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Narratives of Belonging: Rethinking Peace for the 21st Century

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NARRATIVES OF BELONGING: RETHINKING PEACE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY
UNIVERSITÄT ERFURT, 17TH – 20TH DECEMBER 2024
SYMPOSIUM REPORT

PROJECT GOALS

From 17th to 20th December, we organized an international and interdisciplinary symposium for our project on *Narratives of Belonging: Rethinking Peace for the 21st Century* at the University of Erfurt. With this symposium, we aimed to share research results to prepare for our edited volume with the same title. Our intention with this volume is to contribute to new developments in peace studies in which the emphasis on identity and relations between "self" and "other" became increasingly stronger over the last decade.

Particularly the shift from liberal to post-liberal peace, not least through the so-called "local turn", identified peace fundamentally as social relations between people. Such an understanding of peace is based upon and developed from phenomenological thinking and especially from the writings of Emmanuel Lévinas, foremost from his 1984 paper "Peace and Proximity". This emphasis is even stronger pursued in attempts to rethink peace – and the concept of phenomenological peace that we pursue in our project – by critiquing the concept of identity and replacing it with the concept of belonging as well as asking questions about otherness and non-Western perspectives in International Relations. Belonging prioritizes the open, pluralist, and transformative character of people's search for orientation in acting in this world as well as with respect to questions of value and significance ("*Bedeutsamkeit*" according to Hans Blumenberg or "webs of significance" according to Max Weber). In other words, rather than using the language of "identity", the concept of belonging and speaking of narratives of belonging suit much better phenomenological peace as they avoid essentialist and colonizing framings of difference and "self" – "other" relations that hamper the possibility to develop peaceful relations across boundaries.

Based on this premise, our research project aims to trace such narratives of belonging globally in diverse cultures and their respective discourses in political thought. In doing so, we identify different, often non-Western and pre-modern as well as indigenous, mixed heritages, and marginalized narratives that allow to conceive of belonging not in essentialist ways in the sense of a fixed "being" but rather in the sense of a constant "becoming" that embraces change in peaceful ways and allows for more peaceful ways of cohabitation. Despite different linguistic, spatial, and cultural socializations, it seems intrinsic to human life trying to establish ways of living together that offer ontological security. Having this aim, this project therefore deliberately does not restrict itself to conceptualizations of the political, potentially speaking in favor of the sovereign state's universalization. Rather, *Narratives of Belonging: Rethinking Peace for the 21st Century* conceives of belonging and community broadly, comprising of terms like society and even more generally cohabitation. The methodological challenge that arises with the ambition to explore belonging(s) consists in three steps: first, in the hermeneutic elaboration of respective narratives and their meaning structures. Second, in finding out their inter-relations empirically as "self" – "other"-relations and perceptions. And third in developing the normative question of their intersection for promoting peace.

Assuming that this desire for a sense of belonging is an anthropological constant, that, however, the conceptualization of respective articulations as identity is diverse, this project and its individual contributions aim at stimulating a reflection upon this tension between identity that as a concept and idea is deeply entrenched in our philosophical, political, and social language and, in contrast, a more flexible, conceptually and politically open articulation of humans' quest for belonging. In pursuing *Narratives of Belonging: Rethinking Peace for the 21st Century*, project contributors are particularly guided by the following research goals:

- To identify narratives of belonging in non-Western and particularly indigenous and otherwise marginalized contexts;
- The contribution of these narratives to rethink the relation between "peace" and "belonging";
- To determine if these different narratives of belonging allow to identify anthropological constants that can form a basis for a peaceful cohabitation, acknowledging differences in transcultural encounters as enriching rather than threatening.

ERFURT SYMPOSIUM: SUMMARY OF INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTIONS

To discuss these goals through individual contributions, further our project by reflecting on how to continue it, and prepare our edited volume for publication, scholars based in Australia, Germany, Japan, Mexico, Taiwan, and the United Kingdom met in person and virtually in Erfurt in December 2024. As "city of peace" (*Stadt des Friedens*), Erfurt was well suited to host our symposium. Participants at the *Narratives of Belonging: Rethinking Peace for the 21st Century* symposium were in alphabetical order:

- Zaal Andronikashvili, Research Fellow at the Leibniz Center for Literary and Cultural Studies Berlin, Germany; Professor at the Ilia-State-University in Tbilisi, Georgia
- Hartmut Behr, Professor of International Politics, Newcastle University, UK
- Zeynep Gülşah Çapan, Lecturer, Department of International Relations, University of Erfurt, Germany
- Eunju Hwang, Lecturer in Entrepreneurship in Media and Creative Industries, University College (UCL) London, UK
- Alexandra Jima-González, Professor of Political Science, Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey, Mexico
- Milagros López-Peláez Casellas, Senior Lecturer in English Studies, Universidad de Granada, Spain
- Stephen Muecke, Professor (emer.) of Ethnography, University of New South Wales, Australia
- Felix Rösch, Associate Professor in International Relations, University of Sussex, UK
- Giorgio Shani, Professor of International Politics, International Christian University, Japan
- Chih-yu Shih, National Chair Professor of Political Science, National Taiwan University, Republic of China; Professor, Tongji University, China

- Atsuko Watanabe, Associate Professor, Institute of Liberal Arts, Kanazawa University, Japan

The symposium started on the evening of the 17th December with a welcome dinner and finished in the morning of the 20th December, where we reflected on the results of our symposium and had a discussion on how to proceed with the project (more on it in the next section). On 18th and 19th December, we discussed our individual contributions. For each contribution, we devoted approx. one hour (20-30 minutes presentation and 30-40 minutes critical discussion). On 18th December, after a brief welcome, Stephen Muecke, Atsuko Watanabe, Eunju Hwang, Zeynep Gülşah Çapan, and Chih-yu Shi presented their contributions.

First, Stephen Muecke presented his work on *Belonging in Aboriginal Australia: A Political "Cosmography"*. For his chapter, he explored Australian Aboriginal multiple modes of belonging to Country. This "cosmography" necessarily extends its descriptive work across several ontologies, in the tradition of William James" "pluriverse", Bruno Latour's "modes of existence" and Isabelle Stengers' "cosmopolitics". Beginning with a reflective narrative introduction, he then described different modes of territorial belonging, including the religious, semiotic, legal and political. The fieldwork for his contribution was based in Broome, Western Australia where concepts and configurations of territorial belonging have shifted over the last fifty years, among the Aboriginal communities there, from traditional Goolarabooloo regionalism to Yawuru nationalism. He concluded that traditional Indigenous territorial belonging is strong precisely because it has several ontologically different belongings operating at once, and that modernization has the effect of attenuating such territorial belonging.

Next, Atsuko Watanabe discussed her contribution on *Transcending Boundaries for Peace: Pluralist Theology, Shūsaku Endō, and Global IR*. In this work, Watanabe considers the question of how people can conceptually transcend boundaries without actually exceeding them. This puzzle links to the debate over Western-centrism in the social sciences and International Relations. Like other disciplines, International Relations scholars rely on the term "global" to forge a new space which can encompass rapidly diversifying scholarship. To this end, scholars are trying to weave a newly integrated narrative. However, the global is a space that each of us only imagines. She discussed two forms of religious pluralism: those of British-born theologian, John Hick (1922-2012) and Japanese novelist, Shūsaku Endō (1923-1996), in order to explore the possible implications of the term, 'global'. The former proposed to conceive of God as the Real. By contrast, the latter, aspiring to become a Catholic while retaining his Japanese-ness, imagined God as an agency rather than existence. By discussing both intellectuals, Watanabe suggested one way to envisage the global as a co-constructed imaginative space that never takes a concrete shape. Envisaged this way, we do not need to transcend boundaries to share a sense of belonging.

In the third presentation of the day, Eunju Hwang took a different direction by studying *Peacebuilding or Exclusion of Others: Rethinking Cultural Institutions' Roles Focusing on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritages List and Food Museums in East Asia*. Just as many European nations in the nineteenth century, East Asian countries claim and appropriate cultural items as their own, and this phenomenon of cultural appropriation often causes national disputes as the origins of the cultures are not known due to their entangled history, geographical proximity and even climate similarity. Her research

critically examines the roles of cultural institutions such as the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List and food museums amidst international cultural conflicts. The study explores how and why nations appropriate culture. It demonstrates that UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List and food museums often exacerbate controversial debates about cultural origins, contributing to international conflicts rather than fostering peace, which contradicts their intended purpose. Hwang found that cultural institutions create disputes in three ways. First, the current listing system, or how museums display cultural items, is too focused on the nation or a state rather than a broader region. Second, cultural institutions try to authenticate cultural items when the origin is unclear. Third, UNESCO and museums often select cultural items that need not be safeguarded or urgently protected. As a result, these institutions create a false urgency to preserve food items instead of enjoying them peacefully. Thus, she argued in her talk that cultural institutions can contribute to more conflict than peace and call for re-evaluating current listing practices and cultural promotion efforts to better support peacebuilding.

In her contribution, Zeynep Gülşah Çapan questioned *Belonging to the Modern* by discussing *Three Partitionings from Turkey* by discussing Ahmet Hamdi Tanpinar's *The Time Regulation Institute*.

Chih-yu Shih compared in his talk two types of love that can allegedly emancipate others from the continued dominance and oppression of past colonial relations in order to achieve belonging to a decolonized community. Specifically, he employed Confucianism to illustrate a kind of differential love; love that is benevolent between people who take up higher and lower social roles, in contrast to a universal love for all humanity. Benevolent love is hierarchical rather than equal, yet it is also potentially universal because all humans necessarily play roles in a certain hierarchy, with Confucianism being just one of them. Confucian love alludes to ontological equality for all, to the extent that individuals' identities outside of their roles are free from interrogation. Shih also used 'One Country, Two Systems' (OCTS), which is Beijing's policy for arranging Hong Kong's way of belonging to China (PRC), to illustrate how the differences between benevolent love and universal love mean that those who subscribe to each form of love are unable to understand each other in practical situations. Ironically, however, a benevolent love that aims to inspire everyone's selflessness discourages the expression of any imagined intrinsic self-worth. According to the belief in benevolent love, legitimate claims to self-worth instead exist exclusively in one's reunion with the motherland, as opposed to one's own humanity. Among activists who insist on Hong Kong autonomy, a universal sense of solidarity develops and challenges Beijing's pursuit of national unity. As a result of this dissonance, the incongruent emotions of Hong Kong's belonging to China have yet to be reconciled.

On 19th December, Zaal Andronikashvili, Milagros López-Peláez Casellas, Hartmut Behr, and Felix Rösch, Giorgio Shani, and Alexandra Jima-González gave their presentations. Due to health reasons, Casellas, Shani, and Jima- González could only join us virtually for this workshop.

In the first presentation of the day, *Born of the Earth: Autochthony in the Colonial and Decolonial Struggles of the Caucasus*, Zaal Andronikashvili examined the concept of autochthony in the Caucasus as both a colonial construct and an anti-colonial tool. Russian imperial discourse reinterpreted autochthony to frame the peoples of the Caucasus as primordial yet ahistorical, thereby justifying their subjugation as part of a

civilizational mission. In contrast, Georgian intellectuals reappropriated the concept to assert national and regional resistance, developing competing narratives of autochthonous belonging. Through an analysis of figures, such as Ilia Chavchavadze, Rapiel Eristavi, and Alexandre Kazbegi, Andronikashvili's study explores how autochthony was redefined through civic nationalism, affective nationalism, and pan-Caucasian solidarity. While these reinterpretations challenged Russian hegemony, they also introduced tensions between inclusive political identity and exclusionary nationalist discourse. This chapter contextualizes autochthony within broader imperial and decolonial struggles, highlighting its role in shaping historical memory, national identity, and regional conflict.

In the next presentation, Milagros López-Peláez Casellas introduced and analyzed some of the central elements of the theoretical, ethical, and political works of the Portuguese sociologist, Boaventura de Sousa Santos. Using his seminal work, *Epistemologies of the South*, she aimed to create a dialogue with the theoretical framework initially developed by the Chicana critic, Gloria Anzaldúa, in her book, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Writing within the context of a critical decolonial approach, both de Sousa and Anzaldúa were compelled to move away from modern paradigms and, as a consequence, elaborated on their respective theories whilst acknowledging the paradigmatic condition of postmodernity. In her contribution, she was particularly interested in examining both theorists' creation of what de Sousa came to name, the "hermeneutics of suspicion". This positions itself against modern and totalizing knowledges and universalisms as a way of escaping the Eurocentric mono-culturalist monologue, thereby producing an "ecology of knowledge" as a counter-epistemology. From a moderate anti-essentialist strategic position, the work of both de Sousa and Anzaldúa strongly emphasizes the role of lived experience, the knowledge of indigenous peoples, and the use of hybridity/*mestizaje* as a way to claim knowledge and give a voice to a group that is often silenced and excluded. Lastly, López-Peláez Casellas offered an introduction to some key points within the wider theoretical production of the critical decolonial sociologist, Boaventura de Sousa Santos.

Third, Hartmut Behr and Felix Rösch spoke on *Peace, Liminality, and Discourses of Identity in Central European Late Modernity*. In doing so, they discussed three contemporary Western approaches that critically problematize the questions of belonging and identity under conditions of late modernity. This discussion follows from the assumption that the desire for a sense of belonging is an anthropological constant, as well as the recognition that essentialized narratives of belonging are prone to violence and not suitable for the singularized, functionally differentiated and pluralist societies of Western late modernity. The approaches that we critically problematize can be summarized under the keywords of "neo-communities" (Andreas Reckwitz), "functional differentiation" (Armin Nassehi), and "constitutional patriotism" (Jan-Werner Müller). After reviewing these approaches, they argued that each needs to incorporate the notion of 'liminal space' to either prevent tendencies of essentialization, (Müller) or to be able to integrate social differentiation (Reckwitz and Nassehi). This is because such integration and respective alternative narratives provide a sense of belonging while also avoiding any form of essentialized narratives that are inevitably and violently exclusive, and as such, do not live up to the requirements of a pluralist world. The notion of liminal space proposes that the area in-between orthodox spaces (such as "the nation" or *Gemeinschaft*) is significant for critical narratives of belonging. Following this, Behr and

Rösch introduced the concept of transformativity in opposition to the persistent and essentializing language of identity. Both notions of liminal space and transformativity enabled them to conceive of belonging under conditions of differentiation. This is because they radically account for fluidity and change of society, politics, and human being.

In the fourth presentation, Giorgio Shani joined us online from Tokyo to discuss his contribution on *Beyond Nationalism? Embodied Cosmologies in South Asia*. In his talk, Shani critically examined an attempt to pluralize International Relations by accommodating geo-cultural difference as represented by 'global' IR, before he introduced the concept of cosmologies. Shani argued that cosmologies, particularly ones from South Asia, challenge hegemonic iterations of geo-cultural difference in International Relations by interrogating the relationship between territory, culture and difference. Furthermore, he interrogated relationships between the 'religious' and the 'secular' as well as humans and the environment. Shani concluded by suggesting that 'post-western International Relations' should focus on inter-cosmological relations in a pluriverse.

In the final presentation, *Collective Action and Adaptation Strategies in Times of COVID-19: The Case of the Indigenous Movement in Ecuador*, Alexandra Jima-González argued that social movements' repertoires of collective action have been radically changed by the emergence of COVID 19 as several restrictions were put in place as a strategy to contain the spread of the pandemic. Taking as a case study the indigenous movement in Ecuador, she shed light on the reconfiguration processes the movement underwent to maintain its contesting power in the Ecuadorian political scenario. Parting from a qualitative methodological perspective, including interviews and archives analysis, Jima-González followed closely the role of resources and political opportunities, as understood in Resource Mobilization Theory and Political Opportunity Theory, to categorize and systematize this adaptation process. All in all, Jima-González showed that despite freedom of movement restrictions, the indigenous movement in Ecuador could develop novel repertoires of collective action, mostly formed on the movements' smallest units of organization, and based on a reinterpretation of the movement's role and identity.

Symposium Results

As mentioned, with our project, we aimed to trace narratives of belonging globally to identify narratives beyond the Western nation-state in order to make a contribution to rethink peace. Through these narratives, we aimed to critique the concept of identity and replace it with the concept of belonging as well as asking questions about otherness and non-Western perspectives.

At the moment, we are finalizing the edited volume which combines all of our contributions. This volume will be published with Palgrave Macmillan later this year. We plan to submit the final manuscript at the end of May 2025.

Project Continuation

From discussions we had in Erfurt, some of members of this project plan to continue the research on narratives of belonging by reflecting on how they affect communities under stress. At the moment, they prepare a research project grant proposal for the British

Leverhulme Trust with the aim to produce a monograph and several research articles on this topic.

Everywhere in the world communities are under stress. From increasing natural catastrophes due to climate change like the recent wildfires in California to man-made disasters like humanitarian crises in the aftermath of wars, communities in their self-understanding are challenged and have to worry about their survival. So far, the development of human communities has been largely discussed in terms of identity. However, the composite nature of pressures in the age of globalization compels us to reconsider this tendency. This is because identity highlights the importance of commonality among members, which inevitably essentializes humans. However, in contemporary communities, homogeneity is an unattainable myth, as people follow diverse interests and show a multiplicity of concerns, causing different reactions to social pressures. Striving for a unifying identity, however, people retreat into what sociology has termed neo-communities, meaning that people retreat into their own "bubble" of like-minded others, while refraining from engaging with others. In other words, people share only a certain portion of the space in which their community is geographically located. They stay in the space to live through, or more frankly, to survive. However, this has detrimental effects for larger communities, as people need something that puts them together as humans cannot live alone. To counter this development and particularly help people to stay resilient during situations of stress, our project proposes narratives of belonging to reframe our understanding of communities.

The aim of this project is to investigate changes to narratives of belonging during such situations of stress, how they vanish or emerge in such situations, and how the help communities to build resilience. In contrast to the investigations of identity, our focus is the ephemerality and contingency of narratives that form, deform, and even dismantle human collectives. One such example was the Covid-19 pandemic. In Western countries such as the United Kingdom, the gratefulness for essential workers like nurses for their continuing services that could have strengthened communities during the worst times was forgotten quickly afterwards. In our project, however, we aim to focus on communities in the Noto Peninsula in Ishikawa prefecture in Japan. This is because on the one hand, this region has strong community ties as it is one of the longest inhabited areas of Japan with a history dating back to more than 6,000 years ago. On the evening of New Year's Day in 2024, a magnitude 7.6 earthquake hit the region, accompanying a tsunami and massive fire that not only took the lives of approx. 500 people and caused considerable damages but it also shucked these communities. Due to a lack of supra-regional support, Noto communities' resilience was tested by this earthquake and further severe rainstorms in September 2024, taking the lives of another 16 people. As a consequence, the region now suffers from increasing depopulation. It is therefore the aim of our project not only to examine the (trans)formation of narratives of belonging that bind and unbind people in a space-time intersection but also to work with local communities to rekindle to resuscitate their narratives of belonging to help these communities to survive and strengthen their resilience for future crises.

Thus, our interest lies to explore human creativity at the intersection of being together and being apart. To understand this ephemerality, we examine past-present-futures dimensions of narratives of belonging. We observe not only cross-cutting spatialities, which means a multitude of places, but also cross-cutting temporalities of and within narratives of belonging. Hence, the main questions are:

- Do narratives of belonging transform when communities are under stress, like in disaster situations?
- Are narratives of belonging and the community they relate to strengthened, or do communities fall apart into individualized spheres of interest (of survival)?
- Are respective transformations only temporary in and during disasters or enduring, i.e., do narratives of belonging change in the aftermaths of a disaster and lived existential experiences of physical and/or mental insecurities and uncertainties?