

In her essay „Peace Research: The Cult of Power“ Bernice A. Carroll criticizes orthodox peace research, especially in regard of the distorting “Cult of Power”, namely the uncritical acceptance of prevailing conceptions of power, the preoccupation with institutions, groups and persons correspondingly perceived as powerful and the identification of these institutions, groups and persons conceived to be so.

In regard to contemporary peace studies, most prominently the democratic peace proposition, this appears questionable, especially if we consider that the democratic peace resolution has been as close as anything to a natural law within the field of international relations. Prevailing concepts of power, the nation state, lie at the heart of the democratic peace proposition, as it is argued that once the world becomes democratised, perpetual peace becomes possible, as western, liberal democracies, interwoven by the forces of economic globalization, tend to treat each other by the rule of law. How convincing is the democratic peace proposition? Apparently very, but at the time of Carroll’s writing in 1972, it had not proven itself and it would be another 21 years until Francis Fukuyama declared “the end of history” within reach.

The key elements of the “end of history”, democratic, liberal nations in a globalized economy, are those parts of the peace puzzle Carroll identifies as eventually not fit to do so. For her, the root of interstate war is inequality among nations, and contemporary world affairs indicate that there is little improvement in this regard. For Carroll, the “radical school of peace research” apparently got it right, as it argues that peace is ultimately not possible within the prevailing system of nation-states and that only revolutionary changes can truly bring peace about. Obviously, the past decades of provable peace among democracies appear to counter this claim, but the United Nations Millennium Report rightfully claims that “there is no predictable way to keep the peace in this village (in regard to the “global village” metaphor)”. Exemplary, Mexican President Vincente Fox stated at the 2005 UN summit that “the survival of small islands of prosperity surrounded by seas of destitution is not viable”. It can also not be taken for granted that once environmental issues become ever more pressing, democratic nations are guaranteed to put up with regional degradation, as some will be earlier impacted than others. At some point of time, the myth of a globalized “American Dream”, if the right policies are in place and financial aid is finally sufficient to propel global growth, will be unmasked. Thus, as the world is apparently more peaceful at this stage of history, there is no guarantee that this remains so in a world of generally growing, not decreasing, inequalities between the rich North and the “developing” South. For peace research, a hypothesis appears to turn into law, but Carroll would be cautious.

For her, the world should be structured along the lines of smallness, austerity, isolation and autonomy based on self-sufficiency rather than domination. Her idea of development thus differs dramatically from what is commonly perceived as development, and appears apt for failure at some stage of history, as the globalization of an infinite hunger for the earth’s finite resources sooner or later appears to become problematic. Increased economic interdependency, inequalities and a financial dependency of the poor on the rich to chase the wrong ideals, for example Jeffrey Sachs’ ladder of modern economic growth, cannot produce perpetual peace.

Carroll appears to have a point in regard of human nature. Happiness studies clearly indicate that economic, material progress is just a part of human happiness, but a part that is appraised with godlike fascination by neo-liberal practices. The feeling of personal empowerment, security, trust in one’s fellow men and many more factors are crucial for human happiness, but widely neglected by the globalization of western self-making and neo-liberal state making. There is no reason to doubt that smaller units, whether proposed along the lines of bioregionalism or otherwise, would be better suited to advance human happiness, at least if certain thresholds of material wellbeing can be provided. Additionally, contemporary trends for bigness, whether observable in the drafting of a European Constitution or the fostering of global institutions such as the WTO, spread the sense of individual disempowerment.

People are capable of reciprocal altruism and have deep social feelings, which is why “we tip taxi-divers, vote in elections and even dive after drowning people we do not know”, Richard Layard argues, and states that Me-First attitudes may pollute the human way of life. A world system made up out of nation-states, governed by “Me-First elites” and engaged in competitive world affairs does not reflect the true nature of human beings, and thus the focus of peace research should not be how to optimize the institutions “that are”, but what kind of institutions should “be” in order to align people’s lives with what is real, not with the globalization of the unreal.

Consequently, peace-studies should focus on those factors really able to deliver perpetual peace, Carroll argues: the people. The “power of the powerless” deserves more academic attention, as they are only powerless as long as power is solely understood as the power to dominate, not as the power or competence to act. Power should be understood as independent strength, control over one’s own life, competence to deal with one’s environment and so forth, and peace studies should try to understand how people’s actions can foster a change for a peaceful future, not on how intra-national agreements or forms of “big” government create an at best temporarily stable world.

In conclusion, Bernice A. Carroll’s argument that contemporary peace studies have focused their attention on the wrong subjects seems reasonable. The democratic peace proposition appears to prove her wrong, but not if we take into account the relative short period of its application and future problems the globalization of unsustainable lifestyles may deliver. Her call for the dissolution of a world of disempowering bigness appears to deserve attention.