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Interdependence, Interconnectedness, and Intersectionality: The Ecology of Positive Peace

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In the annals of Peace Studies, the concept of *positive peace* generally is taken as the presence of justice in a particular community, society, or culture. This focus does not avoid the reality of navigating crises and conflicts, but rather calls upon us to think and engage proactively, spending as much time building a better world as confronting the one we have—and linking those pursuits in a non-superficial manner. An important component of this work resides in the realm of ecological thought and action, oftentimes grounded in values of *interconnection* and *interdependence* that hold promise as a means to address gathering crises in a world increasingly marked by patterns of displacement, divisiveness, and degradation. Indeed, one of the foundational links between social and environmental engagement is an overarching sense of interconnectedness, from the expansive justice invocations of Dr. King's "garment of destiny" and his observation that "all life is interrelated" to John Muir waxing about "a thousand invisible chords" that bind us to everything in the universe. We are intertwined, socially and ecologically.

The implications of science, philosophy, spirituality, and lived experience alike are clear on this point: *reality is deeply relational, and we are enmeshed in webs of interconnection from the micro to the macro scales in demonstrable ways*. Yet despite this, there remains a profound reluctance to recognize that there is no "other" in a political sense, no "waste" in an ecological sense, and no "victory" in a military sense. The bifurcation of the world into a zero-sum contest is as much a fiction as is the idea that climate change and environmental destabilization only

affect people in some faraway place. Recognizing and remediating this is a central tenet of *intersectionality*, which understands inequalities and entrenched hierarchies not as immutable characteristics of existence but as system-wide factors reflected within foundational values and structures. From its earliest invocations (as developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw and later expanded upon by others), intersectionality has been applied as a tool for recognizing the relational nature of marginalization to structures and norms in a given society; in this formulation, core issues and identities cannot be viewed in the abstract but rather as tangible moments that reveal the limits of mainstream legal conceptions of justice to register and remediate complex claims of unequal treatment. This commentary paper brings this emergent lens to bear on socioecological issues from food to climate change, arguing that a systemic approach is necessary for human survival.

In this light, it is important to recognize that systems are made up of people (at least for the time being as the use of algorithmic and AI-infused models continue to proliferate). It is precisely the humanness of sociopolitical systems that render them both problematic and filled with potential for change. In particular, the environmental realm—often viewed as a space of "low politics" beneath the veneer of power dynamics and political campaigns—has the potential to serve as a unifying set of issues across a wide swath of geographies and societal dimensions. With acute interventions of fires, floods, storms, and other climate-related incidents beginning to show an agnosticism about where (and who) they strike, there is a nascent awareness of our mutual reliance upon environmental factors including the air we breathe, the water we drink, the land we inhabit and grow food upon, a stable set of climate and weather conditions, and more. Such an emerging consciousness, however, even viewed optimistically, is not a panacea—and more importantly, cannot be used to obscure pivotal aspects of difference, inequality, and injustice.

What is intended with this analysis is not to set about demonstrating or proving that interdependence, interconnectedness, and intersectionality are important perspectives nor that they are empirically valid—instead taking these suppositions as a given and going further to unpack their fuller implications as critical factors for peace and our continued existence. As Dr. King famously said, "we must learn to live together … or perish as fools." This sentiment has as much salience when confronting societal issues of conflict and polarization as it does when it comes to how we address common threats of climate change and environmental destabilization; in its fullest sense, we thus can take such notions as pillars of justice and environmentalism alike. This conjoined realm, termed here as the "ecology of peace," requires us to zoom out for a moment to consider the shared

sense of space (i.e., our home planet Earth) and time (i.e., intergenerational responsibilities) that hold promise as unifying forces. Unfortunately, and not subtly most of the time, a rosy notion of shared struggle ushering in peace and sustainability has been dashed by Machiavellian politics and short-sighted thinking. But we can no longer wait.

So let me wind down this brief introduction by setting forth how I hope to illustrate these themes here, and to ask your indulgence for a moment as you suspend your disbelief just long enough to ask the question: *what if we got it right?* Granted, this feels far removed from current events, but that is always the case and not the point of this exercise. The operative premise here, given the stakes involved and the juncture in which we find ourselves, is that there is no getting it *wrong* any longer if we are to have a future in and on this world; whatever version of kicking the problems down the road may have existed previously, we are the ones and this is the time in which they land. To be clear about this, I am not suggesting that our era is special or that others in history haven't confronted grave issues, and I am definitely not looking to add to any looming sense of apocalyptic overtones that are so prevalent in media narratives (Pierre-Louis, 2020). Rather, the point is to assert the gravity of the moment as an inflection point in which we have been gifted with an opportunity to bend the "arc of justice" toward its fulfillment. In this work, we are called upon to be engaged actors and not spectators, to ask not merely *when* but *how*.

Along the way I will share some examples of people and communities doing this work in ways that combine theory and practice, action and vision, reaction and proactivity, and a working synthesis of social and environmental engagement. These examples range from community farms and gardens to deeply rooted commons-based resource systems, spanning urban and rural spaces. The aim is not to be comprehensive here but instead illustrative, inviting readers to add their own examples and, ultimately, to help manifest the conditions of a new emergent paradigm that is rooted in particular places and moments while resonating across spatial and temporal scales. The intent is to center "unity in diversity" and common purpose in our pedagogies and practices, seeking to sow and germinate seeds of possibility while there is still time to do so.

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As you have no doubt already surmised, this isn't the usual tract on the virtues of interconnection and how we can heal ourselves through deeper experiences in

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nature. To be sure, these and other such calls are critically important and they will factor into this work. However, as oft-invoked concepts in the annals of environmentalism, they risk becoming platitudes and clichés that drain their power as paradigm-shifting ideas. This work seeks to avoid this trap by peering into the cutting-edges of ecological practices in the 21st century, inquiring as to how we can reconnect ourselves—notwithstanding the myriad digital tethers that we carry forth—in non-consumptive and non-commercial ways with the larger world, of which we are (and always will be) a part. As noted there is an urgency to this work, on the operative premise that our collective detachment from the rhythms of the natural world is inextricably linked to the pervasive rifts and escalating polarization that seem to be defining our societies, both *within* and *among* them across an array of grave fault lines around issues of race, class, gender, geography, power, privilege, and more. As bell hooks (2009. p. 26) has opined: "Estrangement from our natural environment is the cultural contest wherein violence against the earth is accepted and normalized," and where the roots of human-upon-human violence (including conflict and injustice) oftentimes emanate.

Getting past these points of fragmentation, even those that degenerate into flagrant conflict and open forms of violence, is a pillar of the "ecology of positive peace" concept as it arises from subfields such as *environmental peacebuilding*. Indeed, it was my early discovery of precursor works in this area that helped set in motion the course of my own journey from Peace Studies to Environment & Sustainability—and likewise that reinforces my belief that these spheres are necessarily conjoined. Some of the most powerful tenets of human-human peacemaking and peacebuilding are in fact bound up with human-environment issues over essential resources, health and wellbeing, climate, and more. Among the driving forces of this line of theory and practice is that the environment has a unique capacity to link us together in our mutual reliance upon its bounty. Reflecting this inherent synergy, my work in the area of *Peace Ecology* concluded that: "Our demand is not for a return to a pristine past, real or imagined, or for a perfected utopia here and now. We seek the dismantling of unhealthy, oppressive, destructive technologies in favor of new tools that foster autonomy and exist at the appropriate scale. We seek a world premised on the mutuality of 'human dignity and nature's wholeness', recognizing that we cannot attain one without the other" (Amster, 2014, p. 189, citation omitted).

How we get from here to there is, of course, the pressing question—one that is both historical and forward-looking all at once. If we consider the past, we may run up against a divergent set of conclusions about humankind's capacity to live in

peace with one another and the rest of the world. On one hand, it is often surmised that pre-industrial societies lived in a closer relationship to their environments by necessity and propensity alike; on the other hand, whatever transpired then (even if we view it through the lens of romanticism and nostalgia) has brought us to the point where we are confronting the implications of what Vandana Shiva (2010) described as "a war against the earth [that] begins in the mind" but plays out through the development of "violent tools" that act in and upon the world and each other. Subsequent studies of "planetary boundaries" have demonstrated the consequences of these accumulated practices, steadily pushing the planet toward a *terra incognita* scenario where the world of tomorrow will scarcely resemble the one that has supported human existence for millennia (Rockström et al. 2023).

It is through this lens that I view rhetorical moves to "declare war on climate change" (e.g., McKibben 2016) with some trepidation. Of course, the exigency is clear and the need to mobilize swiftly is paramount, but this isn't a typical war waged against some perceived 'other' who must be defeated (illogical as that zero-sum thinking is); rather, it is a war against ourselves and our way of life. Waging this war would require us to rethink how we produce energy, the ways we transport ourselves and the goods we consume, how we shelter ourselves, the foods we eat (and often waste), our mediums of exchange and communication, the technologies we use, and much more. These myriad hardware changes are necessary but not sufficient; this ostensible war would also require that we address the software of stratification, endemic hierarchies, structural injustices, differential power relations, inequitably distributed impacts and opportunities, patterns of discrimination and othering, and the ways in which we view ourselves as separate from each other—and nature. If one wants to rely upon a war motif, then we should let people know what they are signing up for and what the implications will be. This isn't merely another moonshot of technical wizardry or the conversion of factories to a war footing: we are going to have to revise the fabric of our lives all the way through to the roots, including not only the materiality of our existence but the deeper contexts of values and worldviews.

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Undertaking such a "root cause" effort (or perhaps "system reboot," if that resonates) moves us beyond a reactive politics in which the terms of engagement are set by whomever ostensibly is driving the agenda at any particular moment. Granted, this doesn't mean that we *shouldn't* react to unjust or draconian policies—change often requires contestation and even obstruction, after all—but that we

shouldn't have our efforts truncated or exhausted by reactivism. If an ecological positive peace calls us to inquire as to the root causes of human-human and human-environment conflict as conjoined problematics, simply asserting a preference to stop or end such behaviors will likely be insufficient without (a) understanding what drives them and from where they arise and (b) positing another way to redirect those underlying drivers toward more beneficial pursuits. This type of strategy was suggested over a century ago by William James in his famous essay on "The Moral Equivalent of War" (1911), in which it was proffered that the spirit to serve could be channeled away from militaristic venues toward more innocuously prosocial (e.g, good-natured sporting contests) and even nascent environmental or conservationist efforts. Even with the same caveats noted above about using "war" motivations, this nod to *redirection* is important to note, and indeed a similar sentiment appears in *Peace Ecology* under the framework of "repurposing" the infrastructure, resources, capital (human and otherwise), and energies that warfare entails.

These invocations feel like one potential way to move beyond a politics of despair or disempowerment by meeting the world as we find it but not being limited to that state of being; to *re*direct or *re*purpose suggests that we are seeking to alter the trajectory of current events rather than trying to battle them head-on. While the latter may (and perhaps likely will, at some point) be necessary when it comes to gross injustices and existential impingements, it is still incumbent upon change agents to be able to answer the question: *if not this, then what?* In other words, we need to promulgate and provide another direction and purpose toward which human activities might be encouraged. This penchant for articulating a "constructive program," as Gandhi famously called it, taps into both pragmatic and visionary sensibilities, and is as much about unleashing imaginations as it is about innovation. If some need is being met in unhealthy or unjust ways by unscrupulous actors, then we need to advance scrupulous ways for that need to be either reconsidered (do you *really* need this?) or met through healthier, more humane means.

Where can we locate examples of this type of proactive engagement for peace and sustainability? Think of a community garden being built and managed by neighbors in a "food desert" or an environmental justice campaign confronting a health hazard by deploying "citizen science" and public advocacy on its own behalf in the absence of official engagement. Rather than merely demanding that the problems be fixed by others, such efforts point out the vacuum of inequity and inaction while counterposing another model in its place. These sorts of do-it-yourself initiatives serve to provide tangible benefits while uplifting voices and

perspectives often excluded from the formal decision-making bodies established within a myriad of communities. Drawing upon lessons from *environmental justice*, such examples of deeply rooted socioecological praxis can help transform unjust arrangements of power—while being cognizant of the twin suppositions that those who have suffered the most from disparate environmental burdens should not bear primary responsibility for remediating those crises and that we should engage these issues "without resorting to either victimization or valorization by cultivating pathways toward collaborative ecological engagement, emphasizing policy frameworks and lived experiences equally in seeking tenable and durable solutions" (Amster & Kato 2018, p. 7).

Such stances are grounded in tenets of interdependence and an intersectional analysis of power and autonomy. In developing a framework for "critical environmental justice," David Pellow (2017) identifies a set of "pillars" for expanding the field of inquiry that include the need to analyze issues expansively and complexly "as intersecting axes of domination and control" in a world where "inequalities are mutually reinforcing" (p. 19). Pellow further reflects on the need to go beyond "state power" as the primary unit of analysis for redressing social and ecological harms, instead seeking ways to ground struggles for environmental justice in communities as establishing mechanisms to "deepen direct democracy" by creating new spaces for autonomous activities (pp. 24-25). Finally, building upon the insight that "we are all linked in webs of interdependence," Pellow insists upon an expansive "socioecological indispensability" that balances sovereignty and solidarity by promoting equitable human societies that act in equitable and sustainable ways with their environments. Pellow's thoughtful interventions and analyses call upon academic treatments to contemplate advocacy and engaged activism to galvanize momentum for the task of challenging entrenched systems and cultivating viable alternatives.

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Even in academic spaces noted for their inherent interdisciplinarity there can be a tendency to maintain a dichotomization of theory and practice as well as a methodological divide that renders true synthesis elusive and even sometimes disdained. As someone who has never quite had a disciplinary home in academia, I have had the relative luxury of drawing upon a wide range of inputs and engaging in an array of outputs from community engagement to popular publications. This state of being also has the drawback of falling between the cracks of established units and at times feeling as if one belongs everywhere yet nowhere at all. In recent

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years, however, as the full dimension of complexity around existential issues such as climate change and other "wicked" problems has moved to the fore, a recognition of the need to think and act more intersectionally has taken hold. And when issues of conflict, violence, polarization, and inequality are factored into the understanding of climate and environmental crises, the necessity of broad-spectrum engagement is even more pronounced. Still, none of this is to suggest that discipline-based domain knowledge is moot; to the contrary, engaging complex issues requires robust expression of a multitude of disciplines in order to grasp causes and iterate alternatives.

It is in this vein that we encounter powerful examples of peacebuilding and sustainability as mutually reinforcing, interdependent frameworks in which work done in one sphere amplifies the other. If we are conscious of these synergies, peace work becomes ecological and environmental work is conflict transforming as well. Indeed, I have tried to make the case here that without deliberately cultivating this interconnection, the likelihood of attaining either peace or sustainability drops precipitously, and perhaps becomes altogether unfeasible. Simply put, we don't get peace and justice without ecological balance—and vice-versa. This has been a guiding premise of my work, one that has found resonance in many fine exemplars of the power of this perspective. For instance, the Community Ecology Institute (CEI) in Columbia, Maryland, indicates this nexus in its name, but even more so in its principles and practices. The CEI is an umbrella organization for a host of projects and initiatives, including a Maker Hub and a garden consulting operation plus myriad educational and internship opportunities, as well as its core effort called Freetown Farm (named for the historically significant neighborhood in which it is located). As the CEI website describes, the mission is "to cultivate communities where people and nature thrive together." Working at the intersection of "environment, education, equity and health," the CEI helps to cultivate community to address "the two most pressing environmental issues [of] climate change and the growing divide between people and nature" and to help foster a deep "sense of hope and purpose for the future" by literally (and figuratively) planting seeds.

In a different context and geography, but with similar impulses, consider the acequia system, a thriving example of environmentally wise self-governance, merging influences from Spain and North Africa with Native American and Mexican systems of water conservation and sharing. Acequias are communal ditches located primarily in the arid southwestern United States that carry water (from snowmelt) from streams to fields (see Amster 2014). Acequia users share responsibility for maintaining the ditches, and a rotating elected *mayordomo*

facilitates the process. Land parcels run alongside the acequias, providing equitable access to water through cooperative and carefully managed systems of resource allocation and collaborative governance designed to maintain community cohesion and environmental sustainability. Indeed, the delicate balance of factors needed to ensure the flow of water (which are increasingly impinged upon by climate change and forces of privatization and commodification) mirror the robust balance of sociopolitical factors that promote power sharing, conflict transformation, and open dialogue among community members. The acequia system, which bears resemblance to water sharing systems worldwide, exemplifies the dual senses of human and environmental interdependence.

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Examples such as these highlight the potential of a positive peace perspective to help address complex, interlocking, and existential crises that are emerging in real-time. The lessons are not subtle and the reality of living in an interconnected world (despite misguided trends toward ultra-nationalism and abject self-interest among some sectors) is indisputable in an era of globalization and with due regard for the fact that writ large the environment knows no borders (Amster 2014). From great peace teachers to many faith traditions it is offered that we are enmeshed in networks of reciprocity and mutuality on moral and pragmatic levels alike. These teachings may be widely construed, yet our societal systems generally do not reflect these lessons and oftentimes openly flout baseline principles of connectedness. Disparities of power and privilege yield widely differential outcomes notwithstanding the intertwined nature of reality and a common reliance upon natural systems; a dynamic intersectional perspective seeks to address this by focusing on "how various factors of identity formation and attribution work together to yield differential frames of experience in a manner that exceeds the sum of its parts" (Amster & Kato 2018, p. 14).

A positive peace (and justice) lens on intersectional ecologies thus can help illuminate the nexus of widespread social and environmental crises as they manifest in particular locales, as indicated for example by Marisa Ensor (2023) through the observation that "the worsening climate crisis and pronounced gender inequality are inextricably intertwined" in her recent article on how "intersectional gender equity must inform efforts to enhance climate security." Positive peace provides a robust framework that integrates theories and actions, connects issues and identities, balances structure with agency, unpacks positionality and power dynamics, prioritizes local autonomy in the context of global networks, centers

histories and memories, advocates for an expansive sense of mutualism and practices of reciprocity, and highlights the essential need for people to have voice in effecting meaningful transformation. This is not an ironclad blueprint but rather a pragmatic working vision that weaves together human societies and natural systems while reintegrating justice as a moral force in cultivating peace and sustainability at all levels. Of course, the utopian nature of such notions is clear, yet their salience also is paramount in this era.

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I want to close this brief excursion with a thought experiment, which befits the tenor of this piece overall. In a course I have developed and taught over the past few years (called Ecotopian Visions) one exercise asks us to imagine that we could "pull one thread" in society and "rewrite the source code" for it, extrapolating to what might ensue from the ripples just one alternate idea could generate. For instance, if roads (especially in urban centers) had been built for bicycles rather than cars at the outset, the scaling of peoples' lives might be different beyond just using a variant primary mode of transportation; likewise, if standard housing design specifications were framed around passive and active solar, water catchment and recirculation, and other relatively low-tech interventions, not only energy use (including climate impacts) would change but also power relations and economic arrangements for households. This sort of "fork in the road" exercise indicates the expansive impacts that even one relatively small alteration in basic living might yield, and is about both the hardware (policies and pragmatics) as much as the software (values and new narratives) of our lives, demonstrating a range of synergies and connections.

I have utilized this prompt to positive effect in classes at the main university campus, in courses taught inside prison facilities, and in community settings during workshops and organizing events. In each case, we come upon a sense that the gap from where we find ourselves—with intersecting crises mounting and a narrow window of time in which to act—to where we hope to go isn't as wide as it sometimes can seem. This isn't wishful thinking, though, instead serving as a "design sprint" exercise as well as a driver of more empowered engagement. When we think complexly and act purposefully, systemic change becomes fathomable if not inevitable. Of course, no one expects the journey from here to there to be easy, but starting with even a single step can begin a process and gather momentum toward its eventual attainment.

And this, I believe, is the essence of a positive peace perspective—namely to generate the conditions in which people can work within the flow of their societies and environments to continue the process of improvement and fulfillment, working toward beneficial aims in common purpose rather than mainly reacting to negative influences and experiencing greater isolation and fractiousness along the way. We can build structures and spaces to learn as we go, to manifest prosocial and mutualistic behaviors, to reimagine the world and redesign our place in it. Not only *can* we do this, but it is becoming increasingly apparent that we *must* do this if we are to turn crises into possibilities for peace, justice, and a sustainable future. With due regard for the tolerance limits of our planet's systems and the sense of our window of time closing fast, it nevertheless remains the case that we have everything we need for this journey of our lifetimes. All that is left is to remember that we are deeply connected, and that our power comes from that.

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