

---

# Understanding Peace, Conflict and Security Through Alternative Narratives

---

**Òscar Mateos**

Ramon Llull University (Spain)

**Ana Isabel Rodríguez**

International University of Catalonia (Spain)



---

“We do not need alternatives so much as we need an alternative thinking of alternatives” (Santos, 2014: 70). In recent years, critical peace and security studies have called into question the conflict resolution approaches, peacebuilding initiatives and security strategies driven by major international organisations. Critical views consider that these types of approaches tend to be built from a top-down perspective, with little participation of local actors in contexts affected by armed violence, and often derive from standardized and depoliticized strategies that do not take into account the complex nature of conflict (Mac Ginty and Firchow, 2016). One of the main problems raised by the critical literature on conflict, peace and security is epistemological: the contexts in which international stakeholders intervene are usually understood on the basis of the worldviews and values of Western actors, leading to narratives that impose a certain understanding of the root causes of conflict, and hence a certain type of “solution” (Duffield, 2001; Richmond, 2005).

The construction and use of top-down narratives highlight existing power relations: the power to write, to over-write and be heard (Mac Ginty and Firchow, 2016: 309). Likewise, the act of interpretation is thus not only harmful for what counts and how it is constructed, but also for what does not count, for everything that omits and does not give voice (the silences), as well as for its inability or unwillingness to incorporate voices from different worldviews that question the dominant thinking. In short, this “epistemic violence” referred to by authors such as Gayatri Spivak and Boaventura de Sousa Santos (the latter through the idea of “epistemicide”) highlights the problematic nature of this approach and its insufficiency to explain reality to us.

Narrative analysis helps explain how marginalized people remain marginalized and at the same time it allows for conflict transformation, helping people to renegotiate their social positions and reclaim lost agency (Federman, 2016). Post-colonial, feminist and post-structuralist scholars, from critical peace studies and critical security schools, have developed approaches that challenge, deconstruct

and problematise the existence of these dominant narratives in the understanding of current conflicts and in turn surface alternative ways of thinking and doing peace and security.

## THE CONTENTS OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

This monograph gathers contributions that look into those alternative ways of thinking and knowing peace, conflict, and security by making room for situated knowledge and embodied experiences of these phenomena.

Gathering local voices and interpretations of the Mozambique armed conflict, **Maria Paula Meneses** delves into the questioning of dominant narratives of the conflict traversed by Western worldviews and interests. The author proposes to decolonize the field of peace and conflict studies that for so long has silenced local knowledge and practices, neglecting the colonial root causes of many armed conflicts. Expanding her Epistemologies of the South project developed along with Boaventura de Sousa Santos, this article is another contribution to cognitive justice of international readings of the war.

Also within the postcolonial readings of war, **Zubairu Wai** invites us to deconstruct and question the dominant narratives that have tried to explain armed conflicts in the post-Cold War context. To do so, he dissects certain historical moments that, since the 1950s, have shaped the context in which the Western world has been weaving its particular way of understanding conflicts in the global South as pathological and internalised events that legitimise intervention techniques and strategies. In his text, the author suggests that we are not dealing with impartial or disinterested acts of knowledge production, but rather that they are linked to political and ideological agendas.

Building upon the situated reading of conflicts, **Claudia Saba** analyzes a particular mediatic case that took place during the May 2021 war between Israel and the Palestinians as a proxy to challenge the dominant narratives that portray as a conflict the structural, cultural and physical violence Palestinians live through, instead of as a struggle of liberation against colonialism. Her article also shows how this kind of narrative serves to materialize the interests of the hegemonic power by taking for granted that the conflict and the so-called “Oslo peace process” is between equal parties, instead between occupier and occupied. These counter-hegemonic narratives that start to hit on social media against the public discourse of Western media challenge extant modes of knowledge production.

In the same vein, **Diana Paola Garcés-Amaya** offers an ethnographic account of the interpretations and lived experiences of Amazonian women of the Colombian armed conflict. Through the idea of the intrinsic relationship between body-territory-identity-spirituality, the autochthonous women offer an understanding of the conflict that surpasses the institutional and anthropocentric conceptions of violence, and provide a relational and systemic approach to it that displays a new array of possibilities when thinking about peace.

Along with narratives per se, practices are also deconstructed in the critical literature and read as textual objects. The way subaltern subjects perform can

be analyzed as vehicles of their counter-narratives, as **Stephen Goulding and Amy McCroy** propose in their study of the meaning of riots in post-conflict Northern Ireland. The framing analysis applied to the meaning of these street mobilizations reveals that beyond the loyalist/nationalist identity clash, these young people are conveying their disenfranchised and marginalised claims by the political system.

Even commercial movies such as Spike Lee's *Inside Man* may become alternative ways of challenging dominant discourses. As **Antoni Castells-Talens** shows in his analysis of the masterpiece, the plot defies the US security narrative imposed after the 9/11 attacks that allow for the limitation of civil rights and the military interventions of Iraq and Afghanistan. The movie criticizes the narrative of patriotism, sacrifice, faith, redemption and courage that underlay the US narrative of the War on Terror in a subtle way, criticizing the system from within the system.

In short, this set of articles is a valuable contribution to a central aspect of conflict transformation, namely the deconstruction of narratives and discourses that have tended to simplify its understanding, and thus negatively condition any truly transformative strategy.

---

## References

Duffield, Mark (2001). "Governing the Borderlands: Decoding the Power of Aid". *Disasters*. Vol. 25(4), pp. 308-320.

Federman, Sarah (2016). "Narratives Approaches to Understanding and Responding to Conflict". *The International Journal of Conflict Engagement and Resolution*. Vol. 4(2), pp. 154-171.

Mac Ginty, Roger and Firchow, Pamina (2016). "Top-down and Bottom-up Narratives of Peace and Conflict". *Politics*. Vol. 36(3), pp. 308-323.

Richmond, Olivier P. (2005). *The Transformation of Peace*. Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan.

Santos, Boaventura de Sousa (2014). "Más allá del pensamiento abismal: De las líneas globales a una ecología de saberes". In: Santos, Boaventura de Sousa and Menezes, Maria Paula. *Epistemologías del Sur. Perspectivas*. Madrid: Akal.

Shapiro, Michael J. (1992). *Reading the Postmodern Polity: Political Theory As Textual Practice*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.