

A working orientation for The Future of Peace

MICHELLE ANDERSON



Published August 2026 by World Peace Foundation
at The Fletcher School, Tufts University

Cover illustration: Dedraw Studio, Adobe Stock Images

The World Peace Foundation was established by Edwin Ginn, a Boston-based publisher of educational texts and an advocate for international peace. Initially created as the International School of Peace on July 12, 1910, the WPF was tasked with educating a global audience about “the waste and destructiveness of war and of preparation for war, its evil effects on present social conditions and on the well-being of future generations.” In the language of its time, the mandate also included promoting “international justice and the brotherhood of man... peace and goodwill among all mankind.”

Today, WPF remains committed to the vision of collective action and nonviolence. It also seeks to learn from the limitations of the past by fostering more inclusive approaches to achieving and sustaining peace. Through justice-informed research, we aim to change public conversations on pressing issues related to envisioning, creating and sustaining nonviolent futures.

The WPF is solely affiliated with the Fletcher School of Global Affairs at Tufts University.

Michelle E. Anderson leads the Future of Peace program at the World Peace Foundation. Her interdisciplinary background spans peace and conflict studies, human rights, media studies, and global health, with research and professional experience across multiple regions and contexts, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Her current research interests include the conditions that make more peaceful futures possible, the relationship between political imagination and social transformation, and how concepts of accountability and responsibility are constructed across social and political life.

Learn more about **The Future of Peace Program** at our website: **worldpeacefoundation.org**

“What do you mean by peace?”

One of my first conversations after joining the World Peace Foundation to lead the Future of Peace program began with this question. As part of the program’s early development, we had a number of exploratory conversations with people across our networks to better understand how different individuals, institutions, and disciplines are making sense of a rapidly changing world, the challenges it poses to existing approaches to peace, and the possibilities it may create for new ones.

I had reached out to a former professor who is a scholar of peace and conflict studies to hear how he is thinking about the future in his work, particularly from his lens of being situated in a ‘post-conflict’ context. Before we could talk about the future, he stopped me and raised something that I perhaps should have started with— *what do you mean by peace?*

This exchange highlighted a challenge that sits at the core of the Future of Peace program. Before we can ask meaningful questions about the future of peace, we must first acknowledge that peace itself is not a settled concept— nor will it ever be. How people understand “peace” is informed by a range of factors, including different historical experiences, political projects, disciplinary traditions, and scales of analysis. While not a problem in and of itself, this does present a practical challenge. Kenneth Boulding observed this difficulty in 1978 when he said, “peace is a word of so many meanings that one hesitates to use it for fear of being misunderstood.”¹ If people are working from fundamentally different assumptions about what peace means without at least acknowledging that disjuncture, it becomes difficult to have meaningful conversations about what conditions support or threaten peace, or what it might take to build more peaceful futures.

This challenge is particularly salient for a program situated within the World Peace Foundation; yet, neither the organization nor this program can— or should— assume a shared starting point for thinking about peace. This essay does not attempt to set out a new definition of peace, nor choose an existing one to adopt and apply. Instead, it explores schools of thought that have shaped scholarship and practice, why differences matter, and which conceptual frameworks might offer useful guardrails for a program concerned with the future of peace.

The World Peace Foundation’s Peace

The World Peace Foundation (WPF) was founded in 1910 by the publisher and philanthropist Edwin Ginn, emerging from a concern with the devastation of war and a desire to prevent

1 Kenneth E. Boulding, *Stable Peace* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978), 3.

future armed conflict.² Yet from the beginning, its ambitions extended beyond simply ending and preventing war. The foundation's original mission included educating the public about "the waste and destructiveness of war and of preparation for war, its evil effects on present social conditions and on the well-being of future generations," as well as encouraging international justice and promote peace and goodwill "by every practical means."³ Rather than defining peace itself, these commitments articulated the kinds of efforts the foundation believed were necessary to pursue it.

It is clear that the WPF was shaped by the political and intellectual context of the early twentieth century.⁴ As historian Peter Filene observes, many early WPF leaders approached international affairs through a distinctly Progressive lens, emphasizing education, public engagement, rational problem-solving, and the development of institutions capable of addressing disputes without resorting to force.⁵ Within this worldview, peace was something that could be cultivated through cooperation, international law, arbitration, and social progress. While aspects of that vision may appear optimistic from a contemporary perspective, they were products of their historical moment. More enduring, however, is the way WPF's early leadership approached peace not as a self-evident or singular concept, but as something connected to a wider set of questions about how social and political life should be organized.

WPF's understanding of peace emerged within— and has since contributed to— a much longer conversation about what peace is, why it matters, and how it might be achieved. It is to some of the major strands of that conversation that we now turn.

The problem of definition

Any attempt to define peace quickly encounters a practical challenge: there is no obvious or "correct" place to begin. One could (and many have) trace the concept through centuries of philosophical, religious, legal, and political thought; focus on the emergence of peace studies as a distinct interdisciplinary field; or review contemporary scholarship across disciplines as diverse as political science, sociology, psychology, education, international relations, or history. Each approach would produce a different account of what peace means and how it has been understood. Even limiting the discussion to contemporary peace research reveals an enormous and

2 World Peace Foundation, "Our Story," <https://worldpeacefoundation.org/our-story/>.

3 Peter Filene, "The World Peace Foundation and Progressivism, 1910–1918," *The New England Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (1963): 484–91.

4 These ideas were part of a broader Progressive-era engagement with peace. For example, in *Newer Ideals of Peace* (1907), Jane Addams connected opposition to war with questions of democracy, social reform, and human welfare. Many of these institutional ambitions were eventually realized through institutions such as the League of Nations (1920), the Permanent Court of International Justice (1922; succeeded by the International Court of Justice in 1945), and the United Nations (1945).

5 Filene, "The World Peace Foundation and Progressivism."

still expanding body of work.⁶ Unsurprisingly, there is no shortage of attempts to define peace, nor any clear consensus around what such a definition should contain. Any effort to summarize this conversation is therefore partial at best.

The proliferation of modifiers attached to the word peace may itself be revealing. Contemporary scholarship and practice refer not only to peace, but to positive peace, negative peace, just peace, quality peace, sustainable peace, feminist peace, democratic peace, relational peace, everyday peace, cyber peace, economic peace, and myriad others. Rather than converging around a single definition, scholars and practitioners continue to find it necessary to qualify what kind of peace they mean. The resulting landscape is rich but also suggests persistent dissatisfaction with existing definitions and a recurring effort to capture dimensions of peace that earlier formulations left unexplored or kept too separate.

Part of the challenge is that peace is often approached indirectly. Some writers understand peace through related concepts such as justice, security, nonviolence, reconciliation, coexistence, or human flourishing. Others define peace through its opposite, conceptualizing it primarily as the absence of war, conflict, or violence. Still others focus on particular scales or domains, from interpersonal relationships and communities to states, international systems, and the world as a whole. In many cases, these approaches are not competing answers to the same question so much as attempts to describe different dimensions of a complex phenomenon.

Many scholars have attempted to bring greater coherence to this landscape.⁷ One notable effort is *The Peace Continuum*, in which Christian Davenport, Erik Melander, and Patrick M. Regan review a wide range of definitions of peace before proposing their own approaches to conceptualizing and measuring it. Acknowledging from the outset that no review could ever be exhaustive, they instead seek to identify recurring patterns across influential definitions drawn from different disciplines, time periods, and intellectual traditions. Particularly useful is their effort to distinguish between what appears consistently across definitions and what varies. Surveying twenty-three influential conceptualizations of peace, they argue that the absence of violence constitutes the “lowest common denominator” of peace definitions and is the only element that appears with near-universal consistency. Beyond this common core, however, definitions vary

6 For context, at the time of writing, a Google Scholar search for “peace” AND (“define” OR “definition”) returned approximately 3.7 million results; restricting the search to publications from the year 2000 onward still returned approximately 2.1 million. While not all of these results attempt to define peace, a review of the first twenty pages suggested that a substantial proportion were sufficiently relevant that they might warrant consideration in a systematic review. I stopped at that point: the unwieldiness of the results itself illustrates the scale of the literature, while further refining the search through additional terms or exclusions would introduce choices about what kinds of definitions and approaches to peace should count.

7 See Anatol Rapoport, *Peace: An Idea Whose Time Has Come* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992); David J. Dunn, *The First Fifty Years of Peace Research: A Survey and Interpretation* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005); Nils Petter Gleditsch, Jonas Nordkvelle, and Håvard Strand, “Peace Research—Just the Study of War?” *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 2 (2014): 145–58.

considerably in what else they understand peace to require. Across the literature they review, recurring elements include trust and harmonious relationships; mechanisms for resolving conflict; justice and the rule of law; political freedom and socioeconomic opportunity; human rights; reconciliation and social integration; and order.⁸

This synthesis is useful because it demonstrates that many disagreements about peace are not disagreements over whether violence matters, but over what else peace requires beyond the absence of violence. It also provides a helpful point of reference for understanding the sheer breadth of concepts that have become associated with peace, illustrating how seemingly divergent approaches may capture different, though sometimes overlapping, aspects of the same phenomenon. Beyond providing a deft overview of an unwieldy body of work, it also highlights a recurring tension that runs through many attempts to define peace: definitions that are narrow enough to be clear and measurable often exclude social, relational, and experiential dimensions of peace that others consider essential, while definitions that are broad enough to capture those dimensions can become so expansive that they lose analytical usefulness. An additional risk is that privileging any single dimension of peace can legitimize arrangements that appear peaceful according to that measure, while producing or sustaining violence, injustice, or coercion in other forms. Together, these tensions help explain why debates over peace persist. The challenge is not merely the abundance of definitions, but that many definitions are attempting to describe different dimensions of a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. Rather than attempting to resolve these debates, the following sections trace several recurring contours in how peace has been understood and conceptualized.

Contours and questions within the peace debate

There are many ways to organize the vast literature on peace, and any attempt to do so inevitably obscures as much as it reveals. The discussion that follows is therefore neither a taxonomy nor a comprehensive review of peace scholarship. Many thinkers could appear across several of the themes discussed here, just as many definitions incorporate elements of multiple traditions at once. Rather than seeking to classify the field, this section highlights several recurring contours and debates that help illuminate why peace has proven so difficult to define and how different understandings of peace have developed over time.

What lies beyond the absence of violence?

As noted above, the most common approach to defining peace is through its relation to violence. At its most basic, this understanding appears in political and legal traditions that treat peace as the condition that exists when organized violence is absent. Historical examples such as the *Pax Romana* illustrate both this logic and its limits. In this, peace was understood to exist because

⁸ Christian Davenport, Erik Melander, and Patrick M. Regan, *The Peace Continuum: What It Is and How to Study It* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 47.

large-scale violence had been suppressed and political order maintained; however, it was ultimately a conqueror's peace, established through military domination and dependent upon the capacity to suppress challenges to imperial rule. A similar logic has also been identified in more contemporary notions such as the *Pax Americana*, in which relative international stability is associated with the political, economic, and military predominance of the United States.⁹ As many scholars have argued, these (and other) examples illustrate the limitation of defining peace through the absence of organized violence alone, as absence cannot tell us about the character of the social or political order that exists in its place.

Attempts to address this limitation are central to understanding the development of modern peace research. Johan Galtung's work was particularly influential in this regard; in his landmark 1969 essay "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research", he offered the terms "negative peace" to refer to the absence of direct violence, and "positive peace" (building on the earlier work of Jane Addams¹⁰) to encompass not only the absence of direct violence but also the absence of structural violence and the presence of conditions that support human flourishing.¹¹ Although many earlier thinkers had linked peace to justice, social order, or human flourishing, Galtung's distinction between negative and positive peace provided an influential vocabulary for articulating these concerns.

Many other scholars have sought to answer the same underlying question; if peace is more than the absence of violence, what else should it encompass? For example, Kenneth Boulding offered the concept of "stable peace," which he defines as "a situation in which the probability of war is so small that it does not really enter into the calculations of any of the people involved."¹² Others emphasize the fulfillment of basic human needs,¹³ the legitimacy and stability of political institutions ("quality peace")¹⁴, or the transformation of relationships over time (Curle and later Lederach)¹⁵. Despite their differences, these approaches share the grounding assumption that stopping and preventing violence is essential, but understanding peace also requires asking what enables peaceful coexistence to emerge and endure. Their answers variously emphasize institutions, relationships, human needs, social norms, or political arrangements as central to making peace possible.

9 Mark Neocleous, *War Power, Police Power* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 34.

10 Jane Addams, *Newer Ideals of Peace* (New York: Macmillan, 1907).

11 Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167–91.

12 Boulding, *Stable Peace*, 13.

13 John W. Burton, *Deviance, Terrorism and War: The Process of Solving Unsolved Social and Political Problems* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979).

14 Peter Wallensteen, *Quality Peace: Peacebuilding, Victory, and World Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Gary Goertz, Paul F. Diehl, and Alexandru Balas, *The Puzzle of Peace: The Evolution of Peace in the International System* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

15 Adam Curle, *Making Peace* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1971); John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997); John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

How does justice shape peace?

Among the many concepts proposed to explain what peace requires beyond the absence of violence, justice has proven one of the most enduring and influential. The slogan “No justice, no peace,” popularized during struggles for racial justice in the United States¹⁶ and subsequently adopted by movements protesting police violence, state repression, and inequality around the world, captures a widely held intuition that peace without justice is incomplete, unstable, or perhaps not peace at all.

Justice, however, is no less contested than peace itself. Different traditions understand justice in different ways. Some focus on the fair distribution of rights, resources, and opportunities (often described as distributive justice). Others prioritize recognition and equal dignity, meaningful participation in political life, accountability for wrongdoing, or the repair of historical harms. Although these traditions differ considerably, they share the premise that people can experience profound harm even in the absence of direct physical violence. A society may be free from war while remaining unequal, exclusionary, or oppressive; the central question therefore becomes whether such conditions are compatible with peace.

The relationship between peace and justice has deep intellectual roots, even before peace studies emerged as a distinct field. In *Newer Ideals of Peace* (1907), Jane Addams argued that lasting peace required democratic participation, social reform, and attention to the everyday conditions shaping people’s lives.¹⁷ Pitirim Sorokin similarly emphasized (first in 1948 and in subsequent writings) that altruism, social integration, and the cultivation of social relationships were necessary for sustaining peaceful coexistence.¹⁸ Johan Galtung’s later contribution was to place these concerns within a broader theory of violence; in “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research” (1969), he argued that violence need not be direct to be real, and that political, economic, and social arrangements may systematically prevent individuals and communities from meeting their basic needs or realizing their potential, producing what he termed structural violence.¹⁹ In this formulation, injustice is no longer understood simply as a cause or consequence of violence;

16 The relationship between peace and justice long predates the popularization of the slogan itself. In a 1967 petition to the United Nations, for example, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, “In the final analysis, there can be no peace without justice, and there can be no justice without peace.” The slogan “No justice, no peace” became widely associated with racial justice activism in the United States during the late twentieth century and has since been adopted by social movements around the world. It is important to note, however, that the slogan functions differently in activist contexts than in much of the peace studies literature. Within activism, it generally serves as a normative and political demand that justice is a prerequisite for peace, whereas within peace research the relationship between peace and justice has been theorized in a wider variety of ways, including as overlapping, mutually constitutive, sequential, or analytically distinct concepts (see Vivienne Jabri, “‘No Justice, No Peace’: The Political in Two Mutually Constitutive Concepts,” *Peacebuilding* (2025): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2025.2535132>.)

17 Jane Addams, *Newer Ideals of Peace* (New York: Macmillan, 1907).

18 Pitirim A. Sorokin, *The Reconstruction of Humanity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1948). See also Pitirim A. Sorokin, *The Ways and Power of Love: Types, Factors, and Techniques of Moral Transformation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1954).

19 Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,” *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167–91, 183.

it can itself constitute a form of violence.²⁰ This conceptual move fundamentally expanded the scope of peace research by directing attention toward inequality, exclusion, discrimination, and the structural conditions shaping people's lives long after armed conflict has ended, as well as in contexts where such conflict may never have occurred.

Galtung's concept of structural violence also created space for subsequent scholars to offer increasingly differentiated accounts of how violence and injustice are produced. Some distinguish structural violence from more explicitly institutionalized forms of violence, directing attention to the ways laws, bureaucracies, and governance arrangements themselves may reproduce exclusion or unequal outcomes rooted in colonial legacies, racial and gender hierarchies, and economic relations.²¹ Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality to describe how multiple systems of power, including race, gender, class, and other forms of inequality, interact to produce distinct experiences of discrimination, exclusion, and injustice, often in ways that reinforce one another.²² Peace and conflict scholars have drawn on this framework to examine how intersecting forms of inequality shape experiences of violence, security, justice, and peace.²³ These contributions broaden the range of social, political, and institutional arrangements relevant to thinking about peace, while also raising new questions about which forms of harm it encompasses and where its conceptual boundaries should be drawn.

The shift toward thinking about broader systems of harm also raises the question, whose understandings of justice are reflected in dominant conceptions of peace? Feminist scholarship has long argued that conventional understandings of peace frequently privilege formal political settlements while overlooking gendered violence, unequal distribution of care work, and everyday forms of insecurity.²⁴ Although postcolonial, decolonial, and anticolonial scholarship encompasses diverse and sometimes divergent perspectives, these approaches share a critique of internationally promoted conceptions of justice for reproducing colonial assumptions, power structures, and racial hierarchies, even when framed in the language of peace, democracy, or human rights.²⁵ Collectively, these critiques suggest that disagreements over justice are rarely

20 The concept of structural violence emerged amid wider debates in the 1960s over colonialism, oppression, and the legitimacy of revolutionary violence. These debates included Frantz Fanon's account of violence in anticolonial struggle, Jean-Paul Sartre's influential engagement with Fanon's argument, and Hannah Arendt's subsequent critique of contemporary theories of revolutionary violence.

21 See Julie A. Hawke, "Institutional Violence: A Missing Link in Peace Studies," *Journal of Global Security Studies* 11, no. 2 (2026), <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogag010>.

22 Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989): 139–67.

23 Elena B. Stavrevska and Sarah Smith, "Intersectionality and Peace," in *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Peace and Conflict Studies*, ed. Oliver P. Richmond and Gëzim Visoka (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-11795-5_120-1.

24 See Tarja Väyrynen, Swati Parashar, Élise Féron, and Catia Cecilia Confortini, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Feminist Peace Research* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2021).

25 See Vivienne Jabri, "Post-Colonialism: A Post-Colonial Perspective on Peacebuilding," in *The Palgrave*

disagreements over abstract principles alone; they also concern whose experiences, histories, and political priorities become visible within dominant understandings of peace.

These concerns can be seen reflected within many critiques of liberal peacebuilding, where questions about justice become questions about how peace is pursued in practice. For example, Oliver Richmond's extensive body of work argues that dominant international models for liberal peacebuilding privilege institutional stability while giving inadequate attention to local agency, everyday political life, and alternative understandings of peace.²⁶ Meera Sabaratnam's decolonial scholarship turns specifically to peacebuilding interventions, and argues that these may still reproduce colonial relationships of power.²⁷ These critiques, along with many others, suggest that decisions about what kinds of institutions to build, whose knowledge to prioritize, and what forms of order to pursue, all reflect and produce particular understandings of justice, peace, and their relationship to one another.

Underlying many of these developments is a concern with power. Understanding violence beyond direct physical harm raises questions not only about what counts as violence, but about the social and political arrangements through which it is produced and sustained. Attending to these arrangements also makes clear that peace itself cannot be understood as politically neutral. Although not writing as a peace theorist, Michel Foucault's analyses of power offered an influential account of how power operates throughout everyday social and institutional life rather than residing solely within formal political authority.²⁸ His work would later influence critical peace scholarship, particularly critiques of liberal peacebuilding that examined how internationally promoted models of peace themselves operate through relations of power.

Rather than treating peace simply as the opposite of violence or justice as a self-evident component of peace, these debates direct attention to the political, institutional, and social arrangements and forms of power through which both peace and justice are produced, governed, and

Handbook of Disciplinary and Regional Approaches to Peace, ed. Oliver P. Richmond, Sandra Pogodda, and Jasmin Ramović (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-40761-0_12; David Golding and Victoria C. Fontan, "Decolonizing Peace: Possibilities for Pluriversality," in *The SAGE Handbook of Peace and Conflict Studies*, ed. Maia Carter Hallward, Ji Eun Kim, Cécile Mouly, Timothy Seidel, and Zubairu Wai (London: SAGE, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781036204440.n22>; Kristine Andra Avram, Susanne Buckley-Zistel, and Alexandra Engelsdorfer, "Challenging Peacebuilding from a Postcolonial Perspective," in *The Rowman & Littlefield Handbook of Peace and Conflict Studies: Perspectives from the Global South*, ed. O. P. Richmond et al. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2024).

26 Oliver P. Richmond, *The Transformation of Peace* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Oliver P. Richmond, *A Post-Liberal Peace* (London: Routledge, 2011).

27 Meera Sabaratnam, *Decolonising Intervention: International Statebuilding in Mozambique* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017).

28 See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 92–96.

contested. The question is therefore no longer simply whether justice matters for peace, but how different understandings of justice impact different understandings of peace, what forms of harm are considered relevant, and whose experiences and political priorities become visible within those definitions. Debates about justice thus become inseparable from debates about the kinds of peace that are possible, desirable, and worth pursuing.

What kind of phenomenon is peace?

A second area of debate concerns not only what peace consists of, but what kind of phenomenon it is. One way of reading these different approaches is through the role that time plays within them. Is peace a condition that can be achieved and maintained? Is it a process through which societies move? Or is it a quality of social and political life that is continuously constituted through relationships? The answers to these questions influence not only how peace is understood, but also how it is studied, pursued, and evaluated.

Many approaches treat peace as a condition or state of being. Hedley Bull's conception of international order, for example, focuses on the maintenance of a stable society of states capable of managing conflict without descending into war.²⁹ John Burton's human needs theory similarly describes peace as a condition in which fundamental human needs are fulfilled.³⁰ In different ways, these approaches ask what characteristics a peaceful society or international system must possess. Peace is understood as a state of affairs that can be described, assessed, and, at least in principle, sustained over time.

Certainly, conceiving peace as a condition offers the analytical advantage of providing a benchmark against which societies or political orders can be assessed and compared. Much empirical research on peace, stability, or peacefulness implicitly relies on this logic by seeking to identify the characteristics associated with more or less peaceful conditions.³¹ However, conceiving peace as a condition assumes that peace exists as a sufficiently bounded state that can be somewhat objectively identified. What counts as a sufficiently peaceful condition? Who determines when that condition has been achieved? And can a single conception of such a condition hold across different societies, historical moments, or groups whose experiences of the same political order may differ substantially?

Others instead emphasize peace as a process. In its broadest sense, this shifts attention from peace as a condition that exists at a particular moment toward the pathways through which

29 Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1977).

30 John W. Burton, *Deviance, Terrorism and War: The Process of Solving Unsolved Social and Political Problems* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979).

31 A key effort to measure peace is the Institute for Economics and Peace's annual *Global Peace Index*, which ranks countries according to a composite set of indicators designed to measure relative levels of peacefulness. See Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Peace Index* (Sydney: Institute for Economics and Peace, annual), <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/research/measuring-peace/>.

more peaceful conditions are pursued and developed over time. Within peacebuilding scholarship and practice, this perspective has been particularly influential in thinking about transitions from conflict. One foundational example of this is Galtung's distinction between peacekeeping, peacemaking, and peacebuilding. Developed in relation to the specific context of organized armed conflict, the framework distinguishes complementary and sometimes overlapping forms of intervention. Peacekeeping seeks to halt direct violence, peacemaking facilitates negotiated settlements, and peacebuilding takes a longer-term approach to addressing the structural conditions that underlie conflict by strengthening institutions, reducing inequality, and fostering the conditions for positive peace. Together, these approaches conceptualize peace not as a static end state, but as something pursued through different forms of action over time.³²

Even so, conceptualizing peace as a process carries assumptions of its own. One of the most significant is that movement through a particular process can universally shift any society toward peace. Process-oriented approaches tend to emphasize the pathways through which violence is transformed, institutions strengthened, and reconciliation pursued; however, following these processes does not guarantee a peaceful outcome, nor that any resulting peace will be durable, broadly accepted, or experienced as legitimate by those living within it. While such processes may reduce the likelihood of current or near-future violence, they often assume that societies move toward peace through similar pathways and sequences. In practice, however, peace processes are rarely (if ever) linear, unfold differently across contexts, and may be experienced or accepted very differently by those involved, leaving unresolved questions about what constitutes peace and whose interests the resulting order ultimately serves.

A third perspective similarly rejects the idea of peace as a static condition, but instead locates its dynamism in relationships rather than in a pathway through which peace is progressively achieved. Relational approaches ask how peace is constituted through the ongoing relationships among individuals, communities, and political actors. Although writing outside the field of peace studies, Emmanuel Levinas argued in *Totality and Infinity* (1961) that ethics begins in responsibility to the Other, a perspective that later scholars have drawn upon to conceptualize peace as grounded in human relationships rather than political arrangements.³³ A similar relational orientation can be seen within early peace studies. Writing in 1971, Adam Curle emphasized communication and relationships as central to transforming conflict, arguing that peace depends upon the capacity of individuals and communities to develop more constructive forms of engagement.³⁴

32 Johan Galtung, "Three Approaches to Peace: Peacekeeping, Peacemaking, and Peacebuilding," in *Peace, War and Defense: Essays in Peace Research*, vol. 2 (Copenhagen: Christian Ejlertsen, 1976), 292–304.

33 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

34 Curle, *Making Peace*.

By the mid-1990s, John Paul Lederach's work placed relationships at the center of peacebuilding.³⁵ Rejecting the idea that peace could be secured through agreements or institutions alone, he argued that sustainable peace depends upon the continual work of building, repairing, and sustaining relationships across divided societies. His work on reconciliation and later the "moral imagination" shifted attention toward the relational infrastructure through which societies learn to live with conflict constructively.³⁶ In 2000, Elise Boulding likewise emphasized that such relationships are sustained through cultures of peace, made up of the social norms, values, and collective imaginaries that make peaceful relationships possible and continually reproduce them over time.³⁷ Roger Mac Ginty's concept of everyday peace, which he first wrote about in 2014, further developed this relational perspective by examining the informal practices through which ordinary people negotiate difference, accommodate tensions, and reduce the likelihood of violence despite ongoing divisions.³⁸ More recently, Christian Davenport argued that peace is best understood through political mutuality, which he defines as the extent to which individuals and groups recognize one another as belonging to a shared political community characterized by mutual respect, inclusion, and common purpose.³⁹ Peace from these perspectives is neither simply a condition nor a process leading toward one, but a quality of social and political life that is continually constituted through relationships.

These different orientations each have implications. If peace is understood primarily as a condition, attention naturally turns toward the characteristics of societies, institutions, or political orders associated with peaceful outcomes. If peace is understood as a process, attention shifts toward the pathways through which violence is transformed and reconciliation pursued. If peace is understood as relational, the focus moves to the everyday interactions, social practices, and forms of mutual recognition through which peace (or violence) is continually produced and reproduced. However, these perspectives need not be understood as competing or mutually exclusive. While there are certainly uses and critiques available for each approach, they can usefully illuminate different dimensions of peace and direct attention toward different sites of inquiry and intervention.

The relative prominence of these perspectives has also shifted over time, reflecting changing priorities within peace research and practice. As peacebuilding became increasingly institutionalized, templated and professionalized, process-oriented approaches gained influence within policy and programming through their emphasis on intervention, sequencing, and institutional

35 John Paul Lederach, *Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation Across Cultures* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995); Lederach, *Building Peace*.

36 Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*.

37 Elise Boulding and Federico Mayor. "Peace Culture: An Overview." In *Cultures of Peace: The Hidden Side of History*. Syracuse University Press, 2000. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.35615674.7>.

38 Roger Mac Ginty, "Everyday Peace: Bottom-Up and Local Agency in Conflict-Affected Societies," *Security Dialogue* 45, no. 6 (2014): 548–64.

39 Davenport, Melander, and Regan, *Peace Continuum*.

transformation. More recent relational scholarship has renewed attention to dimensions of peace that cannot be fully captured through institutional or procedural frameworks alone.

How does scale shape conceptions of peace?

The above debates concern the ontology of peace; a related question concerns its scale. When we speak of world peace, what exactly is the object of inquiry? Is world peace simply peace between and within states, or does it convey something different entirely: a world in which the pursuit of peace is recognized as a shared priority of international political life? Can there be international peace alongside local injustice, or conversely, can local peace persist amid national or global instability? These questions illustrate that scale is not only an empirical question about where peace occurs, but is also inextricable from conceptual questions about what peace is.

Although not usually described as questions of scale, implicit assumptions about where peace exists have long been embedded within theories of peace. Many classical approaches located peace primarily at the level of political order, whether within empires, states, or the international system. Ideas such as the *Pax Romana* and later the *Pax Britannica* and *Pax Americana* understood peace largely in terms of maintaining large-scale political order, often through projects of pacification that relied on hierarchy, coercion, or imperial domination. Similarly, international relations scholarship traditionally treats peace as a property of interstate relations, asking under what conditions war between states becomes less likely. Kenneth Boulding's systems-oriented work, for example, understood peace as an emergent property of patterns of interaction across political systems.⁴⁰

Over time, however, political realities and the experiences of practitioners increasingly challenged the privileging of states or international institutions as the primary locus of peace, directing greater attention toward communities, municipalities, and everyday social life as sites in which peace is produced, negotiated, and sustained. This shift also challenged the assumption that peace at one scale necessarily implies or produces peace at another. It is clear that relative international or national stability may coexist with deep domestic or local inequalities, and conversely, local communities may cultivate remarkably peaceful forms of coexistence while remaining embedded within violent national or international contexts. As Christian Davenport argues, peace cannot therefore be assumed to exist uniformly across, or even within, a particular society or scale, making it difficult to characterize any society or political order as simply peaceful or unpeaceful. His concept of political mutuality, discussed above, is one attempt to account for this complexity, offering a framework that can operate across individuals, communities, states, regions, and the international system while remaining attentive to variation within each.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Boulding, *Stable Peace*.

⁴¹ Christian Davenport, "A Relational Approach to Quality Peace," in *The Peace Continuum: What It Is and How to Study It*, Studies in Strategic Peacebuilding (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 145–82.

These debates suggest that questions of scale cannot be separated from questions of definition. How peace is conceptualized influences where it is sought, who is understood to produce it, and which forms of intervention appear meaningful. Definitions centered on interstate relations naturally direct attention toward diplomacy, deterrence, and international institutions; definitions centered on justice, relationships, or everyday coexistence instead foreground communities, social movements, and the practices through which people negotiate difference. The scale at which peace is examined is not just about levels of analysis; it also determines which actors, processes, and forms of politics are deemed central to peace itself.

Some scholarship has also examined what happens between scales rather than treating them as distinct levels of analysis. The literature on hybridity and hybrid peace, for example, emerged partly from efforts to understand what happens when internationally designed peace interventions encounter local political and social realities.⁴² Rather than assuming that international actors simply implement peacebuilding and local actors receive it, this work emphasizes that local actors interpret, resist, adapt, and reshape external interventions,⁴³ and that resulting outcomes reflect interactions across levels and between actors with different kinds of power and authority.⁴⁴ While the literature on hybridity represented an important move beyond treating local and international peacebuilding as separate domains, it has been criticized for reproducing a binary distinction between the “international” and the “local,” illustrating the difficulty of capturing the more complex relationships among scales, identities, and forms of power.⁴⁵

How many peace-s?

The above debates on the content, ontology, and scale of peace also raise the possibility that these are not simply competing interpretations of a single concept, but that they reflect fundamentally different concepts. While much scholarship seeks increasingly precise definitions of peace (often to make the concept analytically or empirically tractable), others argue that no single definition can adequately encompass the diversity of historical experiences, cultural traditions, political projects, and ways of living that peace describes.

42 Roberto Belloni, “Hybrid Peace Governance: Its Emergence and Significance,” *Global Governance* 18, no. 1 (2012): 21–38.; Oliver P. Richmond and Audra Mitchell, “Introduction—Towards a Post-Liberal Peace: Exploring Hybridity via Everyday Forms of Resistance, Agency and Autonomy,” in *Hybrid Forms of Peace: From Everyday Agency to Post-Liberalism*, ed. Oliver P. Richmond and Audra Mitchell (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 1–38.

43 Roger Mac Ginty, *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance: Hybrid Forms of Peace* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

44 Oliver P. Richmond, “The Dilemmas of a Hybrid Peace: Negative or Positive?,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 50, no. 1 (2015): 50–68.; Roger Mac Ginty, *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance: Hybrid Forms of Peace* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

45 Stefanie Kappler and Nicolas Lemay-Hébert, “From Power-Blind Binaries to the Intersectionality of Peace: Connecting Feminism and Critical Peace and Conflict Studies,” *Peacebuilding* 7, no. 2 (2019): 160–77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2019.1588456>

The proliferation of modifiers attached to peace— for example, positive and negative peace, liberal peace, feminist peace, everyday peace, relational peace, environmental peace, digital peace, and so many others— illustrates this tension. These modifiers may represent necessary attempts to specify different dimensions, contexts, or practices of a broader phenomenon. Equally, however, their proliferation also raises the possibility that “peace” has become an umbrella term encompassing multiple concepts that no longer share a sufficiently coherent core. Whether this reflects productive conceptual differentiation or increasing fragmentation remains contested; this debate has emerged as a topic in and of itself in recent scholarship. Simon Pierre Boulanger Martel and colleagues provide a rich review of the proliferation of “peace with adjectives,” identifying 61 distinct conceptualizations and proposing three broad strategies through which these and future peace concepts emerge: developing diminished subtypes, conceptual narrowing, and conceptual expansion. In doing so, they argue that the expanding conceptual vocabulary of peace reflects recurring patterns of conceptual development rather than simply an accumulation of disconnected terms, and that recognizing these patterns can enhance conceptual clarity and deepen constructive dialogue across different approaches to peace research.⁴⁶

A different response to this tension questions the premise that conceptual plurality is a problem requiring resolution. One of these is Wolfgang Dietrich’s transrational approach, which posits that peace should not be treated as a universal concept awaiting better definition, but as a plurality of culturally situated “peaces.” Different societies, traditions, cosmologies, and historical experiences produce different understandings of what peace is, how it is cultivated, and what it requires.⁴⁷ This perspective resonates with broader critiques of universal peace frameworks advanced by postcolonial, decolonial, and everyday peace scholars. Rather than searching for a single definition capable of encompassing all contexts, these approaches emphasize plurality, contestation, and situated understandings of peace. From this perspective, the challenge is not to arrive at one universally valid definition, but to understand how different conceptions of peace emerge from different histories, relationships, and political projects. The value of this perspective lies in its capacity to create space for comparison, dialogue, and reflection across different ways of imagining and pursuing peace, while shifting attention from identifying the “correct” definition of peace to asking what different understandings of peace make possible.

Why definitions matter

Disagreements around definitions of peace reflect different assumptions about what kind of phenomenon peace is, where it resides, and what is required to create or sustain it. Across these debates, another pattern also emerges. Many of the concepts often associated with peace—

46 Simon Pierre Boulanger Martel, Anna Jarstad, Elisabeth Olivius, Johanna Söderström, Marie-Joëlle Zahar, and Malin Åkebo, “Peace with Adjectives: Conceptual Fragmentation or Conceptual Innovation?,” *International Studies Review* 26, no. 2 (2024): viae014, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viae014>

47 Wolfgang Dietrich, “A Brief Introduction to Transrational Peace Research and Elicitive Conflict Transformation,” *Journal of Conflictology* 5, no. 2 (2014): 48–57.

such as justice, security, institutions, participation, reconciliation, cooperation, trust, or human rights— appear repeatedly, but they do not always occupy the same conceptual role. In some accounts, these are presented as constitutive of peace itself; in others, they are understood as conditions that make peace more possible, more likely, or more durable. While these positions often overlap in practice, they reflect importantly different understandings of what peace is, and what might be pursued in its name.

These differences are not merely semantic. Definitions of peace shape how peace is operationalized in research, policy, and practice. They influence what gets measured, what receives funding, which institutions are empowered, what kinds of expertise are valued, and which interventions are considered legitimate. The development of peace indicators, the professionalization of peacebuilding, and the growth of international peace infrastructures have all required choices about how peace is defined, assessed, and pursued. As a result, definitions inform what becomes visible as a peace problem, what forms of harm are recognized, what kinds of responses are considered appropriate, and what counts as success. They illuminate different dimensions of social and political life, bringing certain priorities and possibilities into focus while obscuring others.

This relationship does not necessarily run in one direction. Conceptions of peace are themselves produced by the political projects, interests, and institutional contexts in which they are articulated. Debates over peace are therefore not politically neutral; who gets to proclaim that peace exists, on what basis, and to what ends, matters. Critics of liberal peacebuilding, for example, have long argued that dominant approaches prioritize stability, order, and institutional management over deeper questions of justice, power, and social transformation. Others have problematized instances where pacification or imposed order is presented as peace despite the persistence of exclusion, coercion, or structural inequality.

What is ultimately at stake in debates over peace is therefore not simply language, but competing visions of what peaceful societies can and should look like and how they might be achieved. In this sense, debates about peace are also debates about the futures we imagine and seek to build.

A working orientation for the Future of Peace

The purpose of reviewing these debates was never to position the Future of Peace program within them or to arrive at a new definition of peace. Rather, it was to understand what this conceptual landscape suggests for how a research program concerned with the future of peace might best be organized. If definitions change how peace is pursued, then understanding the existing conceptual landscape seemed an important first step. I wanted to explore what assumptions different definitions carried, whether others had already articulated an approach that captured the ambitions of the program, and how to think about conceptual guardrails that could create space for a range of perspectives while still ensuring sufficient clarity and coherence.

While this was certainly a valuable exercise, I (perhaps unsurprisingly) did not emerge from it with a broad definition or easily summarizable framework capable of capturing the aims of the program without feeling either too broad or too narrow. I did, however, come away with a few related conclusions.

The first is that it is often easier— and analytically useful— to identify what something is not, than to arrive at a single definition of what it is. For the Future of Peace program, peace is therefore not understood as pacification, state security, or stability maintained through coercion, nor is it simply the absence of visible conflict while deeper forms of violence remain unaddressed. These boundaries are not intended to define peace in and of themselves, but they do establish important starting points for how the program approaches questions about peace.

The second conclusion is not so much a new insight as a reaffirmation of the program's earliest conceptual framing. In many ways, it takes me back to my earliest conversations with WPF Research Director Bridget Conley, who first developed the idea for the Future of Peace program. From the outset, Bridget framed the program around exploring the institutions, networks, and ideas that shape the possibilities for more peaceful futures. What writing this essay has helped me realize is that this is more than just a practical way of describing the program's ambitions. It also changes the object of inquiry. Rather than beginning with the question of what peace is, it begins with the conditions that make less violent and more just futures possible. The distinction between peace and the conditions for peace is subtle, but important. Nonviolence is not necessarily peace. Justice is not necessarily peace. Strong institutions are not necessarily peace. Participation is not necessarily peace. Yet these and many other factors can expand or constrain the possibilities for peace, and the objective is to better understand how they interact to produce the conditions under which more peaceful futures become possible.

This way of thinking also has implications for how the program approaches questions of scale. During another mapping exercise that explored efforts to rethink the future and how to engage it in service of peace, many of what I found to be the most innovative ideas emerged at local levels— within communities, municipalities, social movements, and everyday forms of collective life. These efforts are critically important. At the same time, the Future of Peace program is equally concerned with global transformations, including shifts in international order, technological change, climate change, migration, and changing forms of governance, all of which shape the possibilities for peace in ways that cannot be understood through local experiences alone. The challenge, then, is not simply to connect work occurring at different scales in the hope that it will collectively contribute to peace. It is to think about peace in ways that recognize each scale as analytically important in its own right, without assuming that an intervention (in its broadest sense) can simply be scaled upward, downward, or outward from one context to another.⁴⁸

48 Anna Tsing's discussion of scale in *The Mushroom at the End of the World* is particularly helpful here. She argues that processes of scaling are not neutral acts of expansion but often transform the very phenomena they seek to reproduce, offering a reminder that moving between scales is itself an analytical and political process, rather than

Writing this essay helped clarify what this means in practice for the Future of Peace program. Rather than asking how peace can be scaled or assuming that meaningful work must always bridge different levels of analysis or contexts, I have become increasingly interested in asking how processes operating at different scales interact, constrain, and enable one another in shaping the conditions under which more peaceful futures become possible. Sometimes those interactions will be central to the question at hand; other times they will not. Equally important is remaining open to the possibility that some of the most valuable insights emerge precisely because they illuminate one dimension of peace particularly well, rather than because they connect every scale or every context. The point is not to privilege work that spans scales, but to remain attentive to the ways different scales reveal or obscure different dimensions of peace.

While this essay was never about positioning the Future of Peace program within longstanding conceptual debates, I did hope that it might help identify conceptual guardrails for the program. The conclusions above certainly provide guidance, but they did not resolve that question in the way I expected. Instead, what became clear to me is that the most useful conceptual guardrails were not definitions of peace, but clarity about what the program is trying to understand and the assumptions through which it approaches those questions. This also sits comfortably with understandings of peace as relational, dynamic, and continually negotiated rather than fixed or static. In that sense, I have come to think that the challenge is not how to build a research program around some broad but bounded idea of peace, but how to build one in the absence of conceptual consensus.

Rather than seeking coherence through a settled definition of peace or relying on too many conceptual bounds, I think it is more productive to ground the work of the program in a shared orientation toward inquiry— one that is sufficiently clear to guide conversation while remaining open to the plurality of ways in which peace is understood, experienced, and pursued. What requires clarity, then, is not peace itself, but the assumptions and ways of working that guide how the program engages questions of peace.

That orientation— and its success— relies on several grounding assumptions.

First, it assumes that peace is understood differently across histories, cultures, political traditions, and lived realities, while also assuming that these different understandings can nevertheless be brought into conversation with one another. The aim is not to reconcile them into a single concept, but to create space for comparison, disagreement, collaboration, and mutual learning.

Second, it assumes that both the challenges associated with peace and the pathways toward it will continue to change over time. The possibilities for peace are continually reshaped by

something that can be assumed to occur without alteration. See Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

broader social, political, technological, economic, and environmental transformations, as well as by how societies respond to them. Remaining attentive to these changes and their underlying drivers therefore requires curiosity, critical engagement, dialogue across difference, and a willingness to experiment, learn, and unlearn.

These assumptions inform not only what the Future of Peace program studies, but also how it seeks to cultivate an intellectual community around those shared questions. If the program is to remain faithful to this orientation, then it should aspire to embody these ways of working in how it convenes conversations, navigates disagreement, and creates space for dialogue across different forms of expertise, experience, and ways of knowing. I hope that together, these assumptions and ways of working can create the conditions for the kind of imaginative and ambitious conversations about peace— and whatever may emerge from them— that the program is intended to foster. In many respects, this orientation also echoes themes present in the World Peace Foundation’s founding, where peace was understood not only in relation to the prevention of war but also to questions of justice, antimilitarism, cooperation, institutions, and human welfare, as well as in the many ways that WPF’s work has evolved since.

If I happen to be asked again, “*what do you mean by peace?*”, I still would not have a simple answer. What I can say with greater confidence is that the Future of Peace is organized around a commitment to asking questions that bring different understandings of peace into conversation, illuminate emerging challenges, reveal new possibilities for action, and help us better understand the conditions under which more peaceful futures become possible— and around the conviction that, at least for now, this is enough.

At a time when profound political, technological, environmental, and social change is creating new constraints and possibilities for peace, I would argue that our ability to learn across difference, identify shared concerns, and imagine new possibilities together may ultimately matter more than arriving at a universally accepted definition of peace, or even consensus around how to get there. In the end, the most productive starting point may not be agreement about what peace is, but a shared commitment to asking better questions about the futures we hope to create.

The **World Peace Foundation** was founded in 1910, and today, seeks to redefine peace through research, advocacy and engagement that creates pathways for nonviolent futures. It is affiliated with the Fletcher School of Global Affairs at Tufts University.



WORLD PEACE FOUNDATION
at The Fletcher School

114 Curtis Street
Somerville, MA 02144

Tel: +1 (617) 627-2255
worldpeacefoundation.org

