



Geography's Pro-Peace Agenda: An Unfinished Project

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Abstract

Violence, war and militarism continue to play an important role in the organization of modern society. A key factor in the creation, perpetuation and significance of violence is the way it is linked with the military-industrial-academic complex and the way those links perpetuate a war culture. In this paper we argue for a wider academic effort to address the inter-relationships between war and violence, one that addresses and develops a pro-peace agenda for Geography. We focus on the need to be pro-justice and on the need to build wider disciplinary coalitions that confront a predominant war culture in 21st Century U.S. society.

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Finally, we offer this paper in the hope that it is but one step in a larger disciplinary discussion about the role geography can play in challenging a killing society and the broader militarization of the university.

*La géographie, ca sert, d'abord, a faire la guerre.*²

(Y. Lacoste 1976 as quoted in Wisner, 1986: 212).

On the fiftieth anniversary of the Association of American Geographers, Don Mitchell (2004: 768) noted, the United States annihilated Bikini Atoll with a hydrogen bomb—and U.S. geographers were consumed by the relatively apolitical question of whether the field was ideographic or nomothetic. Mitchell's observation, we believe, strikes at the heart of a fundamental tension in geographic scholarship in the 21st Century. When geographers debate the content of their discipline, we should not judge by the method or topic or systematic specialty, but instead by the ethics of our research. Don Mitchell (2004: 764) warned that Geography, the discipline, has two choices: it can choose to collaborate with the awesome, iniquitous violent world order, or it can choose to resist it, scientifically and politically, and thereby help to shape an alternative, more just landscape.³ In the shadow of the continuing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the broader so called War on Terror, and as documents continue to leak out of the website *wikileaks* detailing U.S. war policy, Mitchell's admonition about the interconnected relationships between violence, war and geography continues to loom over the discipline and is a central premise that drives the arguments of this paper.

By taking Mitchell's observations at face value we do not mean to suggest that all of Geography, or geographers in general, are complicit in the (re)creation of a killing society. As a discipline Geography has much to be proud of in terms of addressing violence, inequality and militarism. As we interact with colleagues from other disciplines we are constantly reminded of how Geography and geographers are in the vanguard when it comes to thinking through social, economic, and cultural inequalities (e.g. Bunge, 1969; Harvey, 1984; 1996; Cloke, 2002; Gilmore, 2002; Gregory, 2004); and many geographers have linked the growth of militarism, materialism, and racism through time and space and implicated wider social, religious, and academic institutions in U.S. society as being complicit in the death and destruction that is meted out everyday in the name of American empire (Godlewska and Smith, 1994; Flint, 2005; Tyner, 2006; Gregory and Pred, 2007; Barnes, 2008). We do, however, argue that given the fractured nature of academic Geography, and the varied and theoretically rich ways geographers engage with questions of violence and inequality, what is needed is the articulation of a broadly conceived pro-peace agenda that focuses on the interlinkages between violence, militarism, and inequality. In so doing, we place

² Geography serves, first and foremost, to wage war.

³ Throughout this paper we distinguish Geography (the discipline) from geography (space, place, location, scale, and so forth) by capitalizing the former and keeping the latter in small case.

ourselves within a larger movement in Geography—one that has been addressing the interconnections between violence militarism and inequality for at least the last forty years—in order to contribute to the efforts of the diverse work of geographers who have dedicated careers and lives for the betterment of society and the eradication of violence (e.g. Harvey 1984; 1996; Morrill 1985; Smith 1992; Hay and Foley 1998; Harris 2002; Howitt 2002; Gregroy 2004; Mitchell 2004; Valentine 2005; Katz 2007; Lawson 2007; Castree 2008; Heynen 2009; Kobayashi 2009; Tyner 2009a). Finally, we offer this paper not as a definitive statement, but rather as a set of ideas intended to invite conversation and debate about peace, violence and learning; in the hope that it is but one step in a broader disciplinary discussion about the role Geography can play in destabilizing, contesting, and challenging a killing society, a “war” culture that is dedicated to inequality, death, and the dehumanizing effects of violence.

The Creation of a War Culture

Academic institutions and academic disciplines have long been associated with the study and execution of war. Point-in-fact the establishment of land-grant universities in the United States is tied to particular needs created by the industrial revolution and empire building. The Morrill Land Grant Act passed in 1862 that established land-grant public institutions in the U.S. was dedicated to the establishment of “practical” centers of education intended to teach students agriculture and engineering practices that would directly contribute to the rapid industrialization of U.S. society. The legislation that created land-grant institutions also mandated that students receive basic courses in military tactics. This, in theory, would create a ready pool of military officers that could be called upon during times of crisis and in large part facilitated the establishment of U.S. Geography Departments (as basic knowledge of Geography was/is considered essential for military training). The development of land grant institutions and their connection to the needs of empire were mirrored in broader society and can be traced to the growth of a pervasive militarism in Western societies throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries.

The development of militarism in the West dramatically altered conceptions of justice and culture. As Susan Opatow (2001: 156) explains, militarism needs a framework of exclusionary justice that relies on broader geographic conceptions. She argues that *moral inclusion* “in the scope of justice means applying considerations of fairness, allocating resources, and making sacrifices to foster another’s well being,” while *moral exclusion* “rationalizes and excuses harm inflicted on those outside the scope of justice. Excluding “others” from the scope of justice means viewing them as unworthy of fairness, resources, or sacrifices, and seeing them as expendable, undeserving, exploitable, or irrelevant.” Throughout the 19th, 20th, and 21st Centuries the logic of moral exclusion has been deployed to justify the genocide visited on first peoples/indigenous communities in North America, the imposition of U.S. segregation and racism, colonial wars throughout the world, as well as forming a basis for anti-Semitism, patriarchy, homophobia,

and racism more generally. Critical for us, as geographers, is the way these conceptions rely on a particular territorial logic that neatly packages the world into different camps through the use of a series of master narratives. The deployment of universalizing master narratives comes to legitimate killing, making violence and exploitation appear “natural” and “taken-for-granted.” Conner, in particular, draws attention to the fact that “since the late eighteenth century [modern society] has been governed by the power of certain universalizing “metanarratives” in philosophy and politics [which come to] either assimilate or to exclude other identities, histories and temporalities” (1997: 321). Perhaps the most recent and famous example of this kind of master narrative, one that has been a lynchpin of the War on Terror, was articulated by then President George W. Bush who declared in the wake of September 11 that you are “either with us or against us” (Bush, November 26, 2001). The “with” and “against” not only crudely dichotomizes place (the US nation verses “elsewhere”) it demonstrates the aggressive underpinnings (“against” implies in opposition to, hostile to, antagonistic toward, and so forth) implicit to the circulation of such master narratives.

Master narratives of militarism enter the public consciousness, and gain acceptance, when linked to a particular kind of geography (and Geography) that continues to rely on binary divisions of the world and (re)produces a particular territorial logic of exclusion. As Harvey notes:

The division of the world into spheres of influence by the main capitalist powers at the end of the nineteenth century raised serious geopolitical issues[...] They sought to define the useful geographical strategies in the context of political, economic and military struggles [and] geopolitical thinking continues to be fundamental within the contemporary era, particularly in the pentagons of military power and amongst those concerned with foreign policy (Harvey, 1984: 3).

The division of the world into competing and mutually exclusive camps, of which Harvey refers, promotes a broader acceptance of violence because, through its geographic articulations, it hides the gruesome realities of militarism and modern armed conflict from the vast majority of people. Killing, particularly within the context of war, becomes abstract; people are no longer killed, but instead become victims of “collateral damage.” Chris Hedges (2002: 83) explains, “We do not smell the rotting flesh or hear the cries of agony, or see before us blood and entrails seeping out of bodies.” The designer or manufacturer of a landmine or a machine gun does not always (if ever) witness the effects of his or her labor; neither does the chemist who discovers a more lethal poisonous gas; nor the engineer who designs a more effective delivery system for ever-more lethal munitions. Most of the U.S. population, including the vast majority of our students, are not adequately aware of the daily realities of the U.S. military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and myriad other war zones. The discursive and material distance militarism creates has deadly consequences that are often ignored; as has been

observed countless times, “War is always more popular with those who don’t experience it” (Kurlansky, 2006, 141).

The most obvious consequence of the separation of war and warfare from the broader population is that civilian populations pay the price. If one looks at all the armed conflict that occurred during the late twentieth and early twenty-first century at least 80 percent of the approximately 20 million people killed and 60 million wounded in declared war, civil war and other conflicts have been civilians (Slim, 2008). Of these casualties, three out of every five have been children (Carlton-Ford et al., 2000, 401). Yet the increase and acceptance of civilian deaths is only a symptom of a larger consequence of the shift in the production and execution of war. One cannot separate the debilitating consequences of twentieth century warfare from militarism (see Tyner 2010), a process that legitimizes the deaths of innocents by discursively constructing them as collateral damage and thus more broadly condones violence, intolerance and inequality through the use of master narratives that make it appear as if killing is part of a “natural” human condition. Killing, however, is neither natural nor inevitable; instead, violence is, and should be understood, as a learned behavior (Gilligan 1996; Alvarez and Bachman 2008; Collins 2008).

Tyner (2009b) builds upon these connections arguing that Geography is foundational to the human behavior of killing. Killing is a process, but it is a socio-spatial process; indeed, Tyner details that there is a “spatial logic” of killing. On the one hand, there is a “distance-decay” function of killing (see also Grossman 1995). As the physical distance between perpetrator and victim increases, it becomes easier and less traumatic to kill. This has important implications for our high-tech means of warfare, where we can pilot drones from Nevada to kill people in Pakistan. On the other hand, there is a social distance, a distance of moral exclusion. To exclude other individuals from the scope of justice means viewing them as unworthy of fairness, resources, and sacrifice—of viewing *them* as expendable. Thus two forms of spatial relations exist, one based on technology and the literal, physical, direct act of killing; and the other relational, based on our moral perceptions of others. These two geographic components, or spatial logics, must be considered when promoting a non-killing society.

Indeed, as long as people killing other people relies on Geography to do their work and to organize modern society, we can neither deny nor ignore the interrelations between human behavior, war, and inequality and our responsibility to help our students and colleagues understand the linkages between these seemingly intractable problems. If we are willing to accept this claim, then it will be possible to develop the skills and techniques necessary to provide a just and humane world alternative to our present condition—developments that will promote a pro-peace (not necessarily peaceful) agenda for Geography. A major aspect of this project is the destabilization and challenging of broader master narratives that continue to legitimate killing and to mire people, and places, in inequality.

Searching for Peaceful Alternatives

While academic institutions have long been associated with war there has also been an engagement with concepts of peace. The study of peace is often reactionary, occurring in response to conflict (cf. Kobayashi, 2009; Kurlansky, 2006). Both the First and Second World Wars witnessed significant—though heavily censored and muted—efforts to promote peace. During the long years of the Cold War, as the United States and the Soviet Union stockpiled enough weapons to destroy life on earth numerous times over, many full time peace departments came into existence. Within Geography this effort was picked up by Pepper and Jenkins (1985) who drew attention to “the spatial implications and human consequences of potential nuclear hostilities” (quoted in Kobayashi, 2009, 821) and envisioned a broader engagement with the study of peace.

One result of this wider academic engagement with the concept of peace has been the reframing and refocusing of the definition of peace. In most Western-based societies peace is often represented as an opposite of war. This example of binary thinking obfuscates as much as it illuminates the consequences of a killing society and operates under the same principle of binary thinking and master narratives that is essential for a war culture to proliferate. Consequently the terms of peace and war render silent any ambiguity about what constitutes a just and peaceful society (Varynen, 2004: 131). Many anti-war agendas often focus on solutions rooted in Western liberal thinking and thus preclude larger discussions about *alternatives* to our present condition (Varynen, 2004, 133). This has the material effect of creating a situation in which a largely “peaceful” society continues to produce uneven development and inequality (Heynen, 2009: 189).

Indeed, peace as the opposite of war does not necessarily entail a “just” or “benign” society. As Harris and Morrison (2003: 12) explain, a state not at war may still not be peaceful. Warless societies may exhibit, for example: high crime rates or high infant mortality rates; populations may live under oppressive conditions sanctioned by totalitarian governments; a society might suffer from a high rate of murder or high rates of domestic violence; legal regulations may restrict population movements, reproductive decisions, religious beliefs, or sexuality. Such societies, within the US and outside of it, hardly constitute a “peaceful” existence.

Consequently, a key distinction within peace studies literatures is between “positive” and “negative” connotations of peace. In its negative function, peace implies the stopping of some existing or pending violence. Negative peace building practices subsequently focus on the *prevention* of violence. Such practices may include the international deployment of peacekeepers that separate warring factions, intervention by the local police in a domestic violence situation, support of criminal proceedings that remove oppressive regimes, impositions of sanctions that punish repressive governments, or prosecution of hate crimes. Positive forms of peace follow standards of social justice and involve actions concerned with a

just and humane world (Vriens, 1997, 28). Positive peace building practices are those that *encourage* the growth of social, political and legal institutions that address the underlying causes of conflict. This often results in supporting institutions and peace processes that try to break cycles of violence and processes that try to understand the root causes of conflict by transforming social systems that are frequently connected with broader questions of social justice (Borer, 2006, 14).

The underlying tensions between positive and negative peace building practices is critical to building a more just and peaceful society. The dialectical relationship that exists between negative and positive peace building practices may both uphold and undermine one another. Harris, for example, notes the imposition of military solutions to end conflict (a negative function) may in fact exacerbate the underlying tensions which initially gave rise to the conflict. This “emphasis on peace through strength further alienate[s]” groups and contributes to long term military interventions and further legitimizes a “war culture” (Harris, 2002, 30). Ironically, positive peace efforts may not work in the absence of violence. Thus, to promote and sustain a lasting peace program, it is often necessary to combine positive and negative peace building tasks.

Efforts are Underway

Maintaining a pro-peace, anti-killing, agenda in Geography is daunting but not insurmountable. To be sure, an extensive militarism (and corresponding war culture) has permeated all levels of society (Bacevich, 2005; Turse, 2008) but more problematic is the fact that militarism remains a foundation to our academic institutions. Thus, to challenge an embedded war culture is to resist the financial seductions of militarization at a time when institutions of higher learning emphasize an entrepreneurial model of higher education related to the growth of the military-industrial-academic complex (Mitchell 2008). Consequently, as Mitchell notes, if we are truly serious about resisting a U.S. war culture, “Our target cannot be—or cannot only be—specific programs but our target must also—and *especially*—be the university itself” (Mitchell 2008). A pro-peace agenda must focus on what the idea of a just and equitable world would look like and is an approach that offers alternatives to our current reality.

A Focus on Education

Geographers have long pondered the question: “What shall we say? And to whom shall we speak?” (Abler 1987; see also Sheppard 2004; Murphy 2006). However, as Harald Bauder (2006, 673) contends, we rarely ask how and why we convey “the nature” of academic work to our students. Instead, the entire socialization process, the reproduction of academia, reflects larger power-politics. Consequently, it should come as no surprise that faculty who embody neoliberal norms will incorporate these same values in their teaching, research, and text-book development. In turn, our students learn and reproduce these norms. Curriculum is the result of choices and, as Chris Sharpe (2009: 131) writes, we too seldom ask “whose interests are being served by the geography that is taught?” Writing almost

a quarter of a century ago Ben Wisner commented that geographers, in general, have shown “little awareness of how central their knowledge and methods are to the military adventures that are becoming more and more dangerous to the human species as a whole” (1986: 213). For this reason a major concern in developing a non-killing society is through the use of critical pedagogy that destabilizes and challenges taken for granted norms that too often treat war as a natural and necessary outcome of geo-political disagreements. Writing over two decades ago Alan Jenkins (1985, 204) noted that “geographers, through their knowledge of the content and methods of the discipline, have much to offer peace education either in specialist geography courses or in a different framework.” Agnew et al.’s (2008) work evaluating the US military surge and the reduction of violence in Iraq provides an example of the kind of knowledge geographers can offer the study of justice. As Agnew and his co-authors write, the reduction of violence in certain Baghdad neighborhoods was the result of ethnic cleansing and had much less to do with the U.S. troop surge. This work is particularly important because it destabilizes taken-for-granted ideas upholding the peace/war binary that are routinely proffered in the mainstream news media and which limit discussions of alternatives to war and violence.

Efforts at education are central for constructing a pro-peace agenda in Geography for two reasons. First, education is by definition a future oriented and optimistic activity that impacts more lives than virtually anything else in which we are professionally engaged (Vriens, 1997: 27). Second, education is a political forum where (ideally) students from a diversity of backgrounds gather (Castree, 2008: 680). Pro-peace education must therefore be more than a lesson about specific peace problems, movements, or war situations. A pro-peace education seeks to transform the present human condition by challenging social structures and patterns of thought and by insisting that our current situation is not the only option (see Tyner 2009a). This approach to peace education borrows heavily from Critical Race Theory (CRT) and CRT’s focus on the disruption of master-narratives that offer neatly (re)packaged versions (and visions) of events which legitimize racism. A key feature of U.S. war culture is constructing geographic spaces that denies a complex, realistic, understanding of the world. A pro-peace agenda in Geography must actively work to shatter the complacency and shift the focus from events and places to a more active engagement with violence. It must also demonstrate how violence and other axes of domination (e.g., economic, social, and cultural) are interrelated and present different approaches to solving problems that focus on alternatives to violence, war, and death. The pursuit of these goals will better enable geographers to address social/economic inequality through the use of non-violent practices, work toward the promotion of a lasting peace, and to incorporate those practices in the classroom through a pro-peace pedagogy.

Pro-peace pedagogy, in particular, *engages* students in political discussions of social injustices (Harris, 2002). Such an approach necessarily entails a

collective, collaborative, and ongoing process that directs special attention to people's experiences and ideas, emotions and actions (Valentine, 2005). Recognizing we come from a variety of backgrounds with multiple life experiences is the first step in building a justice agenda that works to avoid the "us versus them" binary which both legitimizes the spatial logics of killing and thus hinders the development of wider justice coalitions. In addition, a pro-peace pedagogy seeks to understand and subsequently challenge oppressive structures and institutions at multiple scales. This entails a discipline-wide discussion about how our own academic institutions are complicit (or active) in practices that contribute to poverty, inequality and the continuation of a war culture. Furthermore, a pro-peace pedagogy must support and generate people's political agency by addressing "personal" concerns and taking those concerns seriously in an effort to draw out the ways they are connected to broader axes of oppression. Finally, a pro-peace pedagogy would cultivate the moral and ethical judgment needed to respond to violence and other forms of injustice through non-killing practices (Hay and Foley, 1998). It must focus on alternatives to violence and the way non-violent political movements (e.g. U.S. Civil Rights Struggle, the work of Ghandi in India) have profoundly reshaped space and place. It must also explore the interconnectedness of our human condition to show how violence meted out in "our name" affects the lives of innocents most directly, and fails to address the underlying causes of inequality that fosters violent reactions.

Larger Institutional Support

If as a discipline we are serious about building a pro-peace agenda in Geography and engaging in non-killing activities we cannot ignore our home institutions and departments. Operating within the institutional confines of our universities will not be easy. It is well documented, for example, that neoliberal trends have led to the commoditization of universities and departments, thereby ensuring that relevant decisions are based on entrepreneurial activity and market-forces (cf. Roberts 2000; Sheppard 2004; Bauder 2006). According to Harald Bauder (2006, 672), it is the university that "defines the parameters of academic practice"; these include "attracting increasing amounts of grant money, pursuing knowledge transfer to state and/or private sectors, teaching "practical" knowledge attractive to employers ... and publishing in large volumes and in highly-rated journals." The impact of these trends on the conduct of research is sadly predictable. Take for example a recent flier that crossed one of our desks. The Department of Defense was hosting a conference at a local historically black college entitled "Taking the Pentagon to the People." The academic part of the conference focused on a technical assistance workshop that promised to help junior faculty attain contracts and grants with the federal government. Since the conference was billed as a celebration of Black History Month there was also a symposium that highlighted "college-to-military success stories," the opportunities available to minority students in the U.S. military and the role the U.S. military played in desegregating Southern society. Currently defense-related contracts

associated with a rampant militarism reigns supreme. In the United States, for example, it is estimated that approximately 350 colleges and universities conduct Pentagon-funded research; universities receive more than 60 percent of defense basic research funding; and the Department of Defense is the third-largest federal funder of university research—after the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation (Turse, 2008, 35). These facts are a reminder of Chris Sharpe's (2009, 125) lamentation, that "the widely accepted view that universities should be centers of entrepreneurial activity locks researchers into patterns of behavior that reflect the priorities of corporate and government institutions."

Consequently, as neoliberal policies have transformed academic institutions over the last twenty years, the ability to attract extramural funding has become increasingly important to academic administrations—a condition that has led to the militarization of universities. The federal government has ensured a military presence on campus with the passage in 1996 of the Solomon Amendment. The Solomon Amendment allows the Secretary of Defense to refuse federal funding, including research monies unrelated to the Department of Defense, to institutions of higher learning if they deny Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) programs or bar military recruiters from appearing on campus. The current emphasis on extramural funding which provides "overhead" payments (particularly those associated with large federal grants) almost certainly guarantees a military presence on campus. Consequently, we should shift efforts from the removal of ROTC and military recruiters from our campus (a negative approach to building a more peaceful society) to a positive approach that seeks to engage with the military and works at transforming a broader culture of militarism through dialog and partnership building.

Over a decade ago Susan Roberts (2000, 241) advocated that critical scholarship entails turning a sharp eye on the institutions in which we work; she argued that the ways in which many universities' policies (or lack thereof) serve to reproduce inequitable social relations cry out for analysis and action. We echo her concerns and advocacy, and indeed hope to broaden her call to provide a critical understanding of those university policies that facilitate and augment militarism and war culture. For example, given the military presence on campus it is absolutely imperative that we advocate and insist that equal time be given to groups and organizations that support peace-building activities. Equal time can mean a variety of things but we note that *at minimum* military recruiting booths should share space with groups dedicated to peace building that offer alternative opportunities for students to serve as well as information on the cost of war.

ROTC courses on campus also need to be supplemented with courses that focus on alternatives to violence and non-violent efforts to solve conflict. Ideally, for every ROTC program a peace studies department should be included at the university, or universities should make available peace studies curricula. This curriculum must be multi-disciplinary and would incorporate (among others) the efforts of Women Studies Programs, Ethnic/Racial Studies Programs, and the many

Social Sciences and Humanities Departments, thereby facilitating a broader academic exchange of ideas as well as building a coalition of support across the university to strengthen a pro-justice agenda. By engaging in a multi-disciplinary effort, geographers and other academics studying peace would also be able to share scarce campus resources to build the educational foundation of a more peaceful and just society.

Engagement with ROTC programs and military recruiters and the initiation of peace studies curriculum is only one part of institutional discussions that should take place in an effort to build a positive peace. As Andrew Bacevich (2005, 1) explains, "Today as never before in their history Americans are enthralled with military power. The global military supremacy that the United States presently enjoys—and is bent on perpetuating—has become central to our national identity." For Chalmers Johnson, however, this is a facet of society to which most Americans are oblivious. He writes:

most Americans do not recognize—or do not want to recognize—that the United States dominates the world through its military power. Due to government secrecy, they are often ignorant of the fact that their government garrisons the globe. They do not realize that a vast network of American military bases on every continent except Antarctica actually constitutes a new form of empire (2004, 1).

Nor, for that matter, do most Americans realize how pervasive militarism has become in their everyday lives (see: Turse, 2008 and Enloe, 1990). Indeed, even as America's troops are engaged in conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan, the cultivation of a war culture, a perverse militarism, obscures the everyday realities of war. This was particularly evident in the wake of September 11 when campuses (and wider society) across the United States were awash in the trappings of American militarism. This trend has continued, as universities eager to attract students have made subtle (and not so subtle in some cases) attempts to encourage militarism in everything from the installation of video game consuls in student unions that make a mockery of killing, to fly-overs by military jets at campus sporting events-- to the point that militarism is now a near-ubiquitous feature of the university landscape.

Set within a scaled geographic awareness, militarism and the glorification of violence on our campuses skews the notion that all life is interrelated. This representation stands in stark opposition to Dr. King's argument that all humanity is linked in "an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny." As King (1986, 254) argued, "Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." Militarism on campus legitimates violence and contributes both direct and indirectly to the continuance of death and destruction on a global scale. But militarism on campus also limits the ability of engaged academics from working towards a more just and equitable society. Therefore we see the need for institutional support in terms not just of the influx of monies to establish peace departments or inter-disciplinary action.

Conclusion

On April 4, 1967, exactly one year prior to the date of his murder, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his “A Time to Break Silence” sermon at Riverside Church in New York City. In this speech Dr. King publically denounced the War in Vietnam saying “A time comes when silence is betrayal” (King, 1986, 231). King went on to explain that over the course of his public work on behalf of Civil Rights, he had begun to see the War in Vietnam and the inability of U.S. society to address entrenched poverty and racism at home as common denominators of the same problem. During the sermon Dr. King powerfully linked the growth of militarism, materialism and racism through time and space and implicated wider social, religious and academic institutions in U.S. society as being complicit in the death and destruction that was meted out every day in the name of American empire. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. understood, perhaps more than any other 20th Century social theorist that a “war culture” obscures more than just the horrors of war. Hidden are the underlying factors that perpetuate militarism. As King noted over forty years ago, “We are spending all of this money for death and destruction, and not nearly enough money for life and constructive development” (King, 1986, 67). King in his “Break the Silence” sermon promoted a vision of non-violence that included his opposition to war and recognized that “the very destructive power of modern weapons of warfare eliminates even the possibility that war may any longer serve as a negative good” (King, 1986, 253). Critical for King’s analysis was the recognition that American militarism and the promotion of “war culture” are inseparable and that the only way to establish a more just society is to directly challenge the promotion of war and violence.

In this paper we have outlined a case for a role Geography can play in destabilizing, contesting, and challenging a killing society, a “war” culture that is dedicated to inequality, death, and the dehumanizing effects of violence. We have outlined one of myriad avenues and we have called for an engagement with questions of violence that extend beyond Geography’s historic academic divisions that moves Geography beyond the university. There are many avenues that we can take to accomplish this goal, but in order for this project to be successful it is important to build a broad coalition of academics and activists who are focused on positive peace building practices that are decidedly pro-justice. In so doing, we will be able to transform and destabilize historic binaries of war versus peace that limit larger engagements with questions of justice, and build a positive and lasting peace. Our message throughout emphasizes positive peace building practices that are proactive and focused on alternatives to war and militarism. We seek not only to broaden the definition of peace to include the elimination of violence as well as viewing violence and war as tied to larger processes of economic, social and culture exclusion and exploitation, but to also engage in a wider disciplinary discussion on war, militarism and pro-peace pedagogy.

Acknowledgements

The authors are indebted to the three reviewers for timely and significant comments on this manuscript as well as Katherine McKittrick for her assistance. We would also like to thank Tiffany Muller-Myrdahl for comments on previous drafts. All omissions and errors are our own.

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