

Peace is more than the absence of violence and depends on our ability to maintain sustainable relations and deal with structural violence.

Speaker

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European
Peace
Conference

Peace is *not* only the absence of violence

Dagmar Punter on understanding the multifaceted nature of peace

We are excited to announce **Dagmar Punter** as a speaker on peace at the European Peace Conference on Perpetrator-Victim Dynamics in Amsterdam, 2025.

Dagmar Punter

Dagmar Punter is a peace researcher. Her PhD research project 'What does peace mean to you?' explores the factors that shape public peace perceptions. She also invites people to visualise peace in her research. Oscar, the founder of the Peace Conference came across Dagmar as she was recommended by Henneke Brink, a peace mediator who is also an ambassador of the conference.

What do you mean with 'peace is not the absence of violence'?

"Academic research defines *peace* roughly in two ways. Most commonly used to define peace is the term *negative peace*, or the absence of war and violence. This definition is about 'what it is not', about absence, hence the term 'negative'. Yet, it does still not define 'what it is'. That's where the concept 'positive' peace comes in. This is about what conditions support peaceful relations, justice and societies in which people can flourish to their full capacity. Even while living with differences. We, however, know less about what indicators could capture these everyday experiences of positive peace. It would mean that peace is not one thing, but multifaceted and might include conflicting narratives and values about what peace is and how it can be achieved. In my research, I aim to connect both schools of thought. After all, is there such a thing as a peaceful society, or a so-called 'post-conflict' society when violence can be systemic as well? Or what forms of peace can exist amid violent circumstances? I seek to move beyond binary-thinking of war versus peace, victim versus perpetrator, micro versus macro, global north versus south, and us versus them. So, I ask myself: If violence is part of human nature and the way we organise ourselves, then what does this mean for our understanding of peace? After all, there will always be conflict and friction since people and groups have different worldviews, interests, and oppositional needs. How can we sustain peace, use the benefits of friction, while reducing harmful aspects of conflict? Eventually, what is not harmful for one, can be perceived as such by another. Thus, can we find patterns in people's subjective experiences of both *violence* and *peace*?"

Does thinking in terms of perpetrators and victims help us understand 'peace' better?



"I would say that thinking in terms of perpetrators and victims is a simplification. I myself rather like to think in grey tones. After all, people can switch roles over time. I would say: it depends on *when* you ask *whom*. Is someone resisting an oppressive regime through violence a perpetrator or a victim of that regime? How peaceful is our society really, if we think about systemic injustices like discrimination and racism? Do we perceive humans as warlike and aggressive by nature or do we see them as creatures built to work towards cooperation and peace? Or can we speak of a blend of the two? To what extent do we identify with the perpetrator or the victim –or maybe both? Can a bad person also have good qualities? Or maybe more personal: Can our process of growing up also change our judgements about our parents? The victim-perpetrator terminology seems to mostly derive from an interpersonal realm. Can we also apply this thinking to analyse intergroup conflicts? Can opposing groups have things in common and, for example, both carry burdens of committing and receiving violence? Does this change how we approach conflict resolution and mediation? And does this categorisation take into account how our perceptions can change through conversation, reflection, and time? Not to justify the harmful impact of violence but, I prefer letting go of the rigid distinctions between classifying people, groups or systems as victims or perpetrators. This does make my research more uncertain, ambiguous, fluid, and maybe vague. Yet, at the same time, it gives more potential towards moving on. After all, conversations with a focus on who is the perpetrator or victim carry energies of blame and shame and stimulate us versus them thinking, which is different than what happens when we exchange perspectives. In fact, if we would consider both roles as static states, this would create difficulties to achieve future reconciliation. When peace has many different aspects, why can perpetrator-victim dynamics not be complex too? We need to look at it in a multi-faceted way. In fact, one's understanding of peace can disadvantage, oppress, and outweigh the perception of others. For dominant groups, peace can have different meanings than for people subjected to the implementation of such 'peace'. In short, peace for the one does *not* mean peace for the other. Allowing these complexities will help understand what sustaining peace in practice means."

Peace for the one does not mean peace for the other.

Publications

- Punter, D. (15-03-24) Guest contribution by Dagmar Punter: 'This is supposed to look like a dove' – engaging the public, visualizing peace. (Part 1). Link: <https://www.imageandpeace.com/2024/03/15/guest-contribution-dagmar-punter-part-i/>

Want to learn more? Join us in person or online.

European Peace Conference on Perpetrator-Victim Dynamics

"We are not at war, but not at peace either," said the new NATO Chief, Mark Rutte. "If you want peace, prepare for war." Is Europe at a crossroad towards more polarisation, identity politics, and war? Reflections on our human nature may help us find a sensible way forward.

At this year's peace conference, the first of its kind, an international group of scholars, experts and practitioners, will seek ways to explore how perpetrator-victim dynamics run through our lives, families, business and politics.

With guest lectures, workshops, personal and group reflections, we seek to embody the latest expertise from the research on war and peace.

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