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Workable World Trust Essay Contest

Studying toward a more workable world

At twenty-four years old and entering my final year of undergraduate studies, I am not a traditional non-traditional student. I am not an adult that returned to university after already accumulating vast experience in career and family, nor am I a student that has taken a little longer to figure out what it is that she wants to do and contribute to this world. What I am is this: an inquisitive person that has come to recognize life as a journey that is far from linear, exploring a world that is far from simple.

I am a perpetual student of the world and global affairs, studying to earn my degree in international relations and cultural anthropology at Webster University in St. Louis, Missouri, where I have lived for most of my life. While my adolescence was not void of political interest or involvement, my main focus and interest was photography and, in particular, photojournalism. When asked who my favorite photographer was, I would answer, "Dickey Chapelle" -- one of the first female war correspondents. It was not any specific photograph that made me admire Dickey Chapelle but who she was and what she did; she was a persistent woman who was determined to cover conflicts with her camera. I wanted to be like Dickey Chapelle and so many of the other photographers that embedded themselves in tumultuous situations in order to show and tell the stories that the world needed to see and hear. I admired -- and still do -- their pursuit of bringing to light those darker things in the world that sometimes people forget to remember or acknowledge.

A series of events led me to leave high school at sixteen and enroll in a university across the country at seventeen. I studied Spanish instead of photography, and within a semester, I realized that I was not where I needed to be. I returned to St. Louis and pursued photography, making connections with anybody I could, though not necessarily within the field of journalism. Decisions here and there, intermixed with opportunities and significant reflection and growth, led me to reimagine the future that I wished to become my reality. My thoughts returned to Dickey Chapelle and all of the actors that play a role in understanding the conflicts that affect our world and our relations with each other. I wanted to find my own path to becoming a part of a more workable world and that began with learning about conflicts and how we think about them.

After an almost five-year hiatus from university, I enrolled at Webster University with the intent to better understand the world and its workings in order to serve the international community in matters of (counter)terrorism and security. Since returning to my formal education, I have taken several courses within both of my fields of study that are relevant to and intersecting with issues of conflict, such as the broader issues of international security, the role of nongovernmental organizations within the global arena, theories of international relations and foreign policy, international political economy, as well as potential causal mechanisms of conflict, such as environmental challenges. It has been my goal to connect the two disciplines in which I study in such a manner that encourages, if not requires, self-critique and reflexivity regarding the approaches to global governance and the challenges of international security.

Throughout my time at Webster University, I have sought to draw linkages between course material and my interests in security and conflict studies. Recognizably, security, peace, and conflict are the watchwords of the twenty-first century and in the post-9/11 world and with

such emphasis on them, their connection to global processes and other political systems is also undoubtedly of interest. With this in mind, in the fall semester of 2014, I completed one of my necessary research requirements for my degree in international relations during an international security course. My research sought to answer questions of causality regarding incidents of terrorism and their relation to state power. With extant literature focusing primarily on the role of regime type and the likelihood of terrorist activity, I aimed to examine another causal mechanism in order to explore why incidents of terrorism occur. While the results of my research were inconclusive, the project provoked further questions and the possibility of interrogating the deployment of state power by particular regime types rather than dichotomous assumptions of weak versus strong and authoritarian versus democratic states. Additionally, in papers completed for other courses, I have attempted a critical look at the problematization of environmental security in international relations, the securitization of U.S. foreign economic policy, as well as the obstacles of reconciling sovereignty with the Responsibility to Protect doctrine.

Through my work as an undergraduate student, I have become well aware of the challenges the United States and the international community writ large faces in our increasingly globalized world. My studies have exposed me not only to the issues at hand but have also provided me the training and tools to think critically through them. The opportunity to attend the 2015 “Creating a Workable World” conference at the University of Minnesota would be an invaluable experience that would only further contribute to my growth as a student of the world and provide greater insight into the arena of global affairs of which I wish to be a part after completing my university studies.

In line with my research interests that I have mentioned above, I want to discuss further one of the problems faced by the world community, which is the challenge of social accountability and responsibility. While this has since manifested in different arenas within the international community, most notably the concept of the Responsibility to Protect (RtoP) that developed formally from the 2000 International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty report of the same name, it has failed to find firm footing and consensus among actors. I do not intend to argue for RtoP as a doctrine or a (in)formal regime governed or enforced by a specific body. Instead, I want to begin the discussion of one of the issues that has been made apparent in our more globalized world that have made visible the failure of social accountability and responsibility, particularly of the states of the Global North.

One of the most important issues in the current zeitgeist -- or at least, I argue, should be if it is not -- is that of environmental degradation. Among international relations scholars, there is a particular shift in thinking when it comes to environmentalism, such that preventative measures are the exception and not the norm. Security and a reactive mentality supersede prevention in such a way that also supersedes accountability and responsibility; issues will be dealt with once they arise but it is not a problem until it actually affects the initial actor negatively.

Environmental issues and the degradation of the planet, of course, do not end at specified borders, whether man-made or nature-made. In classrooms today, environmental degradation is a go-to example of the tragedy of the commons. Yet, in spite of this, most states still refuse to enact the measures necessary to effect change.

I bring up the pervading issue of environmental degradation because it demonstrates a clear fissure that runs parallel to and intersects with other problematics affecting the international

community. Critical environmental security studies not only problematize security discourse and the securitization of the environment, but they also interrogate the narratives that emerge from neoliberal discourses that enable the perpetuation of exploitation by certain actors of others and the earth's resources. This, too, elucidates another issue that requires examination -- consumption, economic inequities, wealth inequalities, and the system of underdevelopment that continues long after states behaved explicitly as imperial actors. Environmental degradation is one link of the causal chain of climate change, which in turn is a significant causal mechanism of instability in certain regions where lack of resources has given way to violence and conflict.

States, in particular the states benefiting from the status quo, must recognize that their actions are not simply harmful to those far afield. Their behavior ultimately affects the stability of the international community writ large. Quite possibly, through unintended consequences (or a consequences-be-damned mentality), this instability expands and causes a breakdown in space that allows and enables further violence, both structural and physical. The environment is only one example of a globally systemic violence and exploitation that contributes to even greater and more pronounced modes of violence that affect more and more people.

To address this problem of accountability and responsibility in order to create a more workable world, I suggest the need to further critical peace and conflict studies insofar as it is imperative to understand the systemic and structural violence that enables instability and ultimately the failure of the nation-state to protect and care for its populations. This is not simply a call to examine the internal inconsistencies and on-the-ground obstacles within the territorialized boundaries of a singular state or even a specific region; rather, it is a call to interrogate the global systems of interchange and exchange that affect not only a state in the

European Union but a tiny island state in the vast Pacific. It is an inquiry into and deterritorialization of all that connects and thereby affects every person and every state and how these more deeply complex issues intersect into lines and nexuses of potential conflict and instability. Moreover, students, policymakers, politicians -- every person -- should be encouraged to think about and critically engage with their own positionality and privilege within current hegemonic structures and what it is that they truly wish to make of the world. After all, our worlds are no longer confined to our neighborhoods or our cities or our countries writ large. In the twenty-first century, we occupy a single, globalized world, interconnected and interdependent via economies, cultures, languages, communications, the environment, and most importantly, we are intertwined as people.