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## **Johan Galtung: A Foundational and Contested Figure in Peace Research**

**Valentina Bartolucci\***

Johan Galtung occupies a unique and foundational position in the field of Peace and Conflict Studies. Over more than six decades, his work has shaped Peace Research as both a scholarly discipline and a form of praxis. His contributions span conflict mediation, international relations, sociology and cultural analysis, but he is perhaps best known for two enduring conceptual frameworks: the distinction between positive and negative peace, and the Violence Triangle. These concepts did not merely introduce new terminology—they fundamentally redefined how scholars and practitioners understand the causes of conflict, systems of domination, and the prospects for sustainable peace (Bartolucci 2025).

This special issue is dedicated to critically revisiting and creatively applying Galtung's ideas, particularly in response to contemporary challenges. In a world marked by increasingly complex forms of violence—ranging from organized crime and gender-based oppression to climate instability and cultural polarization—it is crucial to reassess the conceptual tools we use to analyze and transform these realities. While Galtung's frameworks have been critiqued, they remain strikingly relevant. The contributions in this issue explore his legacy through theoretical refinement, empirical analysis, and interdisciplinary dialogue, offering new insights into how Peace Research can respond to today's most pressing issues.

A defining aspect of Galtung's scholarship is the expansion of the concept of violence (Barash & Webel 2021). Traditionally associated with physical harm, violence was redefined by Galtung to include structural and cultural forms (Galtung 1964; 1969; 1990). Structural violence refers to systemic inequalities that prevent individuals and communities

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from meeting basic needs. Cultural violence encompasses the symbolic systems—religion, language, ideology—that normalize or justify both direct and structural harm.

This conceptual expansion has influenced multiple disciplines, yet has also sparked debate—particularly concerning the vagueness of “structural violence” and its overlap with concepts like power and inequality.

Chiara Chisari’s article addresses these critiques by engaging with Michel Foucault’s notion of “states of domination,” offering a more precise account of how structural violence restricts agency and reinforces oppression. Her contribution clarifies the inner logic of Galtung’s triangle and refines the links between structural and direct violence.

Tiziano Peccia’s article applies the Violence Triangle to the underexplored domain of organized crime, analyzing the Ascione Clan of the Camorra in southern Italy. He examines the complex gender dynamics within criminal organizations. Through qualitative analysis of secondary sources, the study sheds light on the roles of key female figures—such as Antonella Madonna and the mother of Natale Dantese—who are often perceived as peripheral, yet in practice are central to the reproduction and transformation of violent power structures.

What makes this analysis particularly compelling is the way it uses Galtung’s insights to unpack the interplay between cultural norms, structural inequality, and direct violence in a hyper-patriarchal, criminal environment. The transformation of Antonella Madonna—from participant to leader, and ultimately collaborator with law enforcement—demonstrates how gender can serve both as a stabilizing and disruptive force in violent systems. This article also bridges Galtung’s peace theory with insights from political anthropology and feminist scholarship, offering a nuanced and context-sensitive reading of how violence operates outside the state-centered paradigm traditionally addressed in Peace Research.

The relevance of Galtung’s theory for contemporary geopolitical crises is further highlighted in the article addressing structural violence in the Sahel region of Africa. Maria Enow Ayuk & Kudakwashe Chirambwi use Galtung’s insights to interpret the persistence of political instability, socio-economic exclusion, and environmental vulnerability in the region. In this context, structural violence is manifested in weak governance, ethnic marginalization, economic disenfranchisement, and a lack of access to justice and security.

Importantly, the paper introduces climate change as a “violence multiplier,” which exacerbates existing structural conditions and undermines adaptive capacities. The result is a vicious cycle of deprivation, militarization, and political dysfunction. While acknowledging the limitations of applying Galtung’s theory in isolation, the article argues that his framework remains a powerful analytical tool—especially when complemented by an understanding of post-colonial power dynamics and intersectional vulnerabilities. The authors call for holistic, interdisciplinary approaches that can bridge environmental science, political theory, and peace studies in addressing complex, overlapping crises.

One of the most explicit institutional applications of Galtung’s thought has been the development of *peace journalism*, an alternative media paradigm that challenges the dominant narratives of “war journalism.” Peace journalism aims to go beyond the immediate events of violent conflict to uncover root causes, give voice to marginalized actors, and explore potential pathways for resolution and reconciliation. Inspired directly by Galtung’s normative and analytical commitments, this approach calls for a transformation not only in how news is reported but also in the underlying assumptions about conflict itself.

Adriana Valente offers a critical appraisal of the peace journalism model, situating it within broader debates in media theory, textual analysis, and critical discourse studies. It evaluates the innovative potential of Galtung’s proposal while also acknowledging the challenges it faces in terms of professional norms, institutional pressures, and audience reception. Ultimately, the paper argues that peace journalism remains a vital—if contested—tool in the struggle to democratize public discourse and promote more constructive approaches to conflict representation.

To complement the academic reflections on Johan Galtung’s theoretical legacy, this special issue also includes three personal testimonies from individuals who had the opportunity to know and work with him directly. These contributions offer a unique and valuable perspective, shedding light not only on Galtung’s intellectual achievements, but also on the human qualities, convictions, and experiences that shaped his lifelong commitment to peace. By including these voices, the issue seeks to honor Galtung not just as a pioneering scholar, but as a person who inspired others through his presence, dialogue, and action. This editorial choice reflects a deliberate attempt to integrate both

scholarly and experiential perspectives, by including contributions from those who knew Galtung personally as well as from experts long engaged with his theoretical work.

Umberto Gori offers a personal and heartfelt tribute to Johan Galtung, whom he came to know during a series of Peace Research meetings at “Cesare Alfieri” Institute. Fondly recalling Galtung as an “Italian Viking”, Gori portrays him as both a utopian and a realist — an innovative theorist with a strong commitment to applying his ideas in real-world conflict resolution. Gori highlights Galtung’s enthusiasm, even when speaking in Italian, and his openness to diverse cultures, shaped in part by his connection to Japan. He remembers Galtung as charismatic, often smiling and playfully childlike, yet also deeply critical of structural inequality and injustice. Though Gori chooses not to focus on Galtung’s scientific contributions, he praises him as a pioneer and innovator, a true apostle of peace, and the “Gandhi of the West.” He concludes with a quote by Seneca—“*I was not born for one corner; the whole world is my homeland*”—which he sees as perfectly capturing Galtung’s global spirit and mission.

Erika Degortes' article pays tribute to Johan Galtung as a central figure in the development of Peace Research over the past six decades. Celebrated for his innovative concepts—such as structural and cultural violence, and the distinction between negative and positive peace—Galtung not only sparked critical debate but also actively engaged with diverse audiences around the world. Through his boundary-pushing ideas and deep commitment to understanding the roots of conflict, he educated and inspired generations of scholars and practitioners. However, the article also emphasizes that Galtung’s intellectual path was deeply shaped by key individuals who influenced his worldview. It focuses on three such figures: his father, August Galtung, who offered moral and social guidance; philosopher Arne Naess, whose ecological thinking expanded Galtung’s vision; and Daisaku Ikeda, whose spiritual and practical wisdom enriched his approach to peace. The piece explores how these thinkers contributed to the formation of Galtung’s ideas and to the enduring impact of his work in peace and conflict studies.

In his essay, Timothy Braatz explores Johan Galtung’s most influential theoretical contributions, particularly his conception of Peace Studies as a value-driven, applied social science aimed at reducing violence. Central to Galtung’s approach is the “violence triangle”—direct, structural, and cultural violence—which Braatz uses to examine how dominant historical narratives can perpetuate harm.

Focusing on U.S. narratives about World War II and militarism, Braatz critiques ideas like “America won the war” as forms of cultural violence that obscure structural inequalities and justify ongoing military interventions. Drawing on Galtung’s idea of “deep culture,” he contrasts Western and Eastern worldviews, especially their differing notions of time and peace. Through a case study of the U.S.-Japan conflict, Braatz shows how historical myths legitimize imperial ideologies and conceal the true beneficiaries of war. He argues that peace historians must challenge these narratives, promote cultural and structural peace, and engage in ethically committed storytelling.

Ultimately, Braatz presents Galtung as a model for historians seeking not just to interpret the past, but to transform the present in the service of peace.

In addition to the personal testimonies, this special issue also features two invited articles by scholars who have extensively studied Galtung’s work. Their contributions offer in-depth analyses of key aspects of his theoretical legacy, highlighting the ongoing relevance and critical potential of his ideas in contemporary Peace and Conflict studies. These invited pieces enrich the volume by engaging with Galtung’s thought from a scholarly perspective, demonstrating how his concepts continue to inform research and debate across disciplines.

No work on Johan Galtung would be complete without a reflection on his intellectual biography and the evolution of his thought over time. Antonino Drago’s contribution traces his pioneering role in articulating a theory of nonviolent conflict rooted in structural critique. At the same time, the article critically assesses the limitations of Galtung’s later work, particularly his eclectic turn after the Cold War and his controversial political stances.

Fabio Fossati’s final essay focuses on Galtung’s influence on the political culture of the European moderate left, particularly during the transition from modernity (marked by Cold War bipolarity and welfare state ideals) to postmodernity, characterized by multiculturalism, identity politics, and the ideology of political correctness. By comparing these two historical phases, the author probes the compatibility between Galtung’s normative commitments—nonviolence, social justice, dialogue—and the shifting values of leftist politics in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Taken together, the contributions in this special issue offer a compelling portrait of Johan Galtung not only as a towering intellectual figure but also as a provocateur whose ideas

continue to spark debate, adaptation, and reinvention. His frameworks remain indispensable to Peace Research, even as they require constant revision and contextualization. Whether addressing international geopolitics, gendered violence, media narratives, or environmental insecurity, the authors gathered here reaffirm the value of Galtung's legacy while pushing the boundaries of its application.

In doing so, this issue invites scholars and practitioners alike to view peace not as a static end-state, but as an ongoing process—a dynamic negotiation between justice, power, and the possibilities of transformation.

It is important to acknowledge that Johan Galtung is a deeply complex and sometimes controversial figure, whose intellectual legacy cannot be fully captured within the confines of a single special issue. His thought has continuously evolved and provokes ongoing debate and reinterpretation. Having had the unique privilege of knowing Galtung personally and corresponding with him for many years, I can attest to the richness of his ideas as well as the depth of his commitment to peace, which transcends purely academic contributions.

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