

Johan Galtung's concept of 'cultural violence



Discuss Johan Galtung's concept of 'cultural violence' and consider critically its value and applicability for empirical research

This discussion examines the work of Galtung on the idea of cultural violence and how this has influenced our understanding of conflicts. The discussion first of all clarifies exactly what we mean by cultural violence and how the idea came out of Galtung's previous work on structural violence and negative and positive peace, before moving on to a wider contextual analysis of the concept focusing on the ideological conflict between Islamic fundamentalism and Western capitalism. This analysis focuses specifically on how the concept itself translates to these areas of current conflict and how it affects our understanding of these issues.

It is worth first of all clarifying exactly what we mean by the concept of cultural violence in order that we might discuss the idea more usefully. Galtung defines the concept as being "any aspect of a culture that can be used to legitimize violence in its direct or structural form" (Galtung 1990 p. 292). He goes on to argue that whilst "Symbolic violence built into a culture does not kill or maim like direct violence or the violence built into the structure. However, it is used to legitimize either or both, as for instance in the theory of a Herrenvolk, or a superior race" (Galtung 1990 p. 292). In many ways, as Galtung himself said, we can see this theory as being an extension of the theory of structural violence (Galtung 1969) or the violence which Farmer defines as being that which is visited upon all those whose social status denies them access to the fruits of scientific and social progress. (Farmer et al 2006, p. 1687). This has become an important idea in <https://assignbuster.com/johan-galtungs-concept-of-cultural-violence/>

Galtung's work and is something which has been particularly influential. In more recent years the idea of structural violence has become framed more by the issue of human rights and social justice (Morvardi, 2008). This is particularly relevant to approaches in international development which have relatively recently become centred around the concept of a rights based approach, whereby people have the right to be free of poverty (Morvardi, 2008).

However, when we are considering the influence of the theory of cultural violence we must look more closely at the modern context of the conflicts which are currently affecting the world. If we look at much of the Islamic extremism literature, as well as much of that which has been written on the subject then we can see that there is a considerable presence of the idea that there is a cultural imperative for rebellion and attacks on the non-believers or as they like to call them kafirs (Qutb, 2007). Literature such as Qutb's Milestones is highlighted by many such as Husain as being particularly influential on many young Muslims in terms of them defining their identity and their aims in life (Husain, 2007, p. 36). It is works like this which embody the principles outlined by Galtung whereby there is a cultural imperative for violence built into the societal values or cultural values of a particular religion or nation (Galtung, 1990). The current relevance of this is particularly important but the questions as to how best to curb such types of violence is still particularly relevant and unanswered. Modern peace and conflict theorists such as Cochrane have argued that current US led policies on the issue of Islamic fundamentalism simply make matters worse and inflame already problematic tensions (Cochrane, 2007). He argues that

works such as Fukuyama's End of History (1993) or Huntington's Clash of Civilizations (2002) are poor attempts at creating cultural superiority and that their very presence contributes further to this cultural divide (Cochrane, 2007, p. 147). However, the position with which Galtung's theory suggests further analysis is a particularly useful one in order to understand how such conflicts occur and are exacerbated but also how we can begin to solve them.

We can therefore say that the value of Galtung's theory to our understanding of conflicts is a very important and provides a solid basis from which to conduct empirical research. The importance of structural violence as well as Galtung's other theories of positive and negative peace have become a central tenet to how peace and conflict studies is understood (Barash and Webel, 2008, p. 25). The issue of cultural violence can be seen as a development of these ideas and one which is particularly relevant to the current situation in the world regarding the nature of conflicts between different factions on the issue of religion and culture (Barash and Webel, 2008). If we are to understand further how this conflict might best be understood and therefore curbed then the idea that it is this central cultural acceptance of violence which is potentially a factor is a very interesting point of departure for further empirical research.

We can therefore conclude that Galtung's theory of cultural violence is particularly important to our understanding of the modern world. The cultural acceptance of violence by both extremist Muslim and 'Christian' nations is something which often goes unreported in many areas as being a central problem in the issue of conflict. And yet it is this central acceptance of

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violence by these cultures which ultimately undermines attempts by organisations such as the United Nations to successfully negotiate in these conflicts. We can therefore say that this aspect of Galtung's theory is a particularly important aspect of the theory and that it is a particularly useful basis from which to conduct further empirical research regarding both the theory itself but also specific case studies and how the theory may well apply to these specific situations.

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