle is just gardening.” We must honor his activism by realizing that Peace Studies without class struggle is just a corporate wellness retreat—a lovely golf course surrounded by a forest fire.

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