

Conrad G. Brunk
Conrad Grebel College,
University of Waterloo

Peace Studies in the University

Abstract

Like all new ideas peace studies has run into opposition from the more conservative elements of the academic community. But, because of the importance of the questions raised in Peace Studies, this area demands as much concentrated interdisciplinary study and research as the more traditional areas of study. The criticism leveled at the Peace Studies area is just not weighty enough to justify the exclusion of this important area from university curriculum.

Peace Studies is a relative newcomer to the college and university curriculum. In fact, prior to the 1970s, there was only one program at the post-secondary level that called itself "Peace Studies" or anything similar in North America or Europe. It was located at a small college in the midwestern United States, Manchester College. The Manchester program had grown out of the historic peace concerns of its sponsoring church, the Church of the Brethren.

In the 1970s, however, this situation changed dramatically. Largely as a result of popular opposition to the war conducted by the United States in Vietnam and the rising tide of domestic violence in American cities, academicians became increasingly concerned that there was very little place in the university for concentrated study and research on such questions as the origins of war and violence, alternatives to war and violence in international and domestic conflict resolution, and the art of peacemaking in interpersonal, inter-group, or international situations. There were, of course, programs in international relations in political science departments, institutes of strategic studies, and departments of military science, as well as

isolated courses in departments of psychology, sociology, and political science on aggression, violence, conflict resolution, and related issues. But many people felt that these courses failed to make available to a broad spectrum of students and faculty an integrated understanding of the most important issues confronting human society – that of increasing militarism and its concomitant threat to the future of humanity.

In this atmosphere of concern about ways of building more peaceful relations between people and nations, programs of Peace Studies began to proliferate in British and North American universities. The list of universities where Peace Studies was added include Harvard, Berkeley, Bradford (England), Colgate, Notre Dame, Cornell, Kent State, and many other smaller liberal arts colleges in the United States. The first full undergraduate degree program in Peace Studies at a Canadian university was begun by Conrad Grebel College at the University of Waterloo in 1976, and similar programs are developing at the University of Toronto, McMaster University, John Abbott College, and elsewhere.

Now that Peace Studies programs have become fairly prevalent and well-established in universities, they have become the targets of some harsh criticism from various quarters. The argument has been advanced recently by a number of influential people, among them Jessica Gwynne, Roger Scruton, Peter van den Dungen, Herbert London,¹ and others, that Peace Studies is not an appropriate study discipline in the university. It is important to assess carefully the claims that are being put forward by the critics to see whether the case for Peace Studies can be defended.

It is often said, first of all, that Peace Studies is redundant. There is no need for it because the issues covered in Peace Studies courses are already dealt with in the existing disciplines within the university. Political Science departments offer courses and even whole programs in international relations and strategic studies, as well as courses in domestic (international) violence and conflict resolution. Courses in interpersonal and intergroup conflict and aggression are offered in Psychology and Sociology departments. Philosophy and Religion departments offer courses in the ethical aspects of international policy and war. History departments offer courses in military and diplomatic history. What is left over for Peace Studies? Furthermore, in the free atmosphere of the university, there is room for a wide spectrum of opinion on these matters among the faculty and students, so that a variety of perspectives are sure to be represented. There is no further need for the "peace" perspective of Peace Studies.

Secondly, it is argued that since the case for independent Peace Studies cannot be made on the grounds that the problems with which it deals are not being addressed elsewhere in the university, the real

motivations behind it are not academic at all, but rather **political**. That is to say, Peace Studies is primarily a means for indoctrinating students with certain political and/or moral views under the guise of academic instruction. Caroline Cox and Roger Scruton put the criticism this way: "The movement for Peace Studies in schools is part of a trend towards the politicization of education, involving both the lowering of intellectual standards and the assumption of foregone political conclusions" (Cox & Scruton, 1985).

According to the critics, this politicization takes the form of certain biases which are inappropriate in education. One such bias is the pacifist bias, or the view that violence and war are illegitimate ways of settling conflicts. Operating with such a bias, the Peace Studies advocates object in advance to all deployments or use of weapons by a nation (usually their own), without bothering to assess the facts of the case or to consider the possibility that a nation may be facing real threats to its legitimate interests which necessitate a military response. Part of the essence of the academic enterprise is the maintenance of objectivity and balance in the pursuit of knowledge. But Peace Studies, it is alleged, abandons objectivity in favour of a one-sided and close-minded pursuit of its preconceived notions. As Scruton puts it, "The subject (Peace Studies) is taught in such a way as to discourage critical reflection and encourage prejudice about the matters of peace, war and disarmament"

In a *New York Times* article entitled " 'Peace Studies' – Hardly Academic," Herbert London wrote, "These 'academic' programs are really designed to do battle with the Strategic Defense Initiative, the MX missile and any other strategic system introduced by the Administration. In the 1920s people who taught such nonsense at least had the courage to define their position as pacifism. Their views didn't masquerade as a new scholarly discipline." London's point is that Peace Studies is biased not only in favour of a pacifist morality, but also in favour of certain political programs, which are not being subjected to scholarly critique. Peace Studies is not scholarship, but advocacy of political goals. "These are scholars," he says, "who intend to win a war for the minds of students who will be pressed into the service of a controversy they don't entirely understand."

A third charge of bias critics have thrown at Peace Studies is that it is a platform for the propagation of politically left-wing viewpoints on the international situation. Under the banner of "peace" there masquerades a much wider agenda of support for left-wing political causes around the world, from revolutionary guerrilla movements in third-world countries to the strategic policies of the Soviet Union and its allies. "Peace" becomes synonymous with "justice" in many of these programs, and "justice" is defined in socialist or Marxist categories. Again, the criticism here is that

Peace Studies involves a politicization of the university in a way that threatens the traditional aims of balanced, fairminded, and objective scholarship in the university.

Whether or not Peace Studies is accepted as a *bona fide* academic "discipline," however, is not the critical question, especially since what is considered a discipline is more a function of the sociology of the university at any given period in history than a question of academic principle. The critical issue is whether the issues of war, peace, and human conflict addressed by Peace Studies are important enough in society and the world today to merit concentrated study and research as a problem area which requires the integration of the insights and methods of the traditional disciplines. Peace Studies identifies a problem area that cries out for integrated, interdisciplinary study in the university. If there is good reason to believe that the future leaders and opinion makers of our society, who are being trained for the most part in the colleges and universities, ought to have some basic grasp of the nature and role of violence in contemporary national and international affairs, and of the implications and risks of war or nuclear deterrence; and if it is true that the present system of disciplinary specialization dominating our university system makes it difficult or impossible to nurture a unified understanding of these issues, then there is a strong case for Peace Studies as an interdisciplinary educational program in the university.

Let us look at the issue of the nuclear arms race and the risks of nuclear war. Surely, given the magnitude of the risks involved in the practice of nuclear diplomacy by the superpowers and the importance of an educated public on this matter, there is a strong case to be made for courses and research programs in the university which seek a comprehensive understanding of this critical issue. Yet which one of the traditional disciplines in the university can provide this? Is it merely an issue in international politics which can be understood in terms of the typical methods of research and theoretical models with which the political scientist typically deals? Sometimes this claim is made. In fact, it is even argued by some that the nuclear weapons issue is the exclusive province of that narrow field within political science called "Strategic Studies."

But a very cursory look at all that is involved in the nuclear weapons issue demonstrates the inadequacy of this view. The nuclear arms race raises questions about the risks of physical harm posed by radiation, blast, "nuclear winter" effects, and so on, which can be dealt with adequately only by physicists, biologists, meteorologists, and other scientists. Questions about the way in which nuclear deterrence fits into the picture of international diplomacy and military strategy requires the insights of political scientists and historians, as well as psychologists. But the race in

nuclear arms also involves economic issues – for example, to what extent it is driven by economic factors, and what are the economic consequences of massive arms spending in an economy? Nuclear weapons also raise profound ethical and theological questions that are very much present in the public mind though not the province of the physical or social scientists. There are also questions of the risks of nuclear systems failure and political misperception leading to unwanted war that systems theory and risk assessment theory are best prepared to answer.

The issue, then, is not whether or not Peace Studies meets the criteria for being a *bona fide* academic discipline (whatever those are), but whether there is a body of issues within the general area of human conflict and resolution which demand serious, concentrated **interdisciplinary** study and research. The case for Peace Studies, then, is as demanding as the issues of violence, war, and human survival in the face of nuclear disaster.

Given this rationale for Peace Studies in the university, the criticisms cited earlier can be assessed. What of the argument that Peace Studies is redundant – that it is taking up issues already dealt with sufficiently in the traditional disciplines? Even were it the case that the full range of issues importantly involved here were being considered within the traditional disciplines there would still be a need for these disparate insights to be brought together to provide a full picture for both the researcher and the student who want to have an integrated understanding of the issue.

But it is even to be doubted whether the full range of issues here are in fact being dealt with separately by the traditional disciplines. One of the important functions played by interdisciplinary programs in the university, like Environmental Studies and Peace Studies, is that they call attention to important issues which may not at present be addressed by researchers and teachers in the various disciplines, and they provide a context in which these issues can be addressed by people who otherwise would turn their attention to other matters. For example, one of the most significant benefits of an interdisciplinary Peace Studies program at a university is that it provides professors within various departments with the rationale they need for offering courses dealing with conflict and peace issues which would not otherwise exist. It also provides a student constituency for these courses – a very important issue in university politics.

What then is to be made of the criticism that the primary motivation for Peace Studies is political or ideological, rather than academic? The first thing to be noted in responding to this criticism is that this charge is frequently made by conservative members of the traditional disciplines against the emergence of any new interdisciplinary program which treads upon portions of their disciplinary turf, especially if the new program

challenges some of the entrenched ways of viewing problems within the discipline. This, for example, was the fear expressed about Environmental Studies when it first came on the scene. It was thought by some of the scientists to be "unscientific" because motivated by a concern for the environment which would prejudice its adherents on scientific questions about the actual hazards posed by chemical substances, waste products, certain energy sources, and so on. The "Environmentalists," as they were called, also introduced some new "paradigms" for thinking about environmental issues which called into question some of the well-entrenched values and assumptions in the older disciplines. For example, "ecosystems" became a primary model, and the "small is beautiful" concept challenged traditional thinking about technological progress as an inherent good – a notion in which many of the scientists and engineers in the university had a vested interest.

Peace Studies is producing the same kind of reaction within some of the traditional disciplines, and for much the same reasons. It, too, treads upon some of the same ground considered the sacred territory of the political scientists, the military historians, the social psychologists, and some of the scientists, among others. This, of course, is just in the nature of any interdisciplinary program of study. Peace Studies, too, appears to some to be the intrusion of a highly biased political movement (e.g., the "peace movement") into the university, poisoning its objective atmosphere, as the critics cited earlier clearly demonstrate. And, like Environmental Studies, Peace Studies has introduced into the debates about violence and war in interpersonal and international relations some new models and paradigms of thought which challenge some of the models and paradigms deeply entrenched in some of the older disciplines. To those firmly committed to these entrenched paradigms the new ones appear, naturally, to be simple-minded or even outrageous. This, as the philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn has pointed out, is the reaction with which any "paradigm shift" is greeted within a discipline (Kuhn, 1974).

What is to be made of the claim that Peace Studies is really the importation of a political movement into the university rather than a scholarly endeavor to promote greater knowledge and deeper understanding of an issue? Is it true that the aim of Peace Studies is to make converts to a cause, or to advocate a political platform rather than to educate? It is not at all clear where those who make this charge consider the line to be between political advocacy and scholarly pursuit, nor where or how they consider Peace Studies to cross it. Surely it cannot seriously be argued that the university is or should be a place where professors and students have no connections with, or sympathies for, political ideals and movements in the society at large, or that they ought not to allow these to influence the research or the teaching they do. Even where this is the ideal of the university, it certainly is not attained in practice, nor has it ever been in the

past. The modern university has always been a place where government and industry has had a very heavy influence, not only through the personal connections of academics with companies and political parties, but especially through the direct funding of research. The universities have been, and continue to be, the recipients of major grants for research serving the interests of government agencies, including especially departments of defence and corporations. The research, and hence also the teaching, of a significant portion of faculty members is heavily influenced by these interest groups which are clearly non-academic.

Thus, in a very important sense the university has always been highly "politicized," in the sense that it freely admits very strong political interests into its research and teaching role. What is crucial about the charge of "politicization" which is levelled at Peace Studies is the fact that it often reflects political values which, again, dissent from the mainstream political values that infuse the university. There is a certain almost comic irony in the fact that it is not seen as "political" when a professor of physics accepts a multi-million dollar grant from the Pentagon to work on developing a laser component for the "Star Wars" system, but it is "political" when a professor in a Peace Studies course makes public criticisms of that system as politically, technically, or ethically unwise. It is especially "political" if he or she makes that statement as part of a public peace demonstration, even though it is not "political" for the professor of political science to be a leading figure in a (mainstream) political party.

It is possible for Peace Studies to be done in a way which violates the principles of academic freedom and objectivity, and there may be places and occasions when this has been true. But there is no reason for believing that it is inherent in the very concept of Peace Studies, or any other kind of interdisciplinary study, and more than traditional disciplinary studies. And it must be said that the traditional disciplines can be abused in just the same way, and sometimes have been. But this should not detract from the more basic issue. That issue is whether or not the problems we face in our world, as a result of increased militarization and increased reliance upon violence at ever-increasing levels of magnitude and technical sophistication, suggest that we need to devote increased energies to the discovery of new ways of dealing with human conflict at all levels of our interaction. If the answer to this question is affirmative, as it certainly must be in our times of terrorist threats from lonely gunmen as well as nuclear "rocket-rattlers", then there is not only a legitimate place for a competent interdisciplinary forum for peace research and education in the university, but indeed there is a crying need for it.

NOTE

1. A summary of these criticisms is provided in the *International Peace Studies Newsletter*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Winter, 1986), pp. 1-2.

REFERENCES

- Cox, Caroline, & Scruton, Roger. (1985). *Peace Studies: A critical survey*. London: Institute for European Defence & Strategic Studies.
- Kuhn, Thomas. (1974). *The structure of scientific revolutions*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

