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**Rethinking Peace: Discourse, Memory, Translation, and Dialogue,
edited by Alexander Laban Hinton, Giorgio Shani and Jeremiah
Alberg. Reviewed by Mohammed Moussa.**

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Rethinking Peace: Discourse, Memory, Translation, and Dialogue, edited by Alexander Laban Hinton, Giorgio Shani and Jeremiah Alberg. Reviewed by Mohammed Moussa.

Abstract

Excerpt

Peace is a protean concept that equally eludes academics and practitioners on the one hand and perpetrators and victims on the other hand. However, this conundrum has not discouraged the preoccupation of peace and conflict studies with fixing the definition of peace once and for all for immediate export to war zones. In this essay, I review the timely book of *Rethinking Peace: Discourse, Memory, Translation, and Dialogue* which explicitly aims at not only rethinking peace but also providing self-reflexive viable alternatives. My review proceeds according to two steps: first, I identify the key themes of each part and of each chapter; second, I situate the edited volume in a context characterized by two increasingly significant conversations, the interpretivist turn and the decolonizing of knowledge, that at times overlap.

Keywords: *context, peace and conflict studies, peace concept*

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Book Review

Rethinking Peace: Discourse, Memory, Translation, and Dialogue edited by Alexander Laban Hinton, Giorgio Shani, and Jeremiah Alberg

Mohammed Moussa

Peace is a protean concept that equally eludes academics and practitioners on the one hand and perpetrators and victims on the other hand. However, this conundrum has not discouraged the preoccupation of peace and conflict studies with fixing the definition of peace once and for all for immediate export to war zones. In this essay, I review the timely book of *Rethinking Peace: Discourse, Memory, Translation, and Dialogue* which explicitly aims at not only rethinking peace but also providing self-reflexive viable alternatives. My review proceeds according to two steps: first, I identify the key themes of each part and of each chapter; second, I situate the edited volume in a context characterized by two increasingly significant conversations, the interpretivist turn and the decolonizing of knowledge, that at times overlap.

Alexander Laban Hinton, Giorgio Shani and Jeremiah Alberg have managed to put together a cutting-edge collection of contributions by a diverse range of scholars and authors. The edited volume is the culmination of academic workshops and conferences that brought together the likes of Johan Galtung, a founder of peace and conflict studies, and Ashis Nandy, the Indian political psychologist. However, the editors do not simply address the academic field but the field of practice for policymakers, practitioners and victims. In the book, a common thread emerges of problematizing positivist frames of knowledge in the study of conflict and violence. Conventional wisdom about what is peace, such as *positive* and *negative*, among peace and conflict studies practitioners is unsettled towards more self-reflexive thinking and acting.

A “generative, open-ended, processual approach to peace” is pursued by the editors in a move away from hypostasis, teleology, Eurocentric normativity and utopian enterprise that developed under the shadow of Johan Galtung’s work on positive peace, despite the editors’ self-acknowledged debt owed to this towering figure (pp. xiv–xvi). For these four tendencies pose the greatest challenges to the rethinking of peace: a *hypostasized* peace as a thing, a *teleology* of where the direction of peace will end, a singular concern with the Judeo-Christian tradition’s *normative* goods, and their convergence in *enterprise*. Four parts divide this edited volume based on a common theme with obvious and inevitable overlaps: discourse, memory, translation and dialogue.

Discourse

Part one begins with Giorgio Shani’s call for a critical theorizing of peace studies and its parent discipline of international relations. Ashis Nandy offers readers his usual unorthodox and irreverent unpacking of the politics of knowledge in the existence of “black holes” in political science and

international relations (p. 5). Between terror as an end and the idea of just war, the sovereignty of the nation-state and international institutions, peace studies is urged to strike its own “more autonomous path” (p. 11). Similar critical reflections are made by Stephen Eric Bronner about the centrality of the nation-state and modern sovereignty. However, Bronner reserves his most robust observations for foreign policy realists’ predilection for foreign intervention which, contrary to their professed beliefs about the need for a sovereign to impose order in the Middle East, actually belie Thomas Hobbes’s “*most basic lesson*” about extant political authority: chaos and bloodshed ensue from overthrowing a sovereign when no “legitimate substitute sovereign” exists (p. 22). Oliver Richmond’s chapter focuses on the “ontological narrowness of praxis” of international relations (IR) theory on peace and order, namely territorialism (nation-state), centralized authority (hegemony) and hierarchy of states (p. 32). There is thus a need to include the local agency of “subaltern and conflict-afflicted citizens” in the search for a “peace formation” to usher in “a new and hybrid ‘international’” (pp. 34–38). Shani presents a post-Western and post-secular framework through which a double critique of “liberal-colonial IR” and “decolonial IR” is mounted (p. 44). For a “‘postsecular’ approach” leads to the study of subaltern cosmologies expressed in ‘religious’ terms, one such example is the cosmological tradition of *Sikhi* i.e. *Singh Sabha*, the Five Ks and Sikhs constituting a “sovereign body,” without the “alien” experience of *translating* faith-based claims, à la Habermas, into secular claims with a specific genealogy in a Judaeo-Christian “ontotheological framework” (pp. 49–52).

Memory and Temporality

The discussion on memory and memorialization in part two is initiated by Jeremiah Alberg with his observation of the dawning realization of a paradox: the giving of a “new memory” (p. 59) Marita Sturken’s chapter explores the framework of exceptionalism surrounding events such as the Holocaust and 9/11 that have justified further conflicts. Human lives are memorialized according to the inclusion and exclusion of what is considered to be a “grievable life,” invoking Judith Butler (pp. 68–69). However, the mourning of the other can occur through countermemorials and the reframing of memory and human rights to engender peace. The chapter written by Natasha Zaretsky explores the processual nature of cultural memory in Argentina, “the land of memory,” from an ethnographic perspective (pp. 75–76). Present state repression of past state violence, during the Argentine military dictatorship from 1976 to 1983, has been challenged by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (weekly marches) and H.I.J.O.S. (noisily marching at perpetrators’ streets) in what can be described as “embodied disruptions” (pp. 86–87). Identity exchange is the main subject of Yael Zerubavel’s foray into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Three films, despite or perhaps because of their fictional narratives, are examined to reveal the human dimension of the lives of Palestinians and Israelis in close proximity to each other in both Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Identity is at once fluid (in the act of exchange) and an estranging act of either “passing up” or “passing down” (p. 104). Leigh A. Payne’s chapter on silence in the context of a violent past illustrates its paradoxical character of “a speech act”

(p. 113) with examples of silent acts of remembrance and memorials for the victims of conflicts in Argentina, Cambodia, Rwanda, Chile and Spain. For silence becomes a necessity when language is unable to convey an atrocity or an obstacle due to a need to overcome it to voice the demand for justice. In addition, victims' silence to protect themselves is power (and subversive) directly contrasting with the object of "never again!" for a society (pp. 117–118).

Translation

Jeremiah Alberg's introduction to part three alerts the reader to translation in a performative context. In addition, translation leads to "creative misunderstanding" on the one hand and is a "fundamental reality" on the other hand (p. 124). Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, a phonetic play on mouse, provides Beverly Curran with a translational text to illustrate a son's narrative of the testimony about World War Two and Auschwitz from a Holocaust survivor. The translation of this "comix" or "co-mix" to Japanese by Ono Kosei has seemingly added further meanings to *Maus* through kanji characters (visual constellations) and katakana script (for imported words) on the pages leading to the dual presence of a global lexicon and a local lexicon (pp. 130–135). Violence is no less mimetic than desire in Alberg's proposed anthropological theory that draws on the insights of Rene Girard, the French Catholic philosopher, about the misrecognition of sacrifice and the false translation of the community's problems onto the victim. However, the undoing of this mechanism of sacrifice is eminently possible through the Gospel's telling of the sacrifice of the victim through this victim's perspective who reveals the lie and forgives (pp. 146–147). The previous Shinzo Abe government's attempts to replace Article 9 of Japan's *Peace Constitution* with *sekkyokuteki heiwashugi* ("proactive contributor to peace") are met with derision in Shin Chiba's chapter. Such a deceptively named policy is a mere disguise for "a deterrence-based positive military expansionism": participation in collective self-defence (rear support, *koho shien*, to the USA and other allies in times of war) and arms export (pp. 153–156). The "imposition hypothesis" about the Peace Constitution is belied by its past popular support, the traumatic experience of war and the many "pacifist veins of water," principally peaceful ideas, that found their way into it (pp. 156–160).

Dialogue (Fetish)

Alexander Laban Hinton commences part four with the demand for denaturalizing the "dialogue fetish," a discourse implicated in power and linked to genealogy (pp. 169–170). Difference is a problem in Hartmut Behr's chapter generated by the hierarchical relation between the "self" and the "other" (p. 174). Becoming (Simmel), intersubjectivity (Schütze), "dialogical 'towards' 'the' 'other'" (Levinas), and "advent" of suddenness and transformativity (Derrida) point the direction towards an "anti-essentialist" approach to difference (pp. 175–182). There is the potential for "peace-in-difference" when differences are considered to be "*positive*" and different ontologies and epistemologies are included in the formation of peace (pp. 183–185). In a somewhat similar spirit, Morgan Briggs's chapter proposes

a “relational-essential approach” based on the premise of “things as relations” found in “Relationality Scholarship,” “Indigenous Traditions,” “Foundational Conflict Scholarship” and “Feminist Scholarship” (pp. 194–199). Relationality is understood in the ontological terms of diversity rather than “hybridity.” Briggs’s normative approach is motivated by acknowledging difference to be essential yet dynamically created and shared, a pragmatist “muddling through” and attention on “getting among relations” in “peace and conflict resolution work” (pp. 201–202). Performance, memory and civil war are the entry points for Nitin Sawhney in his chapter on *Colectivo Andén*, a collective of local and international artists. This collective uses a former military training base in Quetzaltenango to come to terms with the violent events that took place at this site during Guatemala’s civil war. Their artistic performances combine both the personal and the political in a visible show of creative, cultural and community acts captured in the author’s documentary *Zona Intervenida* (pp. 213–217). The edited volume closes, or perhaps opens in a new direction, with an Afterword consisting of 35 headings. In each heading, passages from publications and online sources, most of which refer to the recent conflict in Syria and Aleppo in particular, have been arranged by Hinton to erase words in an act conspicuously characterized by not only absence but also presence.

Context and Contribution

In the wider milieu of the social sciences, particularly political studies, two conspicuous scholarly trends have emerged: interpretivism and the decolonizing of knowledge. They have sought to locate political ideas, values, behavior and institutions in context in a bold move away from the reductionist tendency to generalize the West while downplaying, if not excluding, the significance of seemingly unconventional or non-European expressions of politics, society and history. The Cambridge School historian of ideas Quentin Skinner and Laurence Whitehead, the British political scientist of comparative democratization, have brought to bear an interpretive approach on political theory and democratization, respectively. Political theory for Skinner is more appropriately placed in an “ideological context” which would reveal the nature, limits and potential development of ideas (Skinner, 2000, pp. x–xi). While democratization is an “open-ended” phenomenon, a “lengthy, erratic and contested” long-term process, Whitehead is sensitive to the lack of a single linear path that ends at a predetermined and irreversible form of democracy (Whitehead, 2002, pp. 30–31). Human agency, whether of ideas or in a process, is more adequately contextualized with little or no suppositions of its chief end.

Decolonizing of knowledge scholarship, loosely organized and global, has problematized the projection of a single model of imagining and enacting politics and society. The questioning by Hamid Dabashi, the Columbia University-based Iranian intellectual, of the supposed universality of the European philosophical pedigree unveils the “structural link” between thinkers and empire (2013). Non-European thinking, characterized by “self-consciousness and evident universality,” offers nothing short

of alternative visions — for Africa, the Arab or Muslim world — as well as possibly complementary or contradictory (Dabashi, 2013). For the local system of knowledge in the Arab world, according to the Tunisian scholar Larbi Sadiki (2015), through which identity, learning, religion and norms occur, is able to undertake a “speaking and writing back” to Eurocentrism, especially on democracy (pp. 11–13, 16). Decolonizing knowledge can demystify the instrumental role played by colonial experiences in the construction of the post-colonial architecture of nation-states and political violence. From identity to power to religion to peace, the pursuit of the co-construction of knowledge and the exercise of agency in context generate self-reflexive scholarship.

Rethinking Peace participates in the above two debates about deploying a contextual approach to political phenomena. Students and scholars of political science and international relations, and other social science disciplines, now have access to a set of illuminating case studies that develop conceptions of post-positivist peace in various processual directions. The volume editors, Hinton (anthropology), Shani (international relations) and Alberg (philosophy), have collaborated on a project that is a remarkable example of the creative fusing of interdisciplinary expertise in the study of peace. And it is somewhat inevitable that the volume contributions on the subject of peace will vary according to the disciplinary backgrounds of each author. Nonetheless, all the chapters are united by the shared recognition of the current inadequacy present in the disciplinary conceptions and practices of peace around the world, in the academy, and in the field.

Further, I locate *Rethinking Peace* in the two trends of interpretivism and decolonizing knowledge in the social sciences with the far-reaching implications of: understanding peace at the epistemological and ontological levels; including seemingly unorthodox and non-European experiences of difference; broadening the definition of the political to encompass formal and informal expressions; pluralizing conceptions of peace; bringing in religion as an interpretive category; bridging the gulf between academics, practitioners, perpetrators and victims; and taking seriously the normative ideals and concerns of actors in conflict zones.

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