

Critical Theories of War and Peace

Instructor: Albert C. Cano

Course overview

Seminar in Political Theory · one two-hour seminar per week, 14 weeks

Is peace the opposite of war, or its continuation by other means? This seminar examines how political theory has defined war, peace and violence, and how critical, feminist, queer, postcolonial and psychoanalytic theories have unsettled the binary between them. We then test these theories against post-conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina, Rwanda, South Africa, Northern Ireland and Colombia, before negotiating a peace agreement ourselves.

Each week pairs theory with one short cultural or literary text: a poem, short story or chapter/episode. Literature is read as a counter-archive, a record of what peace settlements and theories of peace leave out.

Learning goals

By the end of the seminar, students will be able to:

- Explain and compare canonical and critical accounts of war, peace and violence, from Hobbes and Kant to Benjamin, Fanon, Butler and Freud.
- Apply these theories to post-conflict cases, assessing what peace agreements, transitional justice and statebuilding settle and what they defer.
- Read literary texts as evidence and argument, bringing them into dialogue with political theory.
- Negotiate a peace settlement in role and reflect critically on its trade-offs and exclusions.

Schedule

Part I. The meanings of war and peace

W1. What are war and peace? Minimalist and maximalist conceptions. Hobbes (1651) *Leviathan*, chs. 13–15, 17; Kant (1795) *Perpetual Peace*. Galtung (1969) 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research', *Journal of Peace Research Literature*: Owen (1920) '[Dulce et Decorum Est](#)'.

W2. The liberal peace: a critical history. Paris (2010) 'Saving Liberal Peacebuilding', *Review of International Studies*; Cooper, Turner and Pugh (2011) 'The End of History and the Last Liberal Peacebuilder: A Reply to Roland Paris', *Review of International Studies Literature*: Kipling (1899) '[The White Man's Burden](#)', read critically.

W3. Challenging the binary: the continuum of violence. Neocleous (2010) 'War as Peace, Peace as Pacification', *Radical Philosophy*. Tilly (2013) 'Violent and Nonviolent Trajectories in Contentious Politics', in Worcester, Bermanzohn and Ungar (eds) *Violence and Politics*; Dijkema, Anctil Avoine and Koopman (2024) 'Making Space for Peace in Contexts of "Non-war" Violence', *Geopolitics Literature*: Hughes (1951) '[Harlem](#)'.

Part II. Beyond the war/peace binary

W4. Critical theory. Cox (1981) 'Social Forces, States and World Orders', *Millennium*; Jahn (2021) 'Critical Theory in Crisis? A Reconsideration', *European Journal of International Relations*; Benjamin (1921) 'Critique of Violence'. Literature: Kafka (1915) '[Before the Law](#)'.

W5. Feminist theory. Tickner and True (2018) 'A Century of International Relations Feminism', *International Studies Quarterly*; Meger (2016) 'The Fetishization of Sexual Violence in International Security', *International Studies Quarterly Literature*: Alexievich (1985) '[The Unwomanly Face of War](#)', selected testimonies.

W6. Queer theory. Butler (2009) *Frames of War*, Introduction; Hagen, Ritholtz and Delatolla (2024) 'Introduction: Telling Queer Stories of Conflict', in *Queer Conflict Research. Literature*: Vuong (2014) '[Aubade with Burning City](#)'.

W7. Postcolonial and decolonial theories. Fanon (1961) 'Concerning Violence', in *The Wretched of the Earth*; Barkawi (2016) 'Decolonising War', *European Journal of International Security*; Sabaratnam (2020) 'Is IR Theory White?', *Millennium. Literature*: Achebe (1971) '[Civil Peace](#)'.

W8. Bottom-up approaches: hybrid, local and everyday peace, and ontological (in)security. Mac Ginty and Richmond (2013) 'The Local Turn in Peace Building', *Third World Quarterly*; Mac Ginty (2014) 'Everyday Peace', *Security Dialogue*; Rumelili (2015) *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security: Peace Anxieties*, Introduction. *Literature*: Szymborska (1993) '[The End and the Beginning](#)'.

W9. Psychoanalysis and an international political theory of violence. Freud (1933) 'Why War?'; Heath-Kelly (2018) 'Forgetting ISIS', *Critical Studies on Security*; McGowan (2022) *The Racist Fantasy*, Introduction. *Literature*: Sassoon (1918) '[Repression of War Experience](#)'.

Part III. Case studies

W10. Bosnia-Herzegovina and spectacular violence. Fujii (2021) *Show Time: The Logic and Power of Violent Display*, Introduction; Cavarero (2009) *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*, Introduction. *Literature*: Mehmedinović (1998) '[Sarajevo Blues](#)', selected poems.

W11. Rwanda, South Africa and the limits of transitional justice. Sharp (2015) 'Emancipating Transitional Justice from the Bonds of the Paradigmatic Transition', *International Journal of Transitional Justice*; Greedy and Robins (2014) 'From Transitional to Transformative Justice', *International Journal of Transitional Justice. Literature*: Krog (1998) '[Country of My Skull](#)', one chapter.

W12. Northern Ireland, Colombia and the post-conflict governance of trauma. Tomlinson (2012) 'War, Peace and Suicide: The Case of Northern Ireland', *International Sociology*; Meger and Sachseder (2020) 'Militarized Peace', *Globalizations*; Cano (2026) 'The Politics of Civilian Suicidality in Liberal Peacebuilding', *European Journal of International Relations. Literature*: Heaney (1979) '[Casualty](#)'.

W13. Simulation: negotiating the Good Friday Agreement. *The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement* (1998), Strand One and Declaration of Support; party role briefs. *Literature*: Derry Girls (2022), series finale, 'The Agreement'.

W14. Debrief and closing: is peace possible? Revisit Kant and Galtung. *Literature*: Longley (1994) '[Ceasefire](#)'.

Assessment

Component	Weight
Participation and leading one seminar discussion	20%
Five literary counter-readings as blog entries (400 words each): How does the literary text illuminate or complicate the week's theory	20%
Simulation position paper (1,000 words) and negotiation in role	20%
Final essay (4,000 words)	40%