

THE POWER OF IMAGES

By Johan Galtung, professor, World Politics of Peace and War, Princeton University, deeply impressed by the message contained in The Promise of World Peace.

I would like - as a student of peace for many years - to explore three points that seem to me to be of particular significance. In a sense they all relate to our capacity for visioning, for creating images of a peaceful world. This is also a key characteristic of the Baha'i faith: you have to have an image of the desirable state of affairs, so clear, so commanding that the image itself becomes a live force. A part of our predicament is that only in short periods during and right after wars are the images of peace sufficiently commanding. In more peaceful periods, it is as if we are yearning for war, producing images filled with strife and competition and selfishness, even elevating such characteristics to the status of "law of human nature."

More precisely, I am thinking of three characteristic themes from what often refers to itself as the "realism" school in social science in general, and policy sciences in particular: peace through capacity to retaliate; development through trade according to comparative advantages and evolution through self-interest and struggle for survival. Needless to say, such themes will tend to be the credo of men more than women, of the middle-aged more than the old, of the powerful and privileged more than the powerless and discriminated, of the Occident more than the Orient. But the themes are very pervasive in this age which has taken on materialist individualism as its major faith.

A capacity to retaliate is based on offensive arms or weapons systems: long range systems with colossal impact areas and destructive potential. A major characteristic of such arms is that they can also be used for an attack. Even if the intention is only to use them for a second strike, to stick to that jargon, how can the adversary know that they may not one day be used for a first strike? Answer: he cannot. He knows that intentions come and go, the capability remains. Either one can launch an attack, successful or not, or one cannot. So better be prepared: offensive capability breeds offensive capability. And at that point we get not only an arms race in increasingly offensive weaponry, a temptation to launch a first strike to win, and a temptation to launch a first strike to pre-empt, to prevent the other side at least from winning through a first strike. In short, the situation in which we have been since 1945 in the "East-West Conflict." And the people trying to assure us that there is somewhere a stable peace that can be obtained through mutual and balanced and verifiable threats carry a considerable part of the responsibility for the predicament in which we find ourselves.

The same applies to the people - many of them economists of high repute rather than "realists" - who design trade patterns according to the "law of comparative advantages," and have the courage to refer to the result as "development." If the parties to trade are at roughly speaking the same level of technical-economic development this doctrine is not so objectionable. But if one is a sophisticated industrialized nation and the other essentially a provider of some raw commodity, the former will learn from the challenges in processing, developing - in a very real way - the raw materials, and the latter will forgo such challenges to develop. A theory telling us that this solution is "optimal" because the former has so much capital and know-how, and the latter so much (cheap) labor and nature, gives a good formula for exploitation, and the results are highly visible both at the world and national levels of human geography. Today it is even getting worse with the most developed countries exporting ecological degradation in the form of acid rain, polluted rivers and oceans, polluting factories, dioxins and radioactive waste for burial in poor countries with elites eager to make a quick profit in hard currency. The relationship is so flagrantly inequitable. But that is obvious, and not my main point. My main point is the way in which this structurally built-in egotism is legitimized by that kind of theorizing as also being in the interest of the victims.

The crowning achievement of this kind of thinking is the doctrine of national self-interest. That there is a selfish, competitive strain in individuals and nations alike, and that this may express itself in the direct violence released through offensive weaponry and the structural violence built into lopsided trade relations within and between countries -- all this we know. Under certain conditions the opposite comes out, altruism rather than egotism, cooperation rather than conflict and competition. Our task is to understand those conditions, not to proclaim that human behavior under adverse conditions is normal, and elevate that finding to a law of nature. In a jungle it is probable that humans behave like one is supposed to behave in a jungle -- although even the most elementary knowledge of biology in general and zoology in particular will inform us that in the struggle for survival there is cooperation as well as conflict, and that the darwinist formula should make us look for the cooperative elements at least as much as the competitive and conflict-loaded themes.

Let me finish on that note, simply by saying that some of the struggle for peace will have to take place in the corridors of social science. Inspired by a quest for a shared spirituality we have to struggle for better social sciences in general, and policy and peace sciences in particular.