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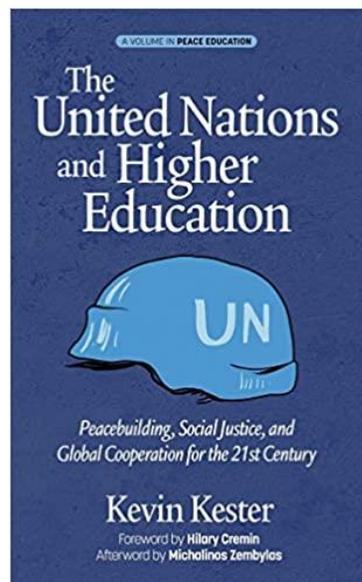
Kester, K. (2020). *The United Nations and higher education: Peacebuilding, social justice, and global cooperation for the 21st century*. Information Age Publishing.

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In his recent book, *The United Nations and Higher Education*, Kevin Kester focuses on how academics conceptualize and teach the field of peace and conflict studies (PACS) within the context of the United Nations (UN). Kester uses participant observation, documents, surveys, and interviews to provide a clear, up-close picture of PACS as it is taught at a UN graduate-level school. He situates his work within scholarship in the sociology of education, and in particular, in the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and critical race theory. The book's major research agenda is defined by four questions:



- How do contemporary PACS educators (mainly associated with the University of the United Nations) conceptualize and enter into the field?
- What forms of capital do the educators possess and deploy in their negotiation of the field?
- How do they translate their conceptualizations into individual practices to teach for peace?
- How might these practices (both individual and collective) perpetuate social inequality and structural violence?

Kester adopts the pseudonym, University of the United Nations, to encompass two distinct UN universities, the United Nations University in

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Tokyo, Japan, and the University for Peace in San Jose, Costa Rica. In contrast to other universities that host PACS, “the sole mission of the school, since its inception, is to teach and research for peace under the umbrella of the parent organization’s peace mission” (p. 3). Kester’s professional association with PACS began at the Tokyo campus of Teachers College, Columbia University in 2004. He continued his education at the United Nations University for Peace in Costa Rica, and earned a Ph.D. in Education, Globalization, and International Development from the University of Cambridge. He teaches international education and global affairs in the School of Education and the School of Global Affairs at Keimyung University, South Korea, and is a frequent contributor to the PACS literature.

Kester’s review of current theoretical and pedagogical debates in PACS education leads him to raise concerns about issues such as the use of frameworks of practice of PACS in higher education, with particular reference to the UN universities, and the extent to which such frameworks can be understood from diverse postmodern/poststructural perspectives. Recently, several critical PACS scholars have argued that the tools of PACS education should be employed to understand social violence, and that “they are also tools for understanding violence in the field itself” (p. 25). For these scholars, “PACS education is inherently political and reproductive of the agendas of those who oversee the educational interactions” (p. 25). Indeed, all education may fruitfully be viewed, in the words of Kester, from the perspectives of contestation, conflict, and contradiction. If PACS is political, it should differ in different societies. Kester explores PACS in English-speaking societies and in Mandarin Chinese-, French-, Japanese-, and Korean-speaking societies. One of his findings is that the global spread of English enhances the prominence of institutions in the English-speaking world. While peace programs based on local traditions and Indigenous knowledge do exist, Kester suggests “efforts to move PACS beyond its Western limitations remains a major challenge for the field today” (p. 36).

Kester continues his critique of the Western limitations of PACS with an exploration of the concept of *Whiteness*. In contrast to earlier writers who viewed Whiteness in purely racial terms, Kester agrees with those who view the concept in terms of ideology. One implication of this perspective is that “those who might be racialized as the other in the previous framing of Whiteness could also be the local perpetrators of colonialism and structural racism” (pp. 38-39). Whiteness now is seen as supporting the European/Enlightenment traditions of the nation-state, state militarism, technology, positivism, liberal democracy, and free market economies. In sum, the concept is used to support White privilege, and both White and non-White social activists may benefit from aspects of Whiteness, such as elite Western education. At the same time, development activists rarely challenge their assumptions that they are doing good and bringing progress by providing the Other with Enlightenment traditions.

Kester devotes six chapters to the study's analytical framework, methods, and empirical findings. The analytical framework builds primarily on the ideas of Bourdieu. For Kester, Bourdieu's key concepts are habitus, field, and capital. Briefly, *habitus* refers to all of the circumstances and experiences (e.g., family, history, peers, class, and culture) that influence how one thinks and acts. *Field* refers to the context in which one acts. Examples include discipline, professional practice, and bureaucracy. *Capital* refers to the possession of resources that enables one to influence the field. The forms of capital are social, cultural, economic, and symbolic. Kester is particularly interested in cultural capital, such as academic qualifications, titles of authority, and affiliations. It should be noted that given the required understanding of the theoretical background and Kester's penchant to form new concepts such as "peace habitus," "post-structural violence," and "second order reflexivity in PACS," the book's appeal is likely to be limited to graduate students and scholars with a strong interest in higher education in the UN and in PACS. At times, the discussion of PACS is so complicated by theoretical concepts that the reader is diverted from the focus of the work, higher education at a UN university.

Kester conducted his research at the University of the United Nations from January to June 2015. He interviewed a cross-section of 25 lecturers. The advantage of the small number is that it allowed for an in-depth focus. At the same time, the small number brings into question the generalizability of the results. Still, Kester's interpretation of his findings is plausible. In addition to the 25 interviews, he and his assistants observed 20 classes; reviewed thousands of pages of materials, syllabi, and UN archival documents; surveyed 108 graduate students; and interviewed 40 graduate students. A major strength of Kester's approach is that he compared what was said in the classroom with discussions that took place outside the classroom. The addition of this informal material enabled him to uncover the relationships between conversations in the artificial formal classroom and those that took place in more natural, real-world informal settings.

A significant finding from this book points to the tension between a UN university's mission in theory and in practice. Although according to its mission statement a UN university has a global orientation, for many faculty and students, "the university is also imputed as Western-centric, and expostulated as neoliberal in orientation" (p. 111). A pedagogical implication of this Western-centric orientation is that nonrational approaches such as experiential learning, emotion and affect, theater, and self-reflection should be used in classrooms. In addition, if social transformation is to take place in PACS and in this UN university, the Western emphasis on the individual must be transcended to include broader structural analysis, and the dominance of Whiteness must be overcome. In this case study, the largest number of students comes from North America and Europe who pay for the majority of their tuition, hence, supporting this Western-centric orientation of PACS at the UN University. A related finding is that during eras of fiscal austerity, poorer nations are less likely than wealthier nations to provide

scholarships for their students. Concerning faculty, more than one half (13 out of 25) of those interviewed came from Europe or North America, and all except two were educated in Western institutions. Given these small numbers, one can see why institutional changes (e.g., broader recruitment and economic support for non-White and non-American and non-European students and faculty) must be made if UN universities are to live up to their mission as global institutions. These observations will sound familiar to anyone who is interested in addressing inequalities at all levels of education.

Another important finding is Kester's argument, based on 180 hours of classroom observations, that the dominant style of teaching is "participatory engagement" in contrast to lecture-centered teaching. However, this interactive approach was criticized by a number of students and faculty who viewed it as biased toward Western concepts. Students from the Global South found the emphasis on interaction to be difficult to adjust to, while students from Europe and North America were familiar with this approach.

Kester reiterates that academics' stress on the importance of education as a remedy for conflict and violence holds true provided that "the premises of the field are robustly examined" (p. 178). He concludes with recommendations for future research, theory, and practice. Unfortunately, his recommendations are little more than restatements of his findings and give little clear sense of direction. For instance, his final recommendation is that scholars "seek to expand the field beyond its Western corpus, and re-engage critical peace pedagogy with structural critique and transnational and post-critical ways of knowing and being" (p. 190). The need for structural analysis to supplement psychological and social-psychological analyses is well taken. However, rather than focusing exclusively on the limitation of these analyses, Kester could have placed the structural analysis within a well-established sociological tradition, such as the work of Emile Durkheim or Karl Marx. Although *The United Nations and Higher Education* is a well-researched, well-documented case study, due to its limited empirical basis and heavily theoretical orientation, its audience is not likely to go beyond scholars who possess a deep interest in PACS in general and in the universities of the UN in particular.

About the Reviewer

Mark Oromaner is a sociologist and independent scholar who, prior to retirement, taught sociology and served in several administrative positions at a number of colleges. His current interests are in the sociology of higher education, the sociology of knowledge, international relations, and social theory. His most recent reviews have appeared in journals such as *Education Review*, *H-Net Reviews in the Humanities & Social Sciences*, *Choice*, *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, *American Studies Journal*, and *Planning in Higher Education*.



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