

PACS - Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies

Newsletter No 6 – April 2021



Minor program “Peace and Conflict Studies” in Times of Corona

The minor Peace and Conflict Studies was again a great success with about 65-70 students completing all five minor courses. The programme was taught completely online due to the covid 19-pandemic. This allowed teachers to experiment with digital learning activities, which sometimes required creativity from the students while the flexibility of watching lectures ‘on demand’ was considered helpful by most students.

The course Peace and Conflict: from theory to practice is a good example of a course where students had to be creative and use their digital skills for the final assignment. The assignment asked students to evaluate one humanitarian aid program and to present theory-based practical recommendations to improve the program in a video. All videos were eventually part of a competition in which lecturers and fellow students voted for the best video. Although all videos were impressive, the winning video discussed food insecurity in Afghanistan. The students made excellent recommendations in the video, while the winning group also conducted (online) interviews with locals in Afghanistan and was able to integrate these interviews in a clear, near-professional video presentation.

The winning video can be watched here:

<https://surfdrive.surf.nl/files/index.php/s/uRD2uM4pMyBN1Rx>.

Two students from the winning group were interviewed for the newsletter of the department of Political Science and Public Administration. Here is what they said:

David (Bachelor’s student Public Administration & Organizational Sciences): “During the course, the teachers really put an emphasis on the people. We talked about theories and concepts, but it is also about real people and you shouldn’t forget that. This is something that we wanted to bring back in the documentary.”

Seba (Communication and Information Studies) adds: “During the whole course, we were very critical about many approaches. But it’s so hard to criticize something unless you’re coming up with the solution. We were trying to think of it in the practical manner: how would this affect real peoples lives?”.

We hope to welcome our minor students back on campus next year, but at least we have now experienced that students are able to develop their knowledge and skills in relation to peace and conflict studies even if our programme (partly) takes place online again.

Talk by Giovanni Mantilla on the Politics of International Humanitarian Law

On 8 March 2021, Dr. Giovanni Mantilla of Cambridge University presented his research on “Social Pressure and the Making of Wartime Legal Protections for Civilians” in a guest lecture to around 60 students and faculty at the VU, hosted by PACS and supported by the VU Vereniging. Dr. Mantilla’s work shed light on the social pressures and strategic manoeuvres taking place between states during codification processes of international humanitarian law, namely the formulation of the rules of civilian protection during war.

The core civilian protection principles of distinction, proportionality, and precaution were established as recently as 1977, and not without controversy. Interestingly, negotiations between states leading up to the final codification of rules reveal intricate inter-state dynamics, manoeuvres, and the functioning of social pressures between countries and alliances. By ways of a new archives-based investigation into the history of this intrinsically important case in international law, Dr. Giovanni Mantilla uncovered how the minority Western states, adamant to uphold the status quo of minimally regulated civilian protection during war, fell under the social pressures of Third World and Socialist states who demanded revisions of the protection status of civilians due to a major wave of wartime atrocities during decolonization. Dr. Mantilla’s lecture detailed the several dynamics and events unfolding throughout the negotiations, such as the Soviet Union and United States moving into backstage collaboration to shepherd palatable compromises, inevitably boosting the US’s negotiation powers and affecting the concrete outcome of the treaty. Dr. Mantilla did an exceptional job in exemplifying how social pressures are instrumental in international politics, by connecting the macro politics of international social competition with process-level dynamics and practices of multilateral negotiations to codify international law.

Svenja McGrath, student of the LLM ‘Law and Politics of International Security’

PhD defense of Biejan Poor Toulabi

On 7 April 2021, Biejan Poor Toulabi defended his dissertation, titled *The Myth of the Poor Man's Atomic Bomb and the Politics of Proliferation: Knowledge, Method, and Ideology in the Study of Chemical, Biological, and Nuclear Weapons*.

Upon completing his LL.M. in Law and Politics of International Security at the VU in 2013, Biejan was working as a lecturer, continuing on to be the program manager for the Political Science programs, and down the line pursuing his doctoral studies as an external PhD candidate at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Political Science and Public Administration at the VU. Supervised by prof. Wolfgang Wagner and co-supervised by prof. Barbara Vis, his dissertation delves into the issue of unconventional weapons, critically reviewing the politics of their proliferation.

Biejan's interdisciplinary research brings together the multi-layered conjunctions of security, morality, politics, political economy, sociology of knowledge and philosophy. The phrase 'poor man's atomic bomb' reflects the tacit expert, academic and public narrative of biological and chemical weapons, which are primarily characterized in terms of uncontrollable proliferation, particularly in the hands of rogue states and conflict prone regions of the world. The dissertation critically reviews the current policy focus and threat assessments that routinely overstate the spread of unconventional weapons and therefore imply the requirement of constant scrutiny and control. This does not only bring forth certain racialized conceptions, it also yields destructive policies at times.

Biejan's dissertation takes a new approach to conceptualizing unconventional weapons by identifying issues of current methodology in academia and policy. Experts in the field rely on a narrow set of sources and at times lack a proper understanding of the concepts. As such, policy makers often speak of 'weapons capabilities'. When taking a closer look at the statements, one will come to learn that 'capability' does not reveal an exact definition, however, it does carry a certain bias. While research might refer to a country's industrial capability to develop certain weapons, this does not equal their actual existence. However, restatement and a hyper focus on proliferation, a term derived from life sciences referring to the growth or production of cells by multiplication, inevitably insinuates rapid and excessive spread. However, as Biejan's research finds, the number of states that have pursued or possessed chemical or biological weapons is substantially smaller than assumed, notably so among less 'developed' countries. For half of the countries that have been alleged to have pursued or possessed CBWs there is no evidence to assume this.

The ongoing proliferation narrative predetermines the outlook on the problem; a broadly carried idea that weapons of mass destruction are inherently desirable, that they automatically spread, and that this spread is uncontrollable. The primary policy objective is thus to limit the supposed increased numbers of the 'poor man's atomic bomb' rather than general disarmament. Consequentially, policy results and coercive non- and counter-proliferation policies, particularly the Global South, have in some cases been devastating.

Biejan's dissertation shows that focus on non-proliferation is effectively replacing focus on disarmament, giving detailed evidence for the need to critically review current policies in the field of unconventional weapons. In line with this, Biejan is involved with the Dutch chapter of Pugwash, for several years as a board member. Pugwash, a network of scientists, experts, and

former diplomats, uses scientific insights to effectuate a world free of nuclear weapons through evidence-based policy making.

Svenja McGrath, student of the LLM 'Law and Politics of International Security'

Workshop on “Prototype Warfare”

On 25-26 March 2021, Marijn Hoijtink organized an online workshop on “Prototype Warfare”: New Regimes of Computation, Experimentation and War. The aim of the workshop was to understand and map the contours of “prototype warfare” as an emerging and distinct technoscientific regime of warfare connected to new digital technologies, including AI, machine learning and robotics. Among other topics, the workshop focused on how new data technologies are translated into the military and military practice; how new relationships between the military, the tech sector and venture capital are formed; and how new digital technologies transform (knowledge) practices in and of war and with what effects for local populations in armed conflict.

The workshop was organized as part of Marijn Hoijtink’s project Deathly Design: The Politics of Engineering Autonomous Weapons, funded by the Dutch Research Council (NWO, grant number 016.Veni.195.381).

Public Lectures on Peace-Theology 2021: POST-COLONIAL APPROACHES to building Just Peace

In April, Fernando Enns organized a series of lectures on “Postcolonial Approaches to Building Just Peace”. **Postcolonialism** is the academic study of the cultural legacy of colonialism, focusing on the human consequences of the control and exploitation of colonized people, their lands, their bodies. It is a critical theory analysis of the history, culture, literature, and discourse of European imperial power. The ambiguous term *colonialism* refers to a world view underlying that system. **Christian theology and theological ethics** are in fact a late comers in the broad research on postcolonialism. But certainly, the de-colonization of theology has become one of the most progressive and revealing attempts of our times.

This series of public lectures intends to provide some more general ways of thinking as well as presenting examples from specific contexts. The discussions following the lectures will seek to explore the implications **for building just peace**.

The series includes the following lectures:

1. April 2021 **“Epistemic Violence” – Revisiting Just Peace from Postcolonial Perspective(s)**

Prof. Dr. Fernando Enns & Friederike Cord

8. April 2021 **Theologising Brexit: A Liberationist and Postcolonial Critique**
Prof. Dr. Anthony G. Reddie

15. April 2021 **Healing or Haunting? Towards a Postcolonial Theology**
Prof. Dr. Judith Gruber

20. April 2021 Modernidad/Des-colonialidad en los procesos de construcción de paz de las mujeres afrocolombianas” / “Modernity/Decoloniality in the Peacebuilding Processes of Afro-Colombian Women” Dr. Betty-Ruth Lozano

22. April 2021 Civil Disobedience and Theological Reflections on Hong Kong Anti-Extradition-Bill Movement – from a Post-Colonial Perspective
HsinYin Yu

29. April 2021 Is God a White Racist? Wake work for Theology
Prof. Dr. Robert Beckford

More information can be found here: <https://a-lab.vu.nl/nl/PACS/Events/index.aspx>

Grant to map peace and conflict studies in the Netherlands

Rosanne Anholt, Lenneke Sprik and Nour Gjaltema received a research talent grant from the department of Political Science and Public Administration at the VU for the project “Mapping peace and conflict studies in the Netherlands”. The project aims to map peace and conflict studies in the Netherlands in terms of both education and research. This overview will help build a network of peace and conflict scholars and identify opportunities for education, research, and engagement with societal stakeholders. The project is also supported by the Dutch Foundation for Peace Studies, the University of Amsterdam, the University of Leiden, the University of Groningen and the Ministry of Justice and Security. For more information, please contact: r.m.anholt@vu.nl.

Upcoming Events, Conferences, and Reminders

On Thursday 20 May 2021, 16:00-17:30 CET, Séverine Autesserre (Barnard College, Columbia University) will present her new book “The Fronlines of Peace: An Insider’s Guide to Changing the World” (Oxford University Press). This event is a collaboration between the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and the Dutch Foundation for Peace Studies.

A leading scholar and practitioner on peacebuilding, Autesserre is also the author of “Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention” (2014, Cambridge University Press), which won a number of prizes, including the 2015 Yale H. Ferguson Award (International Studies Association) and the 2016 Best Book of the Year Award (International Studies Association).

Moreover, we are happy to be able to give away 15 copies of “The Frontlines of Peace” among participants. Registration can be done via this link:

https://vuass.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_1HRtMExNih3xUSa.

The event takes place on Zoom, and will be held in English.

Together with the [VU Centre for Interdisciplinary European Studies](#), Bastiaan van Apeldoorn and Marijn Hoijtink are organizing a lecture series on European Security, Technology and Geopolitics in Pandemic Times. The first lecture will be on 6 May 2021 at 16.00 by Jocelyn Mawdsley with a presentation on 'Sociotechnical Imaginaries of EU Defense in 'Times of Crisis'.

Registration can be done via this link:

<https://vu-live.zoom.us/meeting/register/tJMucumsqDIqGNa3B04KPnwJAdfdzpA2d0sg> .

More information is to be found here: <https://fsw.vu.nl/en/departments/political-science-and-public-administration/bp-academy/index.aspx>

On 23 and 24 September 2021, we plan to have the conference on peace and conflict studies that was initially scheduled for 24-25 September 2020. Prof. Steven Pinker (Harvard University) is once again confirmed as the keynote speaker. We're looking forward to having you!

If you know of any conferences or research that you want to be included in the next edition of the PACS Newsletter, please [send an email here](#) with information. PACS is particularly interested in webinars at this time of social distancing. If you were forwarded this email and are interested in staying apprised, please sign up below to ensure you continue to receive these emails!

Who are we?

PACS, the Peace and Conflict Studies Centre at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, is an inter-faculty scholarly network for research on the causes of political violence, on strategies to build peace and on the governance of conflict. These issues require an interdisciplinary approach. Researchers from five faculties – law, social sciences, behavioral and movement sciences, religion and theology as well as humanities - collaborate in PACS.

PACS is managed by a team of seven researchers: [Wolfgang Wagner](#) (chair), [Tanja Aalberts](#), [Arno Akkermans](#), [Marijn Hoijtink](#), [Ronald Kroeze](#), [Paul van Lange](#) and [Srdjan Sremac](#).

More information on PACS can be found [here](#).