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Positive Peace


'Positive peace' is a term coined by peace scholar Johan Galtung, who differentiated between negative and positive peace. Negative peace denotes the absence of direct (physical) violence, often found in the form of a post-war ceasefire. Positive peace describes more than just the absence of violence and instead describes a situation in which peace is also a state of social justice. The thinking of positive peace can be said to have led to a more pro-active approach to peacebuilding interventions, which now go beyond the facilitation of military ceasefires.

*Negative* peace is defined by *absence*, that is, the absence of organised violence and violent conflict. In a situation of negative peace, it may be that there is no open, violent conflict anymore, but that less visible manifestations of violence still operate in society. In contrast, *positive* peace is characterised by *presence*, that is, the presence of additional values such as equality, cooperation, political freedoms, empowerment, human rights, or social justice. However, there is no commonly agreed consensus on what exactly the factors of a positive peace are. They range from freedom and equality to growth, government and business, with a varying emphasis on which of those factors are a priority to the achievement of a sustainable peace. Galtung emphasises interdependence as one of the most important factors of achieving positive peace. This form of peace has to be voluntary and free as Galtung does not believe deterrence to be able to lead to positive peace.

The fact that justice features prominently in widely used definitions of positive peace means that positive peace is often equated with 'just peace'. In contrast to negative peace which puts emphasis on maintaining the status quo, positive peace is generally oriented towards change and strives to improve unjust social, political or economic structures. It is pro-active in that it aims to not just eliminate direct (physical) violence, but also to address situations in which structural violence prevails. Structural violence can be defined as injustice built into social structures (such as schooling, housing, political representation and so forth) that leads to unjust treatment or discrimination of particular social groups. Attempts to build positive peace therefore challenge (often disguised) manifestations of structural violence. The elimination of structural violence ties in with what Galtung calls the need for 'positive relations' between groups as a basis for the establishment of positive peace. The latter also has a time dimension as negative peace can often be brought about efficiently (through a ceasefire or peace agreement), whereas positive peace requires a much more long-term approach needed for the establishment of sustainable structure of equality, freedom and justice.

The context of the Cold War during the course of which Galtung developed the distinction between negative and positive peace offered only little examples of the latter, but plenty of the former. In the search for a way to peace between east and west, attempts to facilitate disarmament on both sides can be seen as important steps towards the establishment of negative peace in that these efforts reduced the likelihood of an outbreak of violent war. However, as this did not include positive (pro-active) steps to lead to more than the mere absence of violence, positive peace was not the automatic end result of disarmament measures. Positive peace, in this context, would have to have included the active reconstruction of relationships, the acknowledgement of mutual interdependence as well as addressing questions of inequality – not just between the warring parties, but also within.

Famous for its annual publication of the 'Global Peace Index', the Institute for Economics and Peace has increasingly devoted attention to positive peace and developed a matrix through which the institute measures and ranks countries according to this matrix, which is called the Positive Peace Index (PPI). The PPI builds on, but notably differs from Galtung's original design, for instance by emphasising the business environment or corruption, amongst others, as a key indicators of whether positive peace has been established in a country. In this context, the Institute for Economics and Peace argues that positive peace can facilitate resilience and thus empower entire societies to cope with difficult challenges in the long run. In 2015, the list was headed by Denmark, while Somalia took the last rank.

The notion of 'positive peace' can be seen as reflected in the ways in which peacebuilding missions have developed since the early 1990s. The era of the Cold War had been shaped by status-quo oriented peacekeeping missions, providing military personnel to facilitate ceasefires and thus to help create negative peace. Peacebuilding, as the attempt to create sustainable and just post-conflict structures, then represents an endorsement of the notion of positive peace. The goal of primarily internationally-led peacebuilding operations was, at least rhetorically, the creation of lasting structures of injustice and oppression.

This development went hand in hand with an increasing scope of peacebuilding interventions and has therefore faced criticism for providing a tool through which societies in conflict can be controlled and governed. Peacebuilding has indeed taken on a much larger range of tasks, often interfering deeply into underlying societal structures, including political systems, economic organisation as well as legal matters. In that vein, the notion of positive peace inherent in peacebuilding operations can open up questions around the meaning of a just and egalitarian society as well as questions around who has and should have the authority to define and operationalise social structures accordingly.

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Cross-references:

Conflict Theory, Intractable Conflicts, Negative Peace, Reconciliation

Further readings:

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