

Identity, Conflict and Peace

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Current events in the Middle East, as well as dozens of other – highly publicised or relatively obscure – conflicts around the world are deeply troubling, not only for the inevitable loss of life that they incur, but for the various degrees of barbarity and depravity they reveal and the existential threat they pose to our hopes and expectations that human history will be marked by ineluctable progress towards peace, prosperity and happiness.

This raises the question: if peace is such a desirable state, why does it prove to be so elusive? There are really only two possibilities. One is that the nature of peace is not understood to a sufficient degree that would enable it to be realised; the other is that we do understand but do not really desire it, or that we desire other things more. It is more common to incline

to the latter view, to see its non-realisation as more of a moral failing. In this essay, though, I am going to take the view that at least dispelling some misconceptions about peace may contribute to its more ready implementation and will proceed to analyse the nature of peace and its relation to conflict through a phenomenology of identity.

The problematic meaning of ‘peace’

One way in which to begin to understand peace is to start by recognising the ways in which it is misunderstood; and the best way to do this is to look at some of the ways in which it is defined. For instance, some define peace as the absence of war, which, even if true, would be virtually a tautology: it would not tell us what peace is, only what it is not. Additionally, the problem with defining it negatively is that, not knowing what its positive attributes are, it is difficult to determine a strategy for its realisation. However, as so defined, it is probably not true, at least in any absolute sense. Even in war, some aspects of life continue normally, that is peacefully; war can even bring communities closer together, increasing peace locally. This is even clearer if the statement were made more general: ‘peace is the absence of conflict’. This is clearly not true, for peace in the broader global sense can co-exist with degrees of localised conflict, as it does generally in free societies.

Nevertheless, the misunderstanding that peace and conflict are mutually exclusive is commonplace. It gives rise to two further fallacies regarding peace, that of unrealistic idealism and that of unfounded pessimism. The former is exemplified by the belief that some external agency (God, Jesus, History or perhaps even an alien race) will usher in a peaceful world, but also includes the secular belief that by solving an existing and immediate problem – one frequently associated with an emotive issue and subject to highly partial interpretations – a state of peace will come to exist. The second of these fallacies is typified by the ‘Realpolitik’ school of thought on international relations, exemplified by Samuel Huntington’s notion of the ‘Clash of Civilizations’, which is marked by scepticism that lasting peace can ever be realised, as conflict is implicit in the human condition.

Strangely, given the apparent psychological gulf that separates these fallacies, they are frequently held by the same people. A fundamental schizophrenia underlies many of the diplomatic efforts to forge peace in areas of conflict, a seeming hard-headed realism allied with a narrow view of what peace requires. This is unintentionally betrayed in the language chosen, such as the innocuous-sounding ‘path to peace’ or ‘roadmap to peace’. Peace and conflict are seen metaphorically as separate places, separated not only spatially but also temporally. Logically, within this paradigm, peace can only ensue once conflict has ended, but since the route to peace is contained within the confines of conflict, and there is no interrelationship between peace and conflict, there is no real prospect for peace. This is not to denigrate the importance of diplomatic efforts and the real differences they can occasionally make in some conflict zones; it is to argue, though, that conceptually shallow understandings of peace and its relationship to conflict may hinder the establishment of lasting peace.

A more useful understanding of the relationship between peace and conflict than that seen in a Manichean opposition of a moral good and moral evil may be given by analogy with the relationship of health and sickness. Clearly health and sickness are related, even though they can be considered opposites. We could define health as an absence of sickness, but this would be a very impoverished view of health. It is of greater benefit to have a positive definition of health, independent of illness, to understand what constitutes good health and what can be done to promote it. Health has inherited characteristics, but has also a lifestyle component. Health, in this sense, is closer to our sense of self, and can be good or poor almost independently of sickness or injuries, which are more like external factors in the environment. However, susceptibility to these factors is clearly related to overall health and they have consequences for health: a mild illness or injury will have no lasting impact on our general health; a severe one may result in death.

The dynamic between health and sickness is a useful analogy for thinking about the relationship between peace and conflict. And in the same way that health and sickness impact our sense of self, so peace and conflict are bound up with questions of identity. This is relatively easy to see when conflict is considered. Even when conflicts are over very tangible things, such as land and resources, issues of identity always come into it. Humans are innately social, and it may be this very sociality that make the lure of tribalism so seductive, and where even the smallest differences between 'ourselves' and an 'other' renders us susceptible to the malign influence of demagogues.

The Phenomenology of Identity

While there is a tendency to think of peace as simple, no one having reflected upon the meaning and nature of identity can think of it as anything but complex. Discussion about identity frequently focuses on the ephemera of identity such as documentary or biometric evidence, but a phenomenological approach proceeds with the analysis of the conscious sense of self, for this is both universal and constant; every utterance concerning identity, even that made as a representative on behalf of a collective, is an expression of self-awareness. From such an analysis three features of identity emerge: first, it is differentiated into levels or types of identity, which I have chosen to call *existentiality*, *situatedness* and *connectivity*; second, associated with each of these there is a force or impulse through which selfhood is asserted; third, this force is contained or limited in some manner, which shapes the expression and self-understanding of identity.

i. Types or levels of identity

The conscious self can be described as having three fundamental orientations to the world, as self-existing, situated and connected, each of which has internal content and external form. The first and most fundamental type of identity could be called individual, but as all identity (as defined above) is individualised it is referred to as existential, that is awareness of the self's existence as an individual consciousness distinct from others. It is characterised internally by needs and desires and externally by awareness of embodiment and of embodied others. The second type of identity is that of being emplaced or situated in a particular part of reality. Internally this identity is that associated with strong emotional bonds and ties within closed systems such as family, tribe, group, nation, religion or profession, which exclude as well as include. The third type is the 'universal' identity that comes through connection in open systems or networks, such as humanity, society, culture, spirituality, nature, the economy and the universe, mediated internally by concepts and values.

ii. The force of selfhood

Because identity is so closely associated with the emotions, the self manifests a force, or emotive impulse in each context. Being a vector, it has a direction; being affective, it requires satisfaction. Existentiality seeks the object of its desire and is satisfied by its appropriation; it is in this sense completely amoral. The force of selfhood is directed outwards in protecting itself, exploiting the environment for its needs, and making its presence felt in the world. The force of situated identity is directed towards the centre of the group in which one finds a commonality, or one at least in which the elements of commonality are greater than those of difference, and is satisfied by belonging. The force of the connected self turns inwards to seek detachment from desires and ties and seeks satisfaction through participation.

iii. The constraints on the self

Identity only has shape and emerges when the force of selfhood is contained or restrained in some manner, and this takes place at every level though in a different manner. At the level of existentiality this can be considered the limits of selfhood in the encounter with others and the realisation that the other is both similar and different. At the level of belonging there are limits to inclusion in the form of power relations and social status, depending upon the type of system. Just as important there are outer limits, the point at which the in-group ends and the out-group starts. At the level of connectivity the limits are more internal, depending upon the inner resources of the individual to reach out through a potentially infinite open network.

Peace and conflict understood through identity

The analysis applied to identity can fruitfully applied to peace and conflict, in order to understand the conditions under which both manifest themselves. As identity was considered within the context of systems, peace and conflict similarly yield to a systemic analysis of levels, impulses, constraints, and internal and external factors, although it is worth emphasising that this analysis is not merely being transferred to different phenomena: identity is fundamental to understanding both peace and conflict. Moving from an analysis of selfhood to a consideration of systems, though, it is more appropriate to use the terms individual, group and network (for existentiality, situatedness and connectivity)

For example, at the individual level, for peaceful conditions to prevail the satisfaction of desire must be matched by the restraint of the individual, either self-imposed or societally imposed; at the group level, belonging, allegiance and solidarity must be matched by socially cohesive factors such as justice, opportunity, respect and so on; and at the network level, detachment must be matched by actual cooperation, development and progress.

The conditions for conflict are can be similarly analysed in terms of an internal and external component at each level. For example, at the individual level, the frustration of desires corresponds to either excessive impositions or no restraint; at the group level, alienation corresponds to various social injustices and exclusions; and at the network level, anxiety, frustration and confusion correspond to non-cooperation or lack of progress.

More than these details, however, is the important difference in the nature of the relationship between these conditions. **For peace the conditions are conjunctive; that is, each is necessary but not sufficient, so all must exist for peace to prevail. The conditions for conflict are disjunctive; that is, each is sufficient in itself and for any of them to exist is a condition for conflict.**

This analysis taken by itself could be seen as a cause for pessimism, as it means quite simply that the conditions for conflict are much easier to achieve than the conditions for peace, and that other things being equal there is little prospect of us seeing a world without conflict, nor a society without conflict, nor a family, nor an individual.

Conflict, simply put, arises wherever there is a perceived difference. As there is no prospect for a world without difference, and even if it were possible it would be undesirable, we are destined to live with conflict as a recurring aspect of human

There are several factors, however, that mitigate this bleak conclusion:

1. While conflict is generally seen as destructive, it can also be a force for change and development; indeed, it is doubtful whether there can be any meaningful change without a certain degree of conflict. Even war may sometimes – as a last resort – be a necessary condition for something new and better to emerge. Also, individual, institutional and national narratives are promulgated on the assumption of a conflict between good and evil.
2. There is a difference between the conditions of conflict being present and the outbreak of real conflict, brought about usually by a complex concatenation of events. In the build-up to any such crisis there are basically three strategic options: to manage the conflict, to ignore the conflict, and to exacerbate the conflict. This means that under most conditions there is a space for conflict to be managed and limited if good choices are made.
3. There is no reason that managed conflict cannot co-exist with real and actual peace, though not with some imaginary, idealistic notion of peace. After all, this is what is generally accomplished in liberal democracies. We seem to be in a constant state of tension in which innumerable conflicts of interest arise, but to remain in a state of general peace. Taking a systemic view means that peace and conflict can be hierarchically viewed.

Therefore, the prospects for peace are in fact much better than might be imagined. **Peace is complex, as the analysis above has shown, requiring the matching of internal and external factors at several levels; but it is this complexity that can imbue peace with a robustness that conflicts do not have.** Conflicts tend to be very narrowly focused and to have, with some exceptions, a short lifespan. Peace, though difficult to achieve, as the long historical genesis of peaceful democracies from tribal societies has shown, once achieved is difficult to extinguish.

What this suggests is that we should be less concerned with conflict resolution, though this is also important, and more concerned with putting in place the conditions which make for peace. I suggest that these are basically seven: territorial security, constitutional government, free and fair elections, the rule of law, and the promotion of a free market economy, social justice and civil society. I would add to these the free flow of information, for nothing is more important to the eternal vigilance needed to maintain the integrity of these conditions, and nothing so destructive of tyrants' and demagogues' ambitions.



UK UTS Alumni meeting in 2013

This article was originally presented at a meeting of the UTS alumni in the UK in 2007, but has been extensively rewritten, largely in response to the conflicts ongoing at the moment.