

## ARTICLE



# Mutual Recognition as a Means of Peaceful Conflict Transformation\*

Sonia París Albert

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## Abstract

Why do we tend to use violence to deal with our conflicts? This is one of the questions we often ask ourselves when we become aware of this tendency to deal with conflict situations we experience in everyday life. In response, we claim that it is easier to use violence, that there is no other way to do things or that we are simply used to acting that way. But are we right? This paper challenges these claims, arguing that there are several alternatives to regulate conflicts and that we have the capacity and means to do so peacefully. The key is to accustom ourselves to rebuilding our peaceful abilities and to strive to implement new, non-violent habits. To this end, peaceful conflict transformation is presented as the preferred method for positive conflict regulation, and its main characteristics are discussed. Special emphasis is placed on the value of mutual recognition based on an analysis of Axel Honneth's theory of recognition, which reaffirms the role played by recognition in shaping human identity.



## Keywords

conflicts, peaceful conflict transformation, mutual recognition, Axel Honneth, human identity

## INTRODUCTION

We often wonder about our own identity in the different facets of our lives. Who are we? How do others see us? What are we like in terms of our family or jobs? We require an integral and fully constituted identity and for this, whether or not we are recognised seems to matter. At least, that is the argument put forward by the philosopher Axel Honneth, to whom I will refer in this paper.

My goal in this paper<sup>1</sup> is to study the theory of recognition, especially as espoused by Axel Honneth, in order to determine its importance in peaceful conflict transformation. My starting point is that the experience of mutual recognition contributes in several positive ways to the peaceful conflict transformation process. However, I believe it

is necessary to clarify certain points of Honneth's theory of mutual recognition. Consequently, this paper is divided into two sections: 1) Struggle for recognition and the shaping of human identity; and 2) Contributions of mutual recognition to peaceful conflict transformation.

## 1. STRUGGLE FOR RECOGNITION AND THE SHAPING OF HUMAN IDENTITY

Our capacity to recognise and our desire to be recognised as individuals are crucial to how human relationships develop. That is why maintaining personal

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relationships constantly requires this skill and this desire, regardless of the sphere in which the relationships exist. One might look, for example, at the case of the person who needs to recognise and be recognised to be successful in their career; the wife or mother who has to recognise and be recognised by her husband and her children to ensure the smooth functioning of her family life; the individual who must recognise and be recognised by his or her friends to be respected and form part of the group; or any one of us who seeks to recognise and be recognised in any of our identities. When we cross the street, hail a taxi or buy some doughnuts, we have the need to recognise the people we meet and the desire to be recognised by them.

Etymologically, 'recognition' means to discover or get to know something or someone again, derived from the Latin verb *cognōscere* ("to know", Corominas, 1961, p. 162) and the prefix 're'. Accordingly, this act of getting to know again opens up the possibility of seeing the people we meet throughout our lives with new eyes, focussing on traits and aspects that we had more or less ignored earlier on. That is when we hope to receive the same recognition from the other person, becoming aware of what characteristics we have in common as human beings and what differentiates us. This idea brings to mind the work of the political scientist Hannah Arendt (2005), who emphasised the plurality and equality of human beings when reflecting on the possibility we have to exercise power in a concerted fashion and on new ways to engage in politics in accordance with this power. The act of recognition helps us see what we have in common (*equality*) and what distinguishes us (*plurality*), to understand each other in general terms, as members of the human race, and specifically, as individuals.

This paper aims to take an in-depth look at mutual recognition and not at recognition in any other sense of the term. Ricoeur (2005, p. 29) clearly distinguishes some of these senses when he writes that they can be ordered as if they were a process, running from the active voice (recognise) to the passive voice (be recognised). He proposes a sequence of recognition as identification, recognising oneself and mutual recognition. In my view, the latter is the one that most clearly demonstrates the necessary contact between people, so crucial in shaping our identity as human beings, the value of *intersubjectivity* in our personal and interpersonal fulfilment (Martínez Guzmán, 2005; 2009).

The role of mutual recognition in the shaping of human identity has been studied, in particular, by Axel Honneth, a philosopher from the third generation of the Frankfurt School. Honneth has expressly devoted his work to formu-

lating a theory of recognition, which, for him, must explain many of the social practices responsible for the pathology of human reason (Honneth 2009, p. 7). In fact, this is one of the theses being put forward by the third generation of the Frankfurt School when it claims that certain current social practices are causing a pathological deformation of human reason. Building on this argument, Honneth underscores the value of reciprocal recognition to combat these social practices and argues that 'successful' experiences of mutual recognition could generate a change with a view to redirecting our minds towards a greater understanding of ourselves, of the people around us and of the situations and events taking place in our environment. I believe that the violent events reported daily by the media are examples of these social practices that lead to the pathological deformation of human reason. Our society is full of all kinds of interpersonal and international conflicts, which are proof of the current social injustice resulting from the use of violence in certain actions. According to Honneth's theory, the 'successful' experience of reciprocal recognition allows us to confront these situations using the alternative resource linked to our capacity to look at other people in order to understand them, to recognise them, to see what they are thinking and feeling. Only then can we stop and think about what is going through our classmate's mind before using violence against her; about what our neighbour is thinking before launching an attack against them; and about what our family is feeling before attacking them, even if only verbally. Of course, mutual recognition is not the only resource available to deal with these unjust situations, and it usually needs to be combined with mechanisms such as cooperation, effective communication and accountability. But its presence is necessary to help us see others not as simple objects in front of us, but rather as people who we must learn to share our experiences with, whether positive or negative.<sup>2</sup>

This means that Honneth's philosophy that reciprocal recognition is the core of social life (Basaure, 2008, p. 62) generates "*al mismo tiempo, una continuidad y una ruptura con los intelectuales de la primera generación de dicha escuela<sup>3</sup> y, en menor medida, aunque igualmente evidente, con su antecesor directo, Jürgen Habermas.*"<sup>4</sup> (Basaure, 2008, p. 59). Honneth attributes the same role to recognition that Habermas attributes to communication. For Honneth, the shaping of human identity depends on the degree to which and the way we are recognised (Honneth, 1997). This is true to the extent that, for him, those social groups that do not feel sufficiently recognised set up social movements to

2 Here, the adjective 'negative' need not be understood as 'violent', but rather as an experience with another person that may not have been favourable for one or both of the parties, but in which violence was not necessarily used. It is well known that we experience displeasure in our interpersonal relationships when things do not go well, even when we have not resorted to violence.

3 The author is using the term 'that school' to refer to the first generation of the Frankfurt School.

4 "a continuity of and a rupture with the intellectuals of the first generation of that school and, to a lesser extent, but equally clearly, with his direct predecessor, Jürgen Habermas."



channel struggles for recognition. This is where Honneth revives the 'struggles for recognition' previously examined by Hegel, placing the quest for mutual recognition at the centre, as it is both the cause and the desired outcome of these struggles. Consequently, according to Honneth, the interpretation of any social demand should be based on the struggle for recognition, even when dealing with a single individual who has the need to enhance the way he or she is being recognised. In accordance with this view, what truly motivates society and its agents is the possibility of being recognised in all one's facets. It is when this does not occur that the need to struggle to achieve the longed-for recognition arises.

I would like to take a brief look at the concept of struggle used in Honneth's theory. Ricoeur, (2005, p. 227) has complemented the use of the concept in this theory with the expression of 'states of peace', to give it a more positive meaning. Thus, he argues that "*la alternativa a la idea de lucha en el proceso de reconocimiento mutuo hay que buscarla en experiencias pacíficas de reconocimiento mutuo*".<sup>5</sup> It is true that *struggle* can be used with various meanings, but, in a figurative sense, it can be understood as the vigorous effort an individual or group makes to achieve something or make something happen without necessarily using violence. This is how I interpret the word within the framework of Honneth's theory, as I do not believe he is advocating violent struggle to achieve experiences of mutual recognition, but advocates the primacy of experiences of mutual recognition as the core of social life so that struggles can be conducted peacefully without the use of violence. In reality, there have been many social movements that have managed their struggles non-violently and exhibited the characteristics that Honneth cites in his theory.

Having made this clarification, I will now turn to how Honneth structures his theory, which is based on three types of mutual recognition, originating from three types of disrespect (Honneth, 1997).

- 1) Recognition of physical integrity, linked to the attitude of love and the value of self-confidence.
- 2) Recognition of people as members of a legal community with rights and obligations, linked to the attitude of respect and the value of self-respect.
- 3) Recognition of different ways of life, linked to the attitude of solidarity and the value of self-esteem.

Each of the three types of recognition is related to one of the defining facets characterising the human condition. The shaping of human identity depends on fulfilment, that

is, whether a person feels recognised with regard to their physical integrity, as a member of a legal community and with regard to their specific way of life. At least, that is what Honneth (1997) notes when he claims that human integrity owes its existence to experiences of mutual recognition and that, therefore, all people need to feel recognised in all three of the aforementioned ways in order to feel fully realised.

Based on this interpretation of mutual recognition as a shaper of human identity, Honneth classifies the three types of recognition as if he were dealing with a process. He places recognition of physical integrity first, referring to the reciprocal recognition for an understanding of our physical appearance. According to Honneth, these experiences of recognition take place as a result of the attitude of love, although here this is understood not only in the "*sentido limitado que el concepto ha tomado desde la valoración romántica de la relación sexual*"<sup>6</sup> (Honneth 1997, p.117), but in a broader sense "[...] *el amor representa el primer estadio de reconocimiento recíproco, ya que en su culminación los sujetos recíprocamente se confirman en su naturaleza necesitada y se reconocen como antes de necesidad*"<sup>7</sup> (Honneth 1997, p.118). Thus, here "[...] *el amor debe concebirse como un ser-sí-mismo en el otro*"<sup>8</sup> (Honneth 1997, p.118), which is a lifelong need.

The experience of this mutual recognition encourages the value of self-confidence, that is, of people feeling greater confidence in themselves. Needless to say, when we see ourselves physically recognised and valued, we feel better. However, when this is not the case, we find the type of disrespect that prevents the smooth development of this reciprocal recognition and is linked to restrictions in our ability to use our own body freely. This situation occurs when, for example, a woman is prohibited from using her own body due to the control exerted over her by a male.

Second, Honneth (1997) turns to our recognition as members of a legal community with rights and obligations in order to describe the type of mutual recognition that emphasises legal relationships:

*"En el 'reconocimiento jurídico', [...], se expresa que todo sujeto humano, sin diferencia alguna, debe valer como 'un fin en sí mismo', mientras que el 'respeto social' pone de relieve el valor de un individuo, en la medida en que se puede medir con criterios de relevancia social. En el primer caso, como muestra el empleo de la fórmula Kantiana, estamos ante el respeto universal de la 'libertad de la voluntad de la persona'; en el segundo, por el contrario, ante el reconocimiento de realizaciones individuales, cuyo valor se mide por el grado en que*

5 "the alternative to the idea of struggle in the process of mutual recognition must be sought in peaceful experiences of mutual recognition."

6 "restricted sense that the concept has acquired since Romanticism's revaluation of intimate sexual relationships."

7 "[...] love represents the first stage of reciprocal recognition, because in it subjects mutually confirm each other with regard to the concrete nature of their needs."

8 "[...] love has to be understood as 'being oneself in another'."



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*una sociedad las experimenta como significativas.*"<sup>9</sup>  
(Honneth 1997, pp.137-138)

Therefore:

*"[...] en los dos casos un hombre es respetado a causa de determinadas capacidades, pero, en el primero, se trata de aquella cualidad general que le constituye como persona, y en el segundo, por el contrario, de cualidades particulares que le caracterizan a diferencia de otras personas."*<sup>10</sup> (Honneth 1997, p.139)

This form of mutual recognition entails the understanding that all people are entitled to be part of a legal community with the ensuing rights and obligations. That is how the value of self-respect is generated in a person, as individuals clearly also feel more respected and better about themselves when they feel they are part of a given community. Where this is not the case, it is due to disrespect preventing such membership and the subject's exclusion from society becomes clear. For example, these excluding attitudes are present in the ways that certain people and institutions treat people from other countries, especially the poor. In reality, the treatment of those who emigrate from their countries hoping to find better living conditions elsewhere often leaves a lot to be desired, which encourages the type of disrespect discussed here.

Finally, Honneth includes recognition of different ways of life, by which he means our capacity to show solidarity towards lifestyles that are different from our own. Not everyone has to live the same way, like the same music or have the same cultural or religious traditions. We must learn to respect, value and understand those who do not live the way we do, but certain minimum standards with regard to respect for basic human rights must be enforced. These are laid down in the Minimum Ethics designed by Cortina (1992), although we must take into account the principles of cordial reason described in one of her more recent books (Cortina, 2007). Acting this way leads to enhanced self-esteem, as we also usually feel better about ourselves when we realise that our way of life is accepted. Otherwise, we show disrespect for other people's habits, which, while different, are just as valid as our own.<sup>11</sup>

Going through these three states of mutual recognition results in human integrity and, therefore, generates the yearned-for struggle to achieve mutual recognition.

Honneth's philosophical theory on mutual recognition has taken on dramatic importance today, to such an extent that it has been questioned in other studies of this issue. It has even been debated alongside Nancy Fraser's theory of social justice in the book *¿Redistribución o reconocimiento? Un debate político-filosófico* (Fraser and Honneth, 2006). The Spanish edition of this book, which I cite here, clearly shows that Honneth starts from an intersubjective interpretation of mutual recognition, whereas Fraser's work is based on a much more sociological view. For Honneth, people shape their identities based on intersubjective relationships of mutual recognition, whereas in Fraser's view, recognition is linked to social structures from which one must work to encourage the recognition of all people. In this case, to prevent instances of disrespect that give rise to a lack of recognition, one must transform social structures that have already been institutionalised (Zurn, 2003). This is why Fraser notes that social justice also depends on redistribution policies and not just recognition (Fraser and Honneth, 2006), while Honneth, as discussed above, places the full burden on mutual recognition.

## 2. CONTRIBUTIONS OF MUTUAL RECOGNITION TO PEACEFUL CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

The presence of conflict in contemporary society was already hinted at in the previous section. We experience all kinds of interpersonal conflicts, constantly featured in the media alongside news about armed conflicts and acts of terrorism affecting hundreds of thousands of people. People appear to be conflictive, even if this does not mean that we are naturally violent. There is no denying the existence of myriad conflicts or the fact that most of them are dealt with violently; however, it is also true that we have the skills and capacity to regulate them through peaceful means (Martínez Guzmán, 2005, 2009). The problem is that we have become used to using violence to regulate our conflict experiences, and it is now quite difficult for us to spend the time required to learn alternative means, even if we understand that it is increasingly necessary to start doing so.

9 "[In] 'legal recognition', the idea is expressed that every human subject must be considered an 'end in itself', whereas 'social regard' emphasises the 'worth' of an individual, insofar as it can be measured according to criteria of social relevance. As the use of the Kantian formulation indicates, we are dealing in the first case with universal respect for the 'freedom of the will of the person', and in the second case, by contrast, with the recognition of individual achievements, whose value is measured by the degree to which society deems them significant."

10 "[...] In both cases, human beings are respected because of certain traits. In the first, however, this is a matter of the general feature that makes them persons at all, whereas in the second case, it is a matter of the particular characteristics that distinguish them from other persons."

11 It should be noted that the validity of the actions advocated here is always subject to the theories of interculturalism and the minimum values entailed in respect for basic human rights.





To implement this change in mentality and lay down new habits, we can begin by considering the thesis put forward by Muñoz (2001), whereby it is not conflict itself that is negative or positive but rather the means we use to address it. If this is true, we only need to use peaceful alternatives to deal with our conflicts and prevent their most destructive consequences. Through the use of peaceful means we can learn to live with our conflicts, without the incessant need to put an end to them and without the fear of experiencing them. I would argue that conflicts can be interpreted as situations inherent in human relationships and that they encourage social changes when they are managed peacefully. Awareness of this interpretation, will not only allow us to accustom ourselves to seeing conflicts as part of our lives and as situations that, with effort and dedication, can be peacefully transformed but, will also prompt us to seek alternative methods to manage them.

Conflict transformation by peaceful means is one of these alternative methods, enjoying considerable success today, as witnessed by its use in most of the studies conducted at different research centres devoted to the study of these issues. Conflict studies previously used the terms 'conflict resolution' and 'conflict management'. The new name emphasises the value of the use of peaceful means for conflict transformation.

Conflict resolution emerged in the 1950s, emphasising the importance of ending conflicts 'at all costs' by underscoring their destructive consequences. Obviously, the fact that this method emphasises the harmful effects a conflict situation can have and presents it in a negative light makes us want to end it by any means. This aspiration gave rise to a host of criticism, beginning in the 1960s, when scholars began to question the need to resolve all conflicts and whether this need might not lead, in many cases, to a disregard for the criteria of justice (Lederach, 1995).

This questioning led to the emergence, in the 1970s, of the term: *conflict management*. This method has not been as successful, apparently heavily influenced by both the theory and practical aspects of business management. This management view proposed a more positive view of conflicts, although it continued to emphasise their destructive consequences. Its ties to business management led to a wide range of criticism beginning in the 1980s.

The theory of peaceful conflict transformation emerged in the 1990s, and has been quite successful from a methodological point of view, as noted above, although less so from a terminological one, as most research centres do not use this expression, but rather talk about conflict resolution.

The field of peaceful conflict transformation has given rise to an understanding of these experiences as situations that can be peacefully transformed, with studies on human beings' capacities and abilities to deal with conflicts in alternative ways, without resorting to the use of violence. The most important thing is to understand the tensions that caused a conflict, firstly to confront them and, secondly, to overcome them, generating new goals with the aim of ensuring the continuity of our relationships in the future (Fisas, 1998). This entails effort, dedication and – why not say it – both physical and psychological suffering, since, even in the absence of violence, people still suffer when they realise that the regulation process is not going smoothly or is dragging on without any agreement being reached (París Albert, 2009). Therefore, peaceful conflict transformation cannot be understood in an idealistic way, where everything goes smoothly, but rather must be interpreted as a difficult path that requires those taking it to contribute with all their willpower and commitment.

This commitment requires the responsibility to act by peaceful means and according to criteria of justice; to understand what other people are thinking and feeling; to see the conflict as a shared problem that must be addressed jointly if the goal is to reach communicative agreement; and to prioritise shared rather than individual interests. In short, I would argue, the responsibility to implement the following values (París Albert, 2009): 1) cooperation with other people (Rapoport, 1992); 2) empathetic perception of what the other parties feel and think about the conflict (Fisher et. al, 1999); 3) the ability to make use of new forms of integrative power, whilst avoiding forms of an authoritarian and subordinating nature (Boulding, 1993); 4) communication based on criteria of equality and freedom to reach communicative agreements leading to linguistic understanding (Cortina, 1985; Habermas, 1987); and 5) empowerment as the reconstruction of our capacity to deal with our conflicts without the need for help from other people<sup>12</sup> (Bush and Folger, 1994). It is important to mention here that Bush and Folger also talk about recognition, emphasizing this mechanism for peaceful conflict transformation. Therefore, these two authors would fit in the framework of the theoretical contents of this article.

Mutual recognition is among these values, as one arising from the commitment to peaceful conflict transformation. I have sought to give it a stronger presence in this paper due to its role in the shaping of human identity, according to the theory of Honneth (1997), and due to the contribution that it can make to the positive regulation of conflict situations.

12 Notwithstanding this proposal of a capacity for empowerment, it must be borne in mind that the peaceful transformation of a conflict may require the assistance of a third party to mediate and serve as a 'facilitator'. In other words, the mediating party does not offer solutions, but rather guides the parties involved in the process. Therefore, the concept of mediation is not contrary to empowerment as proposed here, as it nevertheless involves a reconstruction of powers to allow the affected parties to reach the necessary agreements.



Contribution of recognition to peaceful conflict transformation	
Recognition of physical integrity	1) Revaluation of the body and of its channels of communication 2) Revaluation of feelings
Recognition as members of a legal community and holders of rights and obligations	1) Revaluation of Kant's theory of respect and, to a certain extent, of his cosmopolitan law
Recognition of different lifestyles	1) Revaluation of specific ways of living life, subject to minimum ethical standards and theories of interculturalism

Recognition of physical integrity recalls one of the theses put forward in the phenomenological tradition by, in particular, Merleau-Ponty (1975), in which the human body is the intermediary between the self and the world. It is possible to say that a person observes the things around from the position of their body and that their perception depends on this position. An example might help to clarify this idea. We know that the perception of the world is different between those, for example, in Mexico and Spain. In Europe, many lifestyles found in other parts of the world are not understood: the world is understood based on how it is perceived, which depends on the location of the body. The value of perception again makes an appearance, as we must learn to change the angle of our bodies (change our perceptions) in order to understand what other people think and feel and thereby successfully bring about peaceful conflict transformation.

Two additional aspects allow us to reach this type of mutual recognition. The first is *body language channels*, the external aspect of gestures, eye contact, the sense of touch and distance to other bodies (Borisoff and Víctor, 1991). This implies that the body is also recognised as a source of communication. The second is that of *feelings*, which are beginning to hold a decisive position and cease to be subordinate to reason (Martínez Guzmán, 2005). Peaceful conflict transformation is highly dependent on the way we feel. Furthermore, it is very important to take into account the revaluation of traumatic experiences, which are very physical and produce lots of feelings that will influence our future experiences and our participation in future processes of peaceful conflict transformation.

This means that education in feelings to train us to 'feel positively' is advisable, without allowing ourselves to get carried away by excessively favourable feelings in the face of violence. This education refers to making people more aware of their feelings so that they have the ability: 1) to not be influenced by their feelings, so that they can avoid the negative consequences that these feelings can produce

in themselves, in other people or in nature; 2) to transform negative feelings into positive ones; 3) to realize the relevance of positive feelings in life if we want to have a peaceful world and want to put into practice the methodology of peaceful conflict transformation.

Recognition as members of a legal community and holders of rights and obligations allows us to revive some of the ideas proposed by Kant (1985) in his theory of respect (some have been mentioned in the previous section) and, to a certain extent, his cosmopolitan law, which contains two theses that I would like to mention here. Firstly, that no human being is more entitled to be at any given point of the planet for the mere fact of having been born there; and secondly, that any violation of a right anywhere in the world affects all other points.

Keeping these two theses in mind when implementing peaceful conflict transformation will help to forestall many of the conflicts that arise as a result of disregard for this second type of mutual recognition. For example, it will allow us to deal more easily and peacefully with conflicts relating to migration, already discussed in the second section of this paper.<sup>13</sup>

The recognition of different ways of life will favour the revaluation of those lifestyles that do not match our own. This will allow us to take into account theories of interculturalism, which emphasise learning between different cultures, strengthening the positive aspects of each one. At the same time, it reminds us of the minimum ethical standards that promote certain minimum standards of justice that must always be applied (Cortina, 1992), although without forgetting our sentimental rationality, as already seen in relation to the first type of recognition (Cortina, 2007; Martínez Guzmán, 2005; París Albert, 2009).

## CONCLUSION

This paper presents a synthesis of the different contributions mutual recognition makes to peaceful conflict transformation, highlighting some, and taking into account the general characteristics of this method of positive regulation of conflict situations. Honneth's theory of mutual recognition was the starting point, leading to an understanding of these experiences of mutual recognition (human relations) as basic to the shaping of human identity.

The ideas set forth in this paper offer insight into the words of Vinyamata (2003, p. 9):

*"La labor de un conflictólogo, aunque resulte paradójico decirlo, se centra en la paz, en la felicidad, no en el*

<sup>13</sup> Migration also involves the third type of recognition proposed by Honneth, although here I have used it only to exemplify the second type of recognition according to his theory.



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*conflicto. El oficio del conflictólogo consiste en facilitar, no dar, la solución a los conflictos, procurando la dignidad, la libertad y el bienestar integral de las personas y de las sociedades; la vida en serenidad y armonía con uno mismo y en relación al entorno.*<sup>14</sup>

The value of mutual recognition is implicit in this quotation if we take into account that conflict specialists will need to promote recognition if they want to achieve the “dignity, freedom and comprehensive welfare of people and societies”. ■

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<sup>14</sup> “The job of a conflict specialist, although it may seem paradoxical, is focused on peace, on happiness, not on conflict. The conflict specialist’s job consists of facilitating, not providing, the solution to conflicts, ensuring the dignity, freedom and comprehensive welfare of people and societies; ensuring life in peace and harmony with oneself and in relation to one’s surroundings.”



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## ■ About the author

**Sonia París Albert**  
[sparis@fis.uji.es](mailto:sparis@fis.uji.es)

Sonia París Albert is full-time researcher and lecturer at the Department of Philosophy and Sociology of Universitat Jaume I. She is Vice-Director of the UNESCO Chair of Philosophy for Peace and research coordinator for the international master's course in studies on peace, conflicts and development at Universitat Jaume I. She has carried out research projects at San Francisco University and lectured for postgraduate courses at the Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México. Her latest publication is entitled *Filosofía de los Conflictos. Una teoría para su transformación pacífica*, 2009.



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