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Workshop Summary: Peace Research and (De)Coloniality, Vienna, December 2016

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WORKSHOP SUMMARY: PEACE RESEARCH AND (DE)COLONIALITY, VIENNA, DECEMBER 2016

Post-, anti- and decolonial theorists have confronted the social sciences with a radical critique by denouncing the coloniality of power and of knowledge and thus unmasking the Eurocentrism and Occidentalism inherent in widely used and generally accepted scientific paradigms and practices (Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 2000; Coronil, 1996; see Brunner, 2015). Peace and conflict studies have so far only faintly picked up the ideas of Fanon, Said, Spivak, Bhabha and their intellectual heirs. A dialogue with post- and decolonial approaches in IR and political science has emerged recently and indicated fruitful ways of decolonizing peace and conflict research (Ziai 2016, Sabaratnam 2013). The workshop “Peace Research and (De)Coloniality” held in December 2016 at the Centre for Peace Research and Peace Education (ZEF) of the Alpen-Adria-University Klagenfurt branch in Vienna was aimed at discussing the application of post- and decolonial approaches and concepts in peace and conflict research, and hence, the potential to ‘decolonize’ this field of study. Exploring how new ways of thinking and ideas about ‘epistemic violence’ (Spivak, 1988) or ‘delinking’ (Mignolo 2007) may help to rethink established definitions or broaden debates on concepts such as e.g. peace, conflict, (non-)violence or transitional justice, the participants engaged in inspiring and intensive debates. (For the detailed program and a summary in German see <http://epistemicviolence.aau.at/index.php/de/veranstaltungen/>)

The event drew together German-speaking academics of all career stages with diverse personal, theoretical and professional backgrounds. The participation of social workers, asylum seeker

supporters, pedagogues and social activists secured a strong emphasis on practical relevance and applicability of decolonial approaches. A guided decolonial tour through the Museum of War History Vienna and an alternatively conceptualized exhibition on experiences of the conflict in Yemen illuminated and challenged trajectories of Eurocentric knowledge production on conflicts and war and its exploitation for the purpose of consolidating and normalizing hegemonic power. The workshop format itself fostered dialogue and critical consideration as all papers were presented by purposively selected presenters in often very creative ways (e.g. theatre performance, audio-visual presentations, readout commentaries and mind maps). Comments and justifications by the authors were reserved for the conclusion of the often fruitful and generative discussions. This polylogical and decentralized approach facilitated a maximal focus on the discussed issues and a move beyond the established hierarchies structuring academic debates. Further, in keeping with a decolonial approach, the workshop neither proclaimed easy answers nor quick fixes for the dilemmas and limitations of peace research. On the contrary, a critical wariness towards the limits and pitfalls of problem-solving mentality of self-proclaimed ‘emancipatory’ scholarship was maintained throughout the conversations.

The initial discussion on the complicity of peace research with trajectories of Western/European dominance – via military interventions, aid conditionality or foreign and trade policy; often unsuccessfully challenged or even legitimized by academic research – was thus not confined to the epistemic violence that peace researchers may exert vis-à-vis their research participants or communities. Using the concept of the ‘decolonial teaching machine’ (based on Spivak 1993), questions were raised about the ability of decolonial approaches to challenge and transform the Eurocentric, Occidental and largely elitist academic knowledge production regimes that scholars have to operate in.

In light of recent initiatives for research excellence and impact assessment, as well as the neoliberalization of higher education, serious doubts were put forward in the discussion as to whether and how decolonial knowledge can actually exist and be disseminated through the academic apparatus whose hierarchies and exclusions it seeks to challenge and dismantle. Apart from a resistance ‘from within’, in the form of the use and diversion of administrative resources and authority for the decolonial project, a more society-focused approach for transcending the exclusive and taken-for-granted authority of academic knowledge production was discussed. Issue-based community events or teach-ins during popular festivals were proposed as ways of nurturing critical thinking and a demand for a decolonial curriculum in higher education. At the same time, participants agreed that the Critical Peace Research Working Group, the workshop’s main organizer, needs to take on a vocal role in challenging and re-shaping the position of its mother organization, the German Association for Peace and Conflict Research (AFK), vis-à-vis policy makers especially in the military(-industrial) and foreign policy realms.

Conceptually, the discussion revolved around ways of rethinking and questioning concepts within the fields of peace and transitional justice. Based on case studies from the International Court of Justice in Kenya, from Colombia and the conflict in Yemen, it was questioned whether and how ‘victim-centered’ approaches can bring about improvement or a sense of justice into the lives of those who have suffered during conflict and civil war. The key issue was identified with the incompatibility between people’s understanding of what happened to them and how they can be helped and, on the other hand, legal language and practices that are often Western-centric and too distant from the specific life—worlds to ever realize the goals of post-conflict justice. Both these and the perspectives on asylum seeker decisions in Germany pointed to the fact that legal-

administrative apparatuses and procedures, and their orientation towards managing conflict and maintaining boundaries, always present some form of coloniality that disempowers and alienates people, also those working within the respective machineries. Thinking and acting at and beyond the fringes of these bureaucratic apparatuses is a way of critiquing the artificial identities and categories they operate with, and to thus challenge the exclusion, marginalization and precarity they produce (Grosfoguel, 2005; Anzaldúa, 1987).

The implications of these and other decolonial debates for the methodology of peace and conflict studies is that only a sustained dialogue with people affected by violent and political conflict can help to understand the (re-)production of identities and knowledges through the eyes of people themselves. Such an approach can help to overcome the extractive logic of empiricist social sciences critiqued long ago in the discussion of social anthropology's 'colonial encounter' (Asad, 1973). To overcome the prevailing scientific, Western-centric and imperial mode of data gathering, analysis and subsequent application in policy, research needs to be more open to 'indigenous' and locally specific knowledges, which are often sidelined because of their incompatibility with pre-conceived categories, research frameworks and universalist conceptions. For instance, rather than transplanting or imposing conceptions of human rights, democracy and reconciliation across contexts, peace and conflict research should examine the effects of such transpositions on the societies in question, and their own ideas about how to build a peaceful and prosperous society. It was also argued that inquiry needs to tackle persisting tensions and conflicts – which are often hidden and reproduced under the surface of everyday normality – head-on and forge an honest conversation about the (im)possibility and temporal contingency of their transformation. Writing about the study of world politics at large, Sabaratnam (2011) has argued that research needs to seek a 'dialogic engagement' about power and its effects, and to let research subjects speak for themselves rather than objectifying them and their culture. Without such a critical re-positioning, the participants concluded, peace research would risk losing sight of substantial and positive forms of peace amidst the focus on ending violent conflict and institutionalizing settlements that reproduce precarious forms of peace with teleological justifications invoking the 'lack of alternatives'.

Established concepts such as Orientalism or Occidentalism were applied to expose the logic European/White/Western supremacy and its entanglement and intersection with gender, class and other categories in specific contexts like the discourse on 'academic misconduct' in international academic communities or the narrative ideology exposed in the right wing Israeli press coverage on the Gaza conflict. The concepts were controversially debated as to their ability to inspire resistance and action towards radical change. The most fundamental uncertainty was expressed over the concept of the 'subaltern' (Spivak, 1988) and corresponding ideas of inclusion and diversity: When and under what conditions do 'subalterns' represent the concerns of the respective group or category we situate them in? Do the demands of the academic curriculum and career paths not make it impossible to make academia inclusive 'proper' rather than just representative according to statistical indicators? The participants agreed that more fundamental and transformative action – not only numerical targets, flagship initiatives and popular appreciation of leading post- and decolonial intellectuals – is needed to decolonize the university and peace research in particular.

Besides an edited collection of the papers and conversations from the workshop and forthcoming publications from individual workshop participants (e.g. Exo, 2017; Brunner, 2017), the de-

colonial peace research agenda discussed at the workshop will be further set out and enacted in concrete initiatives of the working group members. For instance, the recent [‘Statement on the founding of the Centre for Social Cohesion’](#) criticized the lack of transparency and debate during the allocation of 37 million Euros of German government funding to this new think tank, co-initiated by working group members, was undersigned by many peace and conflict researchers all over Germany. The [lecture series](#) ‘Coloniality under De_Construction - Decolonial Perspectives and Activisms’ at the University of Vienna is another achievement of participants of the workshop and proves that decolonial thinking has a lot to offer to peace and conflict studies.

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