

### **In Reply: Emancipation and Critique in Peace and Conflict Research**

I thank the editors of *JoGSS* for allowing me a brief reply, in the spirit of dialogue, to the commentary piece by Isak Svensson. Svensson makes some valid points, and I welcome these. His main axis of response is that “peace research has always been critical” and is “value-based,” yet he sidesteps some of my key points regarding the nature of “valid knowledge,” pluralism in research traditions and the ethical-political dimension of peace research.

First I should clear up a general misunderstanding of the term “critical.” This is contested terrain, but there are two broad senses at play:

- critical as in “intellectually open and ready to challenge the underlying assumptions that are widely shared by the peace movement”; and
- critical as in the original German notion of *critical theory*, which is simultaneously explanatory, practical and normative.

Svensson uses the first sense, while my commentary is aligned with the latter, and related literature in IR (Devetak, 2018). One of Svensson’s first move is to contrast a critical research programme with *empirical* and mainstream approaches (one and the same). While exceptions are noted, this hierarchical positioning of critical peace research as mainly “non-empirical” (and therefore non-scientific) is one of my main targets.

Svensson correctly notes that positive conceptions of peace were present in the original peace research agenda (which I acknowledge), but argues that it has progressively become more prominent in peace research. Perhaps, but a huge gulf remains. Diehl is cited in support, but he notes that “scholarly emphasis remains on war, violence, and negative peace” (Diehl 2016, 1); likewise, Regan (2014) observes “that contemporary social science focuses primarily on the study of war and lesser forms of armed conflict.” This is confirmed empirically by Gledhill and Bright in the original *JoGSS* forum, and in Gledhill and Bright (2018).

We do disagree sharply over the nature of valid (scientific) knowledge in peace research. Svensson argues that the concept of positive peace “negated the precision needed for a meaningful scientific discussion and exploration.” This betrays a specific and narrow conception of social science, reflected in the language of “causal claims,” dependent and independent variables, and the “search for explanations.” Svensson underlines that the “basic scientific procedure of establishing causal claims undergoes the process of identifying correlations, ruling out alternative explanations, verifying the temporal order between cause and effect, and investigating the causal mechanisms at play.” Further, “theoretical constructions can be operationalized in the form of empirical indicators which can be derived and explored,” independent of the meanings that social actors may give to particular acts or situations.

This vision of valid scientific research excludes or demotes to “non-empirical” status all research that focuses on *verstehen* accounts (interpretive, constitutive, or emic accounts). When science is narrowly understood as “data, measurement, and statistics in particular” (Goldstein, 2011: 229, quoted by Svensson), most ethnographic, idiographic, feminist, genealogical, post-colonial, constructivist and other methodologies for generating valid knowledge based on human subjects’ understandings are dismissed out of hand.

For example, Svensson’s illustration (Bjarnegård and Melander 2011) of a study of militarized masculinities is a multivariate regression analysis of indicators of gender equality, political representation and war. A critical scholar would focus on the *constitutive* effects of patriarchy and militarized masculinity on identities (social and individual) and institutions, and how masculinity is understood and performed in particular contexts, perhaps via a deep case study analysis of the example (Thailand), rather than the two pages offered to justify the conclusions as being based on quantitative as well as “qualitative” analysis.<sup>1</sup>

Critical peace research is plentiful (although I do not cite it enough), but is usually marginalized in second tier or specialized journals. Despite Svensson’s claim that mainstream peace scholars no longer draw a line between quantitative and qualitative research, the goal of peace research remains “draw[ing] causal inferences,” in order to achieve a “broader and deeper understanding” of conflicts “in general.” This relegates all qualitative research that does not aim at generalization, and that focuses on particularities, to the status of atheoretical non-science.

Svensson also misleadingly reframes my claim about the apolitical nature of mainstream peace research as a distinction between “research” and “peace activism.” His claim that the “emancipatory perspective risks bringing in political considerations, limitations, biases and preferences through the back-door under the disguise of research,” ironically makes my point. For critical scholarship there is no Archimedean point of “apolitical” research, and politics (understood broadly) is *immanent in all research*. Echoing Robert Cox, research is always “for someone and for some purpose.”

I might have missed my target in my original formulation, so would clarify it as follows. The issue is whether or not peace research as defined by Svensson can contribute *on the ground* to “programs and policies ... where individuals and communities can envision alternative futures” (294-95). Simply stating that the aim of peace researchers is to decrease the likelihood of violent and reactionary conflicts does not make it so. Research on “conflicts in general” aggregated across time and space via abstract categories in the quest for causal or law-like generalizations cannot do so. It represents rather what Benedikt Korf (2006) called “cargo cult science” and armchair empiricism: by definition context-free, removed from the

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<sup>1</sup> Literature on militarized masculinities is too extensive to cite. On Thailand see Streicher 2012.

actors' understandings of their situation, the scope of their agency, and the meanings attributed to particular actions.

Svensson's conclusion reiterates that common ground can be found, but only on the basis of a willingness of critical scholars to accept such things as "testing the generalizability of their claims" or "solid empirical research." Few critical scholars would consider this a common or neutral ground on which to construct a genuine dialogue. I would thus encourage Svensson to reflect more deeply on his positionality in research hierarchies and scholarly networks (and their inclusionary, exclusionary and "disciplining" features) as a basis for developing a genuinely diverse and respectful dialogue between different scholarly traditions.

## References

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