

Peace: A History of Movements and Ideas

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David Cortright

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“Warmakers are often wrong. ... Peace advocates are sometimes right, especially when their ideas are not only morally sound but politically realistic” (4). This statement, on one of the first pages of David Cortright’s volume can be read as his underlying approach to the whole study. It is the explicitly realistic approach to peacemaking that characterizes this book and makes it authoritative in the field of academic peace literature. “Peace” is indeed “a history of movements and ideas.” In Cortright’s understanding, the study of peace is not merely an intellectual exercise, but a more rigorous sum of social action, ideas, social movements, and intellectual development.

The volume is structured in two major parts, “Movements” and “Themes,” introduced by the opening, “What is peace?” Part One introduces the reader to the major peace movements of modern history: the first “peace societies” (e.g., the Hague Peace Conference), international approaches (e.g., the League of Nations), the movement against fascism (e.g., appeasement), issues of disarmament (e.g., disarmament treaties), the period of the Cold War (e.g., the United Nations), nuclear weapons and “Refusing war” (e.g., Vietnam or Iraq). Part Two introduces the reader to theoretical themes: religious and spiritual roots of peace, democracy and peace (e.g., the insights of Kant, democratic peace, or empowering woman), social justice (e.g., a Marxist approach to peace), the responsibility to protect (e.g., debate on human security and the NATO intervention in Kosovo), moral issues (including the well known Einstein-Freud dialogue), and disarmament (e.g., findings of the Canberra Commission). The volume closes in as it began—by pointing out the need for and the application of a realistic pacifism.

The study is thus a broad one, covering nearly every aspect of the term “peace,” including its relative, “pacifism.” Cortright points out that the terms “pacifism” and “pacifist” were originally used in a broad sense to refer to anyone who worked for peace, but which now carry a pejorative connotation for some. Pacifism does not, however, as they contend,

always signify ideological opposition to the use of force in every situation. In fact, alternatives to force, such as nonviolent movements, are often realistic and pragmatic choices, not ideological ones, and in their nature “tactical and strategic rather than philosophical” (226). He asserts that, in fact, the choice of violence may lead to even more oppression. But having, or, even more, wanting to have, this choice is supportive of democracy, or, at least freedom and liberal values, such as the ability to speak and choose freely. To a certain degree, working for peace also means working for democracy, for freedom.

Considering the nature of peace, as well as pacifism, Cortright picks up various insights from scholars of Realism, such as Reinhold Niebuhr and Hans J. Morgenthau. In a debate about disarmament, Morgenthau famously pointed out that people do not fight because of arms: “They have arms because they deem it necessary to fight.” Disarmament can thus be only one path towards peace. Putting away or lowering political tensions is far more important. Particularly interesting is Cortright’s discussion of Reinhold Niebuhr and the challenge he presents to issues of peace and pacifism. The fallacy of pacifism, as Niebuhr pointed out, was and still is often its “faith in the human perfectibility and its rejection of the Christian doctrine of original sin.” This is not only a genuine theological insight; Niebuhr correctly pointed out that self-interest can and indeed does, more often than not, constrain human reason. It is thus not surprising that Cortright points toward the often neglected influence of Niebuhr on Martin Luther King, Jr., or John Howard Yoder.

But what about the actual efforts and achievements of various peace and nonviolence movements around the globe? It is Cortright’s verdict that peace movements are playing a vital role, pointing to actual cases, not just theories and approaches. Although the Bush administration finally launched the war against Iraq in 2003, the antiwar protest, Cortright argues, “has become a consideration in the calculations of government leaders and has started to emerge as a potential influence” (155). That public opinion itself is indeed a “superpower” can be seen, for example, during the three latest and largest movements in favor of peace: the antiwar movement against the war in Vietnam, the (nuclear) disarmament movement in the 1980s, and the movement against the war in Iraq in 2003. Still, despite the obvious examples that Cortright provides, one should be careful in overestimating these movements and should not confuse activism with influence. As already indicated Cortright’s engagement with religious sources for peace is particularly interesting

and worth an examination in more depth in years to come. Niebuhr's challenge is only part of it. Another example put forward by the author is the more positive engagement of the Quakers. Mahatma Gandhi is perhaps one of the most prominent examples of a peace movement leader who learned about Christian nonviolence from the Quakers (and Leo Tolstoy).

The first of three major messages in Cortright's volume is that peace by nonviolent means is achievable. Only in the nuclear realm must the commitment to pacifism be absolute. In other dimensions of conflict, pacifism must be pragmatic and conditional in order to be successful. His second premise is that the exercise of peacemaking is necessary in the ever deepening and widening science of peace. The present volume is indeed an important contribution to this effort. Finally, Cortright contends that the practice of peace is not merely a tactic but a way, a manner of operating. In his encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, Pope John XXIII stated that the most fundamental human right is the right to life, the right for personal integrity, and the development of life. But, achieving and preserving this right demands a commitment to the whole of life, not just birth. This is perhaps the most important message of *Peace: A History of Movements and Ideas*, which not only pulls together theoretical approaches but, more importantly, points out the demands for realistic action.

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