The Limits of Discipline

Ross Ryan

Few academics would deny the value of discipline in scholarly work – the practice of careful and thorough research, for example, provides a common standard for critically evaluating and engaging with new ideas. Of course, there is also the kind of self-discipline required to observe the world around us as accurately as possible, challenge our biases and preconceptions, and present our analyses coherently to colleagues and practitioners alike. This is particularly the case in the field of peace and conflict studies, in which everyone could be considered a practitioner on some level, being, as we all are, constantly confronted with the creative and destructive potential of conflict in our daily lives, and in our relationships with the socio-economic and political institutions which amplify that potential around the globe.

There are other meanings of discipline, however, some of the earliest of which carry with them a much different, and for our purposes, somewhat counterproductive significance. The quasi-religious orders of medieval Europe, for example, built disciplinary boundaries around their practices of learning and ritual, so as to guard the secrets of their particular craft and maintain a position of distinction from the general population. Unfortunately, part of this culture of disciplinary secrecy has survived into our own time, and academic societies continue to guard the lines between the initiates and outsiders of their specializations, for much the same reason as their medieval counterparts.

Another usage of discipline, and again one of the earliest, is in reference to “the order maintained and observed among pupils, or other persons under control or command, such as soldiers, sailors, the inmates of a religious house, a prison, etc.” (OED 2nd edition). Here is where we pick up the associations with physical or psychological punishment and submission to unquestionable authority that come up again and again in the study of how societies produce war and other forms of organized violence.

It is in scepticism of the social value of these latter concepts of discipline, therefore, that the Peace and Conflict Review is committed to the principles of openness and accessibility, and aligns itself squarely in support of research and scholarly dialogue that reaches across traditional boundaries and re-examines the legitimacy of power inequalities – all of which is characteristic of peace and conflict studies, and, we hope you will find, reflected in this Spring 2010 issue.

The following articles cover a broad territory, pulling together analyses of conflict before, during, and after violent outbreaks, within and between states, highlighting the diversity of actors and social organizations involved – from individual relationships to the United Nations. They also represent the work of scholars from quite diverse perspectives, professionally and geographically speaking, each bringing to this discussion of peace and conflict a wealth of knowledge unique to their individual experiences and vantage points.

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As always, submissions and feedback from our readers are highly encouraged, and should be directed to editor@review.upeace.org.

About the Author

Ross Ryan is the managing editor of the Peace and Conflict Review.

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