

Plenary Session II

The Dynamics of Peace

Convenor:

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In this session we will ask to what extent a peaceful way of life is deemed possible. What kind of ontology is a prerequisite for such a belief, and which social and cultural means are employed in order to achieve it? Peace as a goal may be viewed as a dynamic process whose achievement requires concerted efforts which, in turn, needs to be constituted upon a shared understanding of the possibility of its achievement. To what extent do face-to-face interactions play a significant part? To what extent may different gender ideologies account for differences? How may we account for a recent popularity in processes of atonement and reconciliation? If aggression and violence are part and parcel of what it means to be human, then how can we account for the existence of societies where aggressive or violent behaviour is conspicuous by its absence? We shall explore some attempts at creating and maintaining peace and of handling conflict at a societal level. From domestic quarrelling to feuding, persecution and warfare, to peace and reconciliation tribunals, various socioculturally embedded understandings challenge other's (whoever and wherever they may be) entrenched notions of right and wrong, of rights and responsibilities and, ultimately, raise questions of ontology, psychology and personhood. Through empirical examples from very different parts of the world, and addressing very different situations of the dynamics of peace, the papers will seek to highlight how people seek to establish peace and how they resolve situations that threaten societal equilibrium.

Charisma and Nonviolence

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The anthropology of peace has depended up till now on searching for cultures, primarily primitive ones, that are not violent or do not have war. The goal has been to show by the example of these societies that humanity is not inherently violent or bellicose.

Unfortunately, very few societies without war have turned up and even fewer with low levels of violence, and, rather than peaceful, these societies are better typified as "pacified" because they often have been pushed into a marginal existence by more powerful neighbours. Furthermore, such an anthropology of peace seems "in denial" after a certain point: the more it searches for these would-be "harmless" cultures, the more its scholarship seems removed from the world of violence and war around us today.

Let me propose one new direction for an anthropology of peace: I begin by acknowledging that interpersonal and group violence is

commonplace in societies (and perhaps even fundamental to the human condition). Next, I look at the special circumstances under which violence has been overcome in favour of peacefulness. I look, in particular, at several instances in which nonviolent resistance has channelled mass social protest away from violent political conflict and toward active but peaceful resistance. In each instance, a charismatic leader, who enacts or “performs” proofs of supernatural abilities to his followers, facilitates the peacefulness. I suggest that one direction for an anthropology of peace is to shift attention away from whole societies in order to study the face-to-face relations between nonviolent leaders and followers—and through such a shift, to analyze the role that individual charisma plays in the construction of peaceful social behaviour.

Peace and the New Order

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Reconciliation and Strategies of Peace-Making: Thoughts on South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission

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“Peace” is almost always defined in negative relation to violence. Usually used as a noun preceded by a verb, its grammar describes an end potentially achievable by action. The avenues to peace are therefore manifold. The paper explores some attempts to bring peace into being through reconciliation in South Africa. An instruction to that effect in the Constitution became part of the grounds for the ambitious Truth and Reconciliation Commission, whose work, begun in 1996, has recently been completed. In the Commission's work, reconciliation was predicated on revelation the truth, and was often posited as the establishment of a relationship between victim and perpetrator, usually in a face-to-face encounter. Critics have noted that this leaves aside problems of the relationship between social structure and violence. The paper examines some of the arguments about reconciliation, drawing on biographical and ethnographic materials collected in work with political activists who had opposed the apartheid state. It suggests that commissions are important in generating terms of social interaction, and the precise relations of reconciliation to peace has yet to be investigated. It argues that close attention of the kind that Anthropology's epistemological and methodological approach offers to the everyday makings of ordinary lives is crucial for our understandings of the relationship between action and desired ends.

A Delicate Web of Order: Maintaining Peace in Village Ladakh

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Within the small village communities of Himalayan Ladakh a commitment to non-violence is expressed as the unquestioned need to suppress all forms of violence and disorder. This paper describes the villagers' strategies for the avoidance and resolution of conflict. It particularly focuses on the way in which these are intimately connected to and supported by an epistemological construction of what constitutes disorder and its consequences, by an ontology which entails that individual rights are eclipsed by community interests and by a strong, but non-religious, morality.

These communities are also, however, considered in the context of the wider royal and monastic powers which formerly dominated the region and its current administration as part of the Indian nation state. The commitment to peace has been maintained in the face of regional wars, ethnic conflict and political agitation and the moral and social orders of the village have largely been constructed in opposition to centralised political and religious control. Conversely, however, in recent decades Ladakh's elites have drawn upon forms of village justice and expanded local notions of order to establish a centralised dispute resolution service, which provides a real alternative to the courts and laws of the modern administration.