(Peace research, conflict research, democracy research. A handbook)

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Research on peace, conflict, and democracy in the social sciences addresses some of the core challenges to organising human life in complex societies. This is the starting point for this new handbook edited by members of the Austrian Conflict-Peace-Democracy Cluster (CPDC) in 2016. It brings together these three distinct but interconnected research fields because their respective issues are both tightly interconnected and cut across traditional disciplinary boundaries, but are usually treated separately as distinct research programmes or (sub-)disciplines. Consequently, it argues for a more systematic integration of the three fields into a transdisciplinary research movement (p. 216) that combines academic excellence with social relevance and is, more or less explicitly, driven by a normative impetus. It addresses scholars, as well as students and the broader German speaking public, as the protagonists of such an endeavour and sets out to provide them with an introduction to, and overview of, the relevant academic debates and their insights for building a peaceful society that resolves conflicts by non-violent and democratic means.

The handbook is the output of the first working phase of the CPDC. Launched in 2011, the CPDC was first hosted at the Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt and since 2016 at the University of Graz and unites three Austrian non-university institutes. 14 out of the 19 contributing authors are or have been affiliated with one of these four institutions, that are also represented by the four editors of the handbook: Gertraud Diendorfer is the executive director of the Democracy Centre Vienna (DZW); Blanka Bellak is a former director of the Austrian Study Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution (ASPR); Anton Pelinka is a former director of the Vienna-based Institute of Conflict Research; and Werner Wintersteiner is the founder and a former director of the Centre for Peace Research and Peace Education at the Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt. The CPDC is dedicated to both fundamental and applied research as well as to civic engagement through outreach, practice transfer, and further education. The handbook is the result of a thorough process of self-reflection and captures not only the state of the art in the three fields of peace, conflict, and democracy research,
but also their institutionalisation and their contribution to public debates and political thinking in Austria and beyond.

The twofold interest, in the academic foundations and the social relevance, of research on conflict, peace, and democracy is reflected throughout the volume organised in two main parts. The first and larger part consists of five overview chapters that cover, in turn, the three fields of conflict, peace, and democracy research as well as the two corresponding pedagogical areas of political and peace education. The second part comprises 20 much shorter chapters in an encyclopaedia of key concepts from and related to the three fields, organised in alphabetical order. In addition, a concluding chapter addresses the specific challenges and opportunities of transdisciplinary research. The volume is framed by a concise introduction and conclusion by the editors as well as brief information on the contributing authors.

The first three chapters in the first part of the volume take stock of the state of the art in the respective fields of research and their development in the Austrian and broader, German and international, context. In his chapter on conflict research [Konfliktforschung, pp. 17–34], Anton Pelinka starts from the observation that conflict permeates society and is thus essential to the social sciences at large and cannot be reduced to a (sub-)discipline. Instead, he conceives of conflict research as a distinct field of research focusing on the phenomenon of societal conflict that draws on theoretical and methodological expertise of the social sciences more broadly but has its own terminology. He highlights direct links to both democracy and peace research, referring to democracy as a specific, and non-violent, mode of domestic conflict management and resolution, and to peace as the specific angle of conflict research in international relations. Wilfried Graf and Werner Wintersteiner address the foundations and perspectives of peace research [Friedensforschung. Grundlagen und Perspektiven, pp. 35–86], also highlighting the interconnectedness of peace research with both conflict and democracy. At the core of peace research, they identify a normative impetus and a clear orientation towards taking action and finding solutions that make peace research more of an ‘academic “political movement”’ (p. 46) that is distinct from other fields such as security research. While they concede that it is often treated as a distinct (sub-)discipline, strongly embedded in political and social science, they argue for developing a fifth generation of peace research as an ‘inter-discipline’ (pp. 45, 79) that subscribes to an inherently inter- and transdisciplinary approach. In contrast to the inherently interdisciplinary nature of the previous two fields of research in the social sciences, Dieter Segert situates democracy research [Demokratieforschung, pp. 87–123] more narrowly in political science. Tracing the (co-)evolution of debates in democratic theory and the ‘Zeitgeist’ of public opinion since 1945, he sheds light on the most recent critique – or ‘crisis’ – of democracy in times of globalisation and socio-economic inequalities. Against this background, he identifies three main areas of current empirical and theoretical research on democracy: authoritarianism, the measurement of democracy, and the social and cultural context of democratic order.

In line with the CPDC’s commitment to social relevance and its more or less explicit normative agenda behind the study of conflict, peace, and democracy, the last two contributions in the first section address the fields of political and peace education. Gertraud Diendorfer and Johanna Urban (both DZW) take stock of the historical development, current trends, concepts and theoretical approaches in ‘political education’ [Politische Bildung. Historische Entwicklung, aktuelle Trends, Konzepte
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und Theorieansätze, pp. 124–179], understood as a means to foster the willingness (and capacity) for participation in democratic politics. Discussing the various connotations of the English terms of civic, political, and (European, democratic …) citizenship education, they point to the difficulty of finding a terminology that is compatible with different national histories and understandings. Susanne Reitmair-Juárez, in turn, focuses on the developments, focal points and methods of peace education [Entwicklungen, Schwerpunkte und Methoden der Friedenspädagogik, pp. 180–214], also reflecting on the various nuances in the German terminology and the relationship between peace research and peace education. Both contributions trace the historical development of their fields in Austria and observe an overall weak institutionalisation as compared to other European countries and in particular the situation in Germany.

The encyclopaedic entries in the second part of the handbook cover topics as broad as the different schools of thought in international relations theory, alongside entries that discuss concepts fundamental to the social sciences in general such as society and power as well as more specific practices such as peace building. Starting with definitional questions, most chapters mark their concept(s) as ‘essentially contested’ and point the reader to the pluralistic nature of theoretical and methodological debates. In combination with systematic cross-references and suggestions for additional readings, they provide a good starting point for further studies rather than making false promises of quick and easy answers. Contributions are especially strong where they explicitly discuss their concept(s) in relation to their usage in or relevance for peace, conflict, and democracy research, which is unfortunately not the case for all of them. In particular for readers new to these fields, it would have been helpful to provide additional orientation by explaining the choice of concepts covered, e.g. through more systematically identifying them in the first part. Given the limited number of entries as compared to a full-fledged encyclopaedia, it becomes all the more important to tease out the handbook’s unique take in contrast to other encyclopaedias or handbooks in each separate field or the social sciences more broadly.

The concluding chapter by Gert Dressel and Katharina Heimerl addresses the specificity and challenges of transdisciplinary research [Transdisziplinäre Forschung. Oder: Doing Transdisciplinarity, pp. 378–386]. Understanding transdisciplinarity as involving both various disciplines (inter- or multi-disciplinarity) as well as non-academics, they do not advocate the integration and dissolution of distinct disciplines, but for jointly addressing common problems and research questions. They successfully clarify the often diffuse notions of transdisciplinary research, but the chapter only cursorily links back to the substantive issues of conflict, peace, and democracy as examples of transdisciplinary research agendas. Turning against the fragmentation of social sciences and knowledge, the editors conclude by repeating their plea for (re-)integrating the three fields both at the academic level and with regard to their social relevance for education and civic participation. Thus, the handbook aims for ‘cognitive democracy’ (p. 390) as the prerequisite for the democratic and peaceful resolution of conflicts in society.

Their self-critical admission for the need for a whole series of handbooks in order to fully implement their agenda points to what can be construed as the handbook’s main weakness. The editors’ introduction and conclusion convincingly argue the necessity and added value of bringing the three fields together in one handbook.
However, individual contributions are more or less successful in substantiating the overlap of the three fields in terms of their issues and, theoretical and methodological, approaches and in sketching the outlines of a joint and truly transdisciplinary research agenda. Similarly, the disciplinary foundations of such an endeavour remain vague, with almost half of the authors self-identifying as political scientists and others as scholars of history, sociology, or the social sciences more broadly. Interestingly, a number of authors also self-identify explicitly as peace researchers, suggesting that this field has a stronger identity as a distinct research community than the other two. In the end, the handbook’s agenda might have been overly ambitious for its limited space, as each section could have easily been developed into a separate volume. Still, the handbook succeeds in presenting a profound and concise guide to the three fields of research and makes a great contribution by pushing scholars, students, and the broader public to reflect upon their responsibility in the social sciences and in society for facing the timeless challenges of conflict, peace, and democracy.