Brief Reflections on Measuring Peace

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The monitoring of the progress of peace is of such obvious value in any post-conflict society that the worth of doing so is rarely, if ever, challenged. However, the means used to do so is another matter. Qualitative analysis is open to the objection that, even if it is the product of a collective effort, it ultimately depends on the subjective judgement of the individuals in the group. Yet the search for reliable quantitative indicators is beset by many difficulties. That is scarcely surprising. The very notion of a peace index or reconciliation barometer (or whatever form of words is used in this context) seems to embody an impossible quest: the devising of a set of objective quantifiable criteria by which the advancement of the condition/norm of peace or reconciliation can be measured. Adding to the difficulty is the changing content of norms such as peace and reconciliation across both time and space. In this context, the concepts of negative and positive peace that were formulated by Johan Galtung[1] deserve mention. The former implies merely the absence of violence; the latter a more profound transformation in which the reconciliation of society's differences contains the promise that peace will last in the long term. It also implies that the quality of the peace is high, though this begs a great many questions.

But even a focus on the less ambitious task of measuring the amount of violence in a society is far from straightforward. What forms of violence count as a threat to peace? Should the focus be solely on acts of political violence? And should that include violence arising from industrial disputes? Should it include riots arising from social discontent of one form or another? An obvious objection to the narrow approach is that it might exclude from consideration the gang warfare that terrorises societies such as Mexico. But if the attempt is made to include all forms of violence on the grounds that, even if many of them do not present a direct threat to the country in question's political stability, they detract from human security in the society and thus from peace, then other difficulties arise. Thus, notoriously, attitudes towards domestic violence, i.e. violence within the household, vary markedly from society to society. What is worse, the availability of reliable data in this area depends far more on the attitudes towards such violence than it does on the incidence of even its most extreme manifestations. The same is also generally true of hate crimes. While the evolution of attitudes may also play a part in the measurement of, say, hate

crimes within a particular country over time, data collected within the same society over the years provides more reliable results than it is usually possible to put together across different societies. To put the point starkly, there may be all sorts of legitimate reasons for questioning the way any society collects, say, homicide statistics. Nonetheless, it would seem perfectly reasonable to attach considerable significance to spikes in these statistics in a society in which the basis for the collection of this data has remained more or less the same from year to year.

This also applies to sets of figures covering narrower categories than homicides. For example, the police in Northern Ireland publish annual figures for deaths due to the security situation. The first year covered by this rubric was 1969 and, usefully, the practice has continued not merely beyond the paramilitary ceasefires of 1994 or even the Belfast Agreement of 1998, but to the present day. It provides one obvious dimension by which the peace can be judged, notwithstanding the arguments that are possible over whether the police have got right the inclusion or exclusion of particular incidents from the figures. It is worth noting in this context that the police were not alone in collecting data on deaths as a result of the Troubles. The figures compiled by Michael McKeown[2] were broadly similar to those of the police but by no means identical. And highlighting lethal attacks does not preclude other measurements of political violence, such as the number of shootings, explosions or punishment attacks. Indeed, these can be added to present a fuller picture of the extent of paramilitary activities in any year. This underscores the complexity of the task of monitoring peace even within a single society over time, since it seems to require more than one set of measurements, even to get a handle on the level of political violence, and there is no easy way to combine them all into a single figure.

Of course, political violence may be seen as just one of a number of indicators of peace. And it is by no means the only one that is subject to some sort of measurement. Indeed, through use of attitude surveys, figures may even be attached to such subjective elements as the public's judgement of the threat to their personal security as a component of the peace. In fact, it is tempting to rely wholly on what can be quantified in some form or another and then combine the results to produce an outcome that can be defended as objective, in the sense of not being dependent on the wishful thinking or other prejudices of those conducting the research. And the greater the reliance that can be placed on quantifiable information, the more rigorous and robust the analysis is likely to appear to others. During the seminar it was evident that there were different views on this issue. For some, research that focused on what was quantifiable embodied the essence of the social scientific method and was a

mark of the objectivity of the research. For others, the choice of what was measured involved normative assumptions so that they considered the results no more value-free than qualitative analysis. While there is plenty of scope for argument over the numbers that go into any single set of figures within one society, there is even more scope for argument over how different sets of figures measuring different dimensions can be combined. That is one reason why it generally makes more sense for researchers to present their results in a narrative that makes reference to the data that has been collected in a quantifiable form, but does not rely wholly on numbers.

Comparing how other societies go about the task of monitoring peace in a post-conflict environment or, even, as in the case of Israel/Palestine, the prospects for the resumption of negotiations following the breakdown of a peace process, is useful to anyone seeking to judge the state of peace in any society. It provides a useful check on what might prove relevant to the monitoring of peace in similar societies. Thus, Northern Ireland has long been compared to two other deeply divided societies: South Africa and Israel/Palestine and appropriately there were researchers from both at the seminar, with presentations by Fanie Du Toit and Tamar Hermann. It was evident from the discussion in the seminar on the cases of Israel/Palestine and South Africa that what is seen as relevant to peace in one society may not be seen as having much bearing even to the quality of peace (or, to use Galtung's term, positive peace) in another. In particular, it was evident that corruption loomed far larger as an issue that was seen as salient to the country's political settlement in South Africa than has been true of either Northern Ireland or Israel/Palestine, though from time to time, the issue of corruption in the governance of the West Bank and of Gaza has attracted attention.

But of course comparison may extend beyond simply learning from what others have done in seeking to monitor peace in their societies, to seeking to compare how peaceful different societies are, taking not just a similar subset of societies but at its most ambitious comparing societies around the world. Such overarching comparison of different societies is not new. In the 1960s it was common to compare different countries on the basis of power. Indeed, quite complicated formulas were put forward that combined such elements as population, military strength, size of the economy, and even steel production to produce a composite power index. Even with some understanding of the dimensions put into the number that was eventually arrived at, the attachment of a figure to any country conveyed very little. What mattered was the ranking of countries. And, even more importantly, the particular elements that went into the formula for power were chosen so that they could be extrapolated into the future. However, what none of these extrapolations took into account was

the possibility of transformative political changes and while the prediction that, for example, China might become the dominant power in the 21st Century still has a measure of credibility, the demise of the Soviet Union has underscored that political factors may intervene that nullify some of the model's most basic assumptions.

A common feature of monitoring that involves the construction of a composite index for comparative purposes is that the figure arrived at for a single case is quite meaningless on its own, even if accompanied by a reasonably full explanation of the different elements that go into the index. What is meaningful is the ranking of different countries that results from the exercise. A current example discussed during the seminar is the Global Peace Index and a researcher from the programme, Thomas Morgan, gave a presentation on the index to the seminar. Despite the attention given to it in the media, the value of the resulting ranking of countries remains open to question. Indeed, on the face of it some of the results seem not merely counter-intuitive but perverse, such as the map that places the United States and Russia at opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of their peacefulness. By contrast, where the ranking does accord with what most people would expect, it has verisimilitude, but perhaps little more than that. Thus, it is hardly a surprise that Syria ranks close to the bottom of the rankings for peaceful countries (though extraordinarily still above Russia). An obvious disadvantage of the global peace index compared to the power indices of the past is that change from year to year can be very dramatic. Thus, a peace index can tell us little about which countries that are currently politically stable might succumb to a violent political breakdown. In this context, the point is worth making that it is a characteristic of deeply divided societies that they tend to oscillate very sharply between periods of tranquillity when there is little overt violence in the society to periods of virtual or even actual civil war between communities. This point was nicely underlined by Paul Nolan's reference in his presentation on Northern Ireland to the study by Eric Fromm[3] in the 1950s that had identified the province as seemingly the most contented society in the world.

The general problems attached to any system of rankings can be illustrated by the global listing of universities that each year secures wide, and largely uncritical, coverage in the media. The focus of the reporting is almost entirely on changes from the ranking in the previous year, with little or no reference to the methodology used to arrive at the rankings. As virtually everyone would expect, both Harvard and Cambridge are at, or near the top of, the list every year. Indeed, it is fair to say that a list in which these two universities did not emerge as among the leading universities in the world would scarcely be taken seriously. However, the fact that the list conforms to expectations

in the ranking of the world's most prestigious universities is not a good reason for treating the rankings as a reliable guide to the relative merits of different universities. The obvious problem that anyone who has spent any time teaching at universities outside those at the very top of the list will appreciate is that in the vast majority of universities, differences in the quality of departments within universities are much larger than the gap in the overall quality between universities. Further, there is scope for universities, through focusing on the criteria for the rankings, to improve their standing on the list. Ideally, movement up the rankings should represent a genuine improvement in the quality of the university in question, but it might also involve what might be characterised as a gaming of the statistics with no discernible change to the student experience or the university's research output.

What happens at the micro level of university politics can also be expected to happen at the level of the state. There is the analogous problem to that of departments in universities in that regions in states may enjoy very different levels of peace and this makes the ranking of countries as single entities a simplification of reality at best. There is also the question of who collects the statistics and for what purpose. An example is the difficulties social scientists have encountered in the past in estimating the size of the world's Kurdish population, as well as the number of speakers of the principal Kurdish languages, since the states in which most Kurds are to be found have not been keen to lend any credence to the notion of a Kurdish nation and thereby to give encouragement to claims for self-determination or even autonomy by their Kurdish communities. And it is unnecessary to posit deliberate political manipulation of the figures on an ongoing basis. States vary in their cultural assumptions and that is bound to be reflected in the categories they use in collecting information of all kinds. This may seem a statement of the obvious but it is one that is too easily simply glossed over in the desire to be able to compare different societies and organise the findings into some kind of pecking order.

A slightly different problem is the lack of availability of reliable statistics, which may even affect such basic information as the population of the country, let alone the numbers killed in political violence. In such cases, highly innovative approaches may be needed to get a measure of the level of human security that exists in the society in question. In his contribution to the seminar Roger MacGinty discussed a number of unusual indicators, including the barking of dogs at night or failure to repair windows as signs of insecurity. This unorthodox approach has much to commend it, not least that it addresses the issue of people's experiences at a grass roots level and that it is information that lies outside the realm of statistics collected by the state. Consequently,

such information is not subject to the manipulation that state statistics may be prone to. While MacGinty's everyday peace indicators are most obviously relevant in societies where reliable information is hard to come by, these methods are also relevant even in the most developed and closely observed societies. And, in fact, he developed the idea for such unusual indicators from his experience of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Further, recent events suggest that this approach still has value in post-conflict Northern Ireland. Thus, Paul Nolan has suggested that the theft of wheelie bins (to use in rioting) may prove a better indicator of the trajectory of the flags protests in Northern Ireland during 2012 and 2013 than conventional police statistics on arrests for public order offences.

Monitoring of peace within one society (which may form a region in a larger country) can be far more fine-tuned to local realities than can attempts to compare a large number of countries. Further, there is much more scope for qualitative analysis in a single case study. However, even in dealing with a single case, pitfalls remain. In particular, it is important to distinguish between peace and the peace. By "the peace" I mean the political settlement that the parties to the conflict have achieved. Peace as such is the circumstance of tranquillity that may be underpinned by a political settlement but it cannot be equated with the existence of such an agreement. Thus, to take the example of Northern Ireland, the Good Friday Agreement and its additions and amendments constitutes "the peace". Relevant to monitoring "the peace" is the ongoing examination of the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, including its equality agenda, thus justifying extensive consideration of all the various sources of inequality between the two communities. A case can also be made that "peace" is dependent on the durability of "the peace" and hence that in practice, it might be reasonable to treat "peace" and "the peace" as aspects of the situation that can be rolled into each other.

However, it is not difficult to construct an argument that the two are by no means necessarily congruent. In particular, there are critics of the Good Friday Agreement who argue its consociational character, far from ensuring peace, imposes a straitjacket on the society that in the long run will cause conflict. It is not necessary to agree with this viewpoint for it to be clear that peace and the peace are not the same and, indeed, to imagine circumstances in which they might conflict. It is important, in particular, to draw a distinction between peace and conditions that are conducive to peace. Naturally, the monitoring of peace in a post-conflict society needs to examine both. Because of the difficulty of defining peace itself, whether as a condition that can be attached to the current state of affairs in a society or as a norm (i.e. a desirable aspiration to be striven for), distinguishing between peace and favourable conditions for

its maintenance is far from easy. And insofar as the changes in the conditions conducive to peace may be good indicators of the durability of peace, there is ample justification for paying as much attention to these conditions as to attempting to assess how tranquil the society is. However, some caution is needed in this context. Thus, assumptions about what conditions are favourable for political stability have changed very considerably over the years. For example, anyone familiar with the literature on political stability will be aware that relative equality of incomes in a society was long considered an important factor in underpinning the durability of liberal-democratic political institutions in Western Europe and North America. Few of those who examined the issue in the decades following the Second World War ever imagined that liberal-democracy would prove to be compatible with the levels of income inequality to be found in the world's mature democracies in this century.

Peace has such positive connotations that most people consider it a desirable objective, perhaps even the most desirable objective, of political activity both domestically and internationally. That increases the temptation to conflate peace with other desirable objectives, such as justice. The widely used concept of human security tends to lend itself to such conflation. Failing to resist such conflation seems to me to be a mistake, particularly insofar as it encourages the belief that hard choices between different desirable objectives can be avoided. An obvious example in the case of Northern Ireland is the unwillingness to accept the proposition that peace (and not just the peace) may require people in this society to forego the pursuit of justice for all of the victims of the Troubles. Admittedly, this issue does not have a direct bearing on attempts to measure how peaceful a society is. The temptation is to include dimensions that are readily amenable to measurement, such as economic well-being in the society. The problem is that this may or may not be related to the level of tranquillity in the society.

Notes

[1] Galtung, 1964, 1996

[2] For example, Mckeown, 1989

[3] Fromm, 2002

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