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Rengger on War: Conversations, Subversions, Disorientations

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Abstract

Kennedy-Pipe's recent provocation invites us to consider Nicholas J. Rengger's writings on war in pacifist terms. Rengger's subversive war scholarship is timely in its disruption of mainstream war narratives: it emphasises the centrality of uncertainty, judgement, and failure in place of the rationalisation, sanitation, and fetishisation of war so prevalent in post-9/11 politics. However, we ultimately disagree with the characterisation of his thought as pacifist and offer an alternative reading of his legacy that frames his interventions as anti-Pelagian and, as such, deeply resistant to theoretically-driven practice. We explore the connections and divergences between Rengger's writings and critical war and peace studies discourses, arguing that although disruptive of mainstream narratives of war and peace, Rengger's work continues to be predicated on a problematic Eurocentric war/peace binary and a more thoroughgoing commitment to 'deal in darkness' would wrestle with the colonial legacies that continue to shape global politics.

Keywords

pacifism – violence – anti-pelagian – critical theory – decolonial theory

To read ‘Nicholas Rengger: A Pacifist Sensibility?’ is to be offered a gift by Caroline Kennedy-Pipe. Her engagement with Rengger’s reflections on war, peace, and the human condition allows us, as readers, to hold space with his ideas once more. As former PhD students who were mentored by Nick Rengger in St Andrews in the years immediately post-9/11, we are grateful to Kennedy-Pipe for bringing his words to life again, and for her provocations in relation to the reception of his thought. Although we ultimately disagree with her characterisation of Rengger’s thought as (proto-)pacifist (Kennedy-Pipe, 2025), we agree that Rengger is a subversive scholar of war whose writings continue to be profoundly relevant in this time of global crisis (Kennedy-Pipe and Patton Rogers, 2025).

Rengger’s academic writings make clear his ‘desire to stay firmly within the walls of the academy’; however, Kennedy-Pipe (2025; Kennedy-Pipe & Rogers, 2025, p. 654) rejects his characterisation as disconnected and disengaged from contemporary politics. Instead, she argues, a seemingly ‘aloof’ Rengger can be re-read as an ‘engaged, subversive and disruptive’ thinker for our time, with important implications for thinking about contemporary war (Kennedy-Pipe and Rogers, 2025, p. 654). Kennedy-Pipe portrays Rengger as deeply attuned to the imperfection of our modern life and to the dangers of language and actions that elide the horrors of war and the continued passion for war (Kennedy-Pipe and Rogers, 2025; Kennedy-Pipe, 2025). Our response to her paper develops this line of thinking, arguing that Rengger’s legacy lies in the provocation of conversations across IR discourses via his thoughts on order (1999), political theory (2000), and violence (2005a).

Rengger’s writings on war are notable for their rejection of simple narratives (Rengger 2008), including clear demarcations of good and evil (Rengger & Jeffrey 2005), robust and certain justifications of war in the face of unknowing (Rengger, 2007), and the obfuscation of killing and terror via ‘virtual’ or remote war (Rengger, 2002). Against the rationalisation and sanitisation of war, Rengger emphasises the centrality of uncertainty, judgement, and the likelihood of failure. It is this attunement to the very *humanness* of war that makes him a disruptive and subversive scholar of war—a characterisation with which we agree. His disruption of mainstream war narratives raises important questions about his relationship with pacifist thought, as Kennedy-Pipe (2025) invites us to reflect upon. In responding to Kennedy-Pipe, we acknowledge that pacifism

is a diverse and rich tradition encompassing a variety of perspectives. As Alexandre Christoyannopoulos (2022) writes, pacifism is malleable, encompassing a tradition of thought marked by specific and critical opposition to war as opposed to more general critiques of war and political violence. For Christoyannopoulos, pacifism offers

a rich and nuanced critique of the violence of the international system, which helps interrogate the fetishization of violence of traditional readings of IR and invite serious considerations of alternative options.

CHRISTOYANNOPOULOS, 2022, p. 4

Hutchings' (2023) interrogation of the relationship between pacifist and feminist thought adds further nuance. She highlights the 'very broad range of positions' (p. 105) that emerge, saying that although narratives of feminist pacifism tend to focus on western traditions, with roots in maternalist feminism, the strength of feminist pacifisms lie in their diversity and the 'contingency, complexity and fragility' of the relationships built between pacifism and feminism (p. 106). Hutchings' critical engagement with pacifist thought teases out the role that gendered relations of power play in a world of states always on a 'war footing' (p. 110). In doing so, she argues for a 'this-worldly imagination of pacifism and nonviolence that does not wait for, but rather makes and practices an always uneasy and experimental peace' (p. 106).

Building on this critical engagement with violence and pacifism, we argue that Rengger's thought also offers a profoundly thoughtful critique of the fetishisation of violence in mainstream IR. We question, however, whether it is best understood as pacifist. Instead, we offer an alternative reading of Rengger's legacy that frames his interventions as anti-Pelagian and, as such, deeply resistant to theoretically-driven practice (Rengger, 2017; Schick, 2022). In what follows, we engage with his reading of the Just War tradition, before reflecting on the connections and divergences between Rengger's thought and critical discourses (Barkawi, 2016; Brighton, 2019; Hutchings, 2023, 2025). We argue that his sceptical provocations enrich pre-existing debates on discourses of pacifism and International Relations, and that putting his thought in conversation with pacifist thought and critical war studies is generative of the kinds of conversations Rengger relished.

In the wake of 9/11, Rengger's writings on war became more pointed and, Kennedy-Pipe remarks, 'more querulous' (2025, p. 22). She describes his growing frustration with the co-option of the just war tradition amidst an international order increasingly fascinated with the possibilities of preventive war, framed in a legal, rights-based, narrative. The post-9/11 turn to preventive war,

he argues, is cavalier and reckless: 'if we have taken preventive action, we have let the genie of war out of its bottle, and we will have the devil's own job to put it back' (Rengger 2008, p. 955). The unintended consequences of intervention are deeply consequential, more generally. Rengger quotes Taylor who notes, 'we will do battle against the axis of evil and networks of terror and then we discover to our surprise and horror that we are reproducing the evil we defined ourselves against' (Taylor, 2007, cited in Rengger 2013b, p. 147; Kennedy-Pipe and Patton Rogers, 2025, p. 662). Rengger acknowledges that 'the search for peace has a venerable lineage rooted in Enlightenment thought, which holds that the problem of war is solvable via a movement away from the political and social forces which encouraged it' (Kennedy-Pipe, 2025, p. 11)—a rationalist belief that sought an actionable 'short cut to heaven' (Rengger, 2017, p. 107; Oakeshott, 1999).

Rengger's subversive rejection of interventionism and preventive war has been interpreted by Kennedy-Pipe (2025) in this issue as (proto)-pacifist, at least in terms of its practical outworking. However, in what follows, we argue that his anti-interventionism is best understood not as *pacifist*, but as *sceptical*, and as inextricably entwined with his anti-Pelagianism. Rengger's anti-Pelagianism orients him in countercultural ways to theory and practice in IR scholarship. In *Dealing in Darkness*, Rengger explains what he means by anti-Pelagianism, saying:

It is a term that escapes all the usual (and often rather tired) divisions that tend to bedevil contemporary political thought at whatever level, 'left/right', 'conservative/radical', 'realist/liberal' and so on; it allows me to focus on the sceptical, anti-perfectionist, non-utopian assumptions that inform theoretical reflection on human activities (including politics) without being reducible to any particular 'theory' (or even a group of 'theories').

RENGGER, 2017, p. 4

At the core of Rengger's anti-Pelagianism is a rejection of certain knowledge and theory-driven practice. Modern rationalist thought, he argues, is driven by a desire for certain knowledge that then might be wielded in practical politics. The promise that one might know what 'ought to be done' and the consequent marriage of theory and practical politics is a seductive utopianism; however, it is deeply misguided, 'seduced by the lure of thinking that it can "help"' (Rengger, 2000, p. 769). Rengger's refusal of utopianism is twinned with a refusal of realist tragedy which, again, tells too simple a story and remains wedded to 'the logic of [this] world' (Rengger 2017, p. 168; Schick, 2022, pp. 81–82). Instead, he

posits a sceptical orientation to thinking about human life and global politics that accepts life as 'just life': attuned to failure and fallibility, alive to mercy and charity, committed to living in the present in all its messy complexity (Rengger, 2017, p. 76; Schick 2022, pp. 89–90).

Rengger distilled the notion of modern anti-Pelagianism over the course of many conversations and publications. At an International Studies Association conference panel discussion in 2004, Rengger professed his anti-Pelagian position on a panel on 'tragic IR', providing an antidote to the tragic realism of the other contributors. In a follow up article, Rengger (2005) professed an affinity to Oakshott's scepticism, as opposed to Morgenthau's notion of tragedy, teasing out the centrality of 'mercy and charity from their place of first importance in the relations of human beings' (Oakshott, 1996, p. 25). The Oakshottian choice to center mercy and charity is characteristic not only of Rengger's academic work, but also a wonderful reminder of how Rengger gifted the world a kinder interpretation of our mistakes and transgressions. 'We are all in the gutter,' he was wont to remind us, quoting Lord Darlington in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, 'but some of us are looking at the stars' (Wilde, 2014).

Returning to war, Rengger's anti-Pelagianism shaped his understanding of the just war tradition as a casuistic tradition, rather than a prescriptive set of legal rules to follow (Rengger, 2002). His critique of the way the tradition has become co-opted in the practice of war has parallels with Ryan's (2015) genealogy of modern iterations and interpretations of the just war tradition. However, there are clear disjunctions, too. Ryan's work interrogates the relationship of pacifism and the just war within the current world order, noting that while the just war tradition accepts the legitimacy of states and thus, their monopoly on the use of force, pacifism does not. Pacifism, he writes, has the power to transform the current world order into a 'truly global community' (p. 18). Ryan's delineation of a pacific teleology stands in distinction to Rengger's articulation of the just war tradition, but also, the anti-Pelagian mindset. On this he is clear: the anti-Pelagian mindset understands theory as simply that—as *theory*, and not a prescription for our relational journeys through the world (Rengger, 2017). Similarly, for Rengger, the just war tradition does not provide concrete guidance; instead, it is a space for reflection and action, where our agency is in evidence. When the tradition is returned to its original casuistic form, it provides a mode of reasoning that negotiates a perilous and uncertain world, taking heed of both our shared vulnerability and fallibility. Rengger's writings on the just war remind us not just of the fallibility of the human condition, but also of the centrality of judgment and failure, key themes across his oeuvre.

Returning to Caroline Kennedy-Pipe's characterisation of Rengger's increasing affinity with pacifism, then, what is our response? Kennedy-Pipe highlights

Rengger's frustration at the co-option of the just war tradition in the wake of 9/11 and she is alive to his emphasis on nuance and judgement. She writes, in the absence of a foregone conclusion on Rengger's pacifist tendencies, that 'he would, I think, ultimately have remained sceptical about any framework which eschewed context and judgment in favour of a blanket ban on the use of force' (p. 22). Despite this, she returns to the notion of a pacifist sensibility as increasingly influencing his political thought and engagement—a tentative conclusion, but a stake in the ground, nonetheless, saying: 'If not a pacifist, then perhaps increasingly beguiled by that philosophy more than any other' (p. 22).

We agree that Rengger offers an important critique of political violence, and one that in the context of post-9/11 politics was out of step with mainstream IR. In so doing, Rengger's writings 'interrogate the fetishization of violence of traditional readings of IR' (Christoyannopoulos, 2022, p. 4) in ways that resonate with pacifist thought. His invitation to problematize how we, as political (and relational) beings, orient ourselves to war and peace is a clarion call to think differently about the place of violence in global politics. As Kennedy-Pipe (2025) argues, this could be construed as a call to interrogate the possibilities of the 'critical lens' pacifism affords IR. Christoyannopoulos (2025) writes of the Russian invasion of the Ukraine as an invitation to begin this type of thinking. His reflections on pacifist possibilities in the face of invasion invite a conversation that both deepens, and challenges, traditional responses to the warist orthodoxy in IR. Kennedy-Pipe's (2025) engagement with Rengger's writings responds to this provocation to engage in more meaningful conversations about the role of pacifist discourses in the discipline. However, despite this, we push back against her move to conceptualise Rengger's work as proto-pacifist, noting that his anti-Pelagian subversion of traditional IR occupies a thoroughgoing scepticism that extends to pacifist thought as well. As we have already argued, Rengger's anti-Pelagian rejection of theory-driven practice precludes drawing a line between a particular way of understanding the world and implications for practice. Rengger maintains that theory cannot '*become* "practice"...become, of itself, an engagement in the world or give rise to such an engagement' (Rengger, 2017, p. 167, emphasis in original). Casting Rengger in pacifist terms is problematic in large part because of the way that this interpretation of his thought orients him to 'the world'. Rengger sought to 'stand outside the logic of [the] world' (Rengger, 2017, p. 168); narrating his anti-Pelagian scepticism as 'latent Pacifism' veers uncomfortably close to reinserting him into the world in ways he resisted.

We close by observing Rengger's influence on our own work before examining his anti-Pelagian subversion in the light of some of the concerns of critical war studies and suggesting some—perhaps unexpected—resonances, before

pushing his thought a little further. We have noted that Rengger's anti-Pelagianism shaped his attunement to the very *human* problem of war; this, in turn, has profoundly shaped our own orientation to and reading of contemporary politics. Although it may not seem obvious to trace our critical and feminist IR scholarship to Nick's mentorship, in fact our academic journeys owe a deep debt to our conversations with him over the years. For Kate, his mentorship instilled a deep distrust of tidy, progressive liberal narratives by introducing radical critical theorists prepared to 'deal in darkness' such as Theodor W. Adorno and Gillian Rose (Schick 2009, 2012). For Amanda, his mentorship provided the space to critically engage with the assumptions of human nature and agency (Beattie 2016, 2013), carving out pathways to engage with embodied forms of knowledge and emotions, moving past the singular, rational, individual to wonder at the potential for relational, global, entanglements (Beattie 2019a & 2019b).

Although Rengger's work tends towards the conservative, we argue that his deep scepticism of contemporary war discourses and practice resonate, on some levels, with the concerns of critical war studies. His anti-Pelagian insistence on close attention to the present informs his writings on war: he names the 'killing' it requires (Rengger, 2008, p. 955, cited in Kennedy-Pipe, 2025) and rejects its sanitisation and instrumentalisation in the service of future goals. In doing so, his writings accord with critical war studies' rejection of the 'certainty' of war fighting powers and an emphasis on the human over abstraction (Brighton, pp. 137–138). Critical approaches seek to meet the 'narratives and abstractions of war-waging power inside and outside government' with 'the authority of lived experience' (Brighton, p. 139). It would be a stretch to say that Rengger's work meets abstraction with lived experience; as Kennedy-Pipe notes, he was more comfortable 'raising questions of epistemology and judgement' (Kennedy-Pipe, 2025, p. 6). However, his very insistence on raising questions of epistemology and judgement, in a context marked by certainty and action, is itself subversive and disruptive—a decidedly critical intervention.

Bringing a critical war studies lens to bear on Rengger's writings highlights multiple resonances; however, it also points us to some of the limits of his thinking, particularly in relation to his conceptualisation of war and peace. The dominant view of war and peace in IR continues to be essentially binary and, despite the texture and nuance of Rengger's engagement with war, his concerns remained largely predicated on this understanding of war. His statement about 'let[ting] the genie of war out of its bottle' reflects the view that war is something decided by political actors, with observable origins based in particular choices. However, as Tarak Barkawi (2016, p. 203) argues, such a view remains caught in a Eurocentric binary whereby "war" and "peace" are sharply

distinguished'. What remains unseen is the deeper and more permanent war that shapes global politics:

from 1492, the encounter between what we now refer to as the global North and South has engendered near continual, if geographically dispersed, warfare and violent repression. Instead of war and peace, we have permanent war: as Isabel Hull remarks, “the colonial situation itself was identical to war”

BARKAWI, 2016, p. 205

On this reading, war cannot be neatly demarcated from peace; nor is it best understood in relation to sovereign nation states and their choices. Instead, as Barkawi argues, war must be contextualised in relation to a rich and complex web of interrelations—including imperial military histories: ‘histories, sociologies, and geographies of major and imperial warfare qualify and implicate one another’ (p. 211). Rengger’s subversive attunement to the violence of the state, then, could be pushed further in relation to the making of capitalist modernity, whereby colonisation, repression, and imperial warfare ‘provided the order that made possible capital accumulation and globalisation, that is they made possible modernity, and continue to do so’ (Barkawi, 2016, p. 211).

As we draw this piece to a close, we return to Hutchings’ (2025) engagement with critical feminist pacifisms that transcend Eurocentric binaries of war and peace. Hutchings highlights the contingency and failure of efforts to secure peace, arguing that ‘peace...cannot avoid contamination by war/violence in principle and in practice’ (p. 9). Although this acknowledgment of contingency and failure resonates with Rengger’s sceptical anti-Pelagianism, there are key differences. Critical pacifist feminisms are deeply informed by decolonial thought and practice, and attuned to the persistent legacies and hierarchies of colonialism (Hutchings, 2025; Escobar, 2020; Santos, 2016). Furthermore, these approaches do not stand at a distance from everyday practical politics. Although they refuse the rationalist (Pelagian) pursuit of ‘peace’, narrowly defined, they stand in sharp relief to Rengger’s Oakshottean insistence on a disjuncture between theory and practice (Rengger, 2017; Schick, 2021). On the contrary, Hutchings advocates grounded approaches that creatively and doggedly engage with the complex, political present *despite* the inevitability of failure. She describes this mode as ‘artisanal’, saying that in this mode, ‘peace feels its way, works with the materials to hand and does not know where it is going in advance’ (p. 11). Failure is inevitable and peace is always compromised, but this does not preclude political action. Instead, Hutchings’ writings on critical pacifisms invite a different relationship to action, seeing the worlds

of theory and practice as deeply entwined as we reflectively struggle towards alternative worlds.

We end, as we began, in gratitude to Caroline Kennedy-Pipe for her work in illuminating Nick Rengger's thought and for pushing us to wrestle more deeply with his legacy. She reminds us yet again of the ongoing possibility of the conversations his work inspires and his prompting to imagine the world otherwise. Perhaps counterintuitively, our own ever-evolving feminist and decolonial thinking has emerged in conversation with Rengger's anti-Pelagian thought and we continue to take inspiration from his commitment to 'deal in darkness'. Although Rengger interrogates the centrality of violence in the discipline and practice of IR in ways that resonate with pacifist thought, we argue that he is better understood as an anti-Pelagian thinker whose thought lies outside the immediate concerns of global politics. Standing outside 'the logic of the world', the value of Rengger's thought resides in the scepticism that runs like a thread throughout his work, which continues to subvert, disorient and carve out space for future conversations. In pushing Rengger's work further, however, we argue that his work continues to be predicated on a Eurocentric war/peace binary that shapes his engagement with war studies theory and practice. Drawing on critical and decolonial approaches, we argue that a more thoroughgoing commitment to deal in darkness necessitates a willingness to go beyond simple demarcations of war and peace to wrestle—in theory and in practice—with ongoing colonial legacies of trauma and violence in a complex global order.

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