

“The Limits of Peacebuilding Theory”, in Routledge Handbook of Peacebuilding Roger MacGinty, Editor, London: Routledge, 2013

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Abstract

Academic interest in and research focused on peace studies and peacebuilding has grown steadily in recent decades, producing a myriad of articles in scholarly journals, books, conferences, workshops, and university programs dedicated to this field. Researchers, practitioners, and officials of funding agencies – government and private – are naturally drawn to the hope or promise for finding a cure for the scourge of war, both between states and within states.

However, in direct contrast to the growth of what has been cynically called ‘the peace industry’, the situation on the ground remains quite grim. Few stable agreements have been implemented, and many of the major post-Cold War international and ethnonational conflicts continue. And while a few conflicts seem to have been settled, such as Northern Ireland and Angola, the factors involved are unclear and have been not convincingly generalized.

To some degree, the enormous disconnect between the ongoing investment in academic peacebuilding, on the one hand, and the dismal outcomes on the other, can be explained by the enthusiasm of the would-be peace makers. Many of the theories, models, papers, books, simulations, etc. under the banner of political conflict resolution are guided, written, and produced by researcher-practitioners with strong personal commitments to peace.

As will be shown in this chapter, advocates and enthusiasts often underestimate the fundamental differences between societies – particularly the behavioral and normative distinctions between liberal pluralist democracies and groups dominated by an intolerant ideological, nationalist or religious framework. The social-psychological approach to peace generally assumes the existence of a common foundation based on shared human values.

Contact theory, dialogue, cross-cultural communications and interaction, as well as forgiveness, reconciliation, and even quasi-legal arguments (or at least legal discourse) are among the main dimensions used in this approach, from which mutual understanding and compromise are expected to flow. Similarly, the approaches based on democratic peace theories, which are used to justify the liberal interventionist policies pursued by the US and Europe, have also produced meager results. The creation of stable democratic institutions and accompanying political cultures based on pluralism and tolerance has proven very illusive. As in the case of the social-psychological models, the enthusiasts have greatly overstated the likely impacts, and underestimated the obstacles.