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After Liberal Peace:
The Changing Concept of Peace-building

By Oliver P Richmond

Synopsis

It has become increasingly apparent that both the liberal peacebuilding framework of the 1990s (as defined by the UN's Agenda for Peace), and the more critical responses since (as outlined in the recent High Level Panel Report on UN Peace Operations), have been surpassed by current events and new dynamics.

Commentary

THE IDEA of peace, as mainly seen in the broad context of reconstruction and stabilisation at the end the Cold War in the 1990s, has undergone profound change. There has been some gentle criticism of the risks of literal understandings of liberalism, with its focus on human rights and democracy, and the shift to neoliberalism with its preference for market forces, as a basis for peacebuilding. In the 1990s, the debates were just beginning to push against the post-Cold War Washington/New Consensus on the aforementioned liberal and neoliberal approaches to peacebuilding, but these are now long dead in scientific terms.

It has now also become more doubtful as to whether an emancipatory form of peace - one that removes direct and structural forms of violence and offers the 'good life'- can be found by merely resolving identity issues and recognising the risks of Eurocentricism, without major structural international change and deeper forms of justice.

Liberal peacebuilding and its limitations

The 1990s' conceptual framework and understanding of liberal peacebuilding suffers from too many internal contradictions. These contradictions relate to how to resolve

conflict, bring about an emancipatory or empathetic peace, or to facilitate the local agency of conflict-affected citizens in their attempt to do more than cope in an everyday struggle.

The peace thinking and policy of its time translates into project programming, the nature of the liberal-democratic state, and the liberal-institutionalist international architecture. But this has not settled claims for autonomy and self-determination, nor deal with the progressive concerns of post-colonial and post-communist subjects. By the 2000s, with the Iraq invasion and subsequent statebuilding processes, both UN peacebuilding and international statebuilding have become conservative rather than emancipatory projects.

Critiques of liberal peacebuilding and the more recent neoliberal statebuilding projects - as theoretical and policy constructs - have underlined the limits of liberalism. Some 'local agency' has surpassed the states-system and the liberal international architecture in both practical and ethical terms.

Neither have the state, liberal international architecture and capital nor technology been able to resolve their contradictions, nor has there been much evidence of new emancipatory thought or policymaking in the areas of peace or international relations (IR), reshaping the state or the international system. The alliance of capital, technology, and oligarchy appears for now to have surpassed previous approaches to peace, resulting in a limited, negative-hybrid form of peace and unstable states in many post-Cold War interventions.

What after liberal peace?

It remains to be seen as to what type of peace, state, and international system will emerge in this latest epoch. We are now in a position to engage with peace in multiple layers: as a long-standing ethical project, as a response to colonialism, the end of WW2, the collapse of the Soviet Union, globalised flows, networks, and mobility, the environment, and new technology, thus rethinking emancipation and social justice for the 21st Century. These are admittedly broad matters of concern.

However, we know a lot more about an emancipatory peace by now, both in terms of war settlements since the Peace of Westphalia. That treaty of 1648 brought peace after the religious wars of Europe by establishing some of the modern norms of sovereignty, and in terms of structural violence and inequality after the Cold War. We know that military security and law and order are required. From the post-Cold War, we know that a state and its institutions, along with law and public services, are necessary. We know that empathy for everyday conditions and assistance with settlement and sustainable development are needed. We know that a recognition of identity is required, along with complex constitutional, and regional architectures, all lessons of the 21st Century.

We know that a global agreement on norms and international organisation is also necessary. Finally, we have learned that local agency and the everyday space are very important, and often in unexpected ways. We also now understand the limitations of political liberalism, of neoliberal approaches to capital and

development, the problem of the arms economy, and the limits of technology in achieving peace.

It is also clear that the mobility of people, capital, and arms, is now very important, and that the state and international architecture are incredibly static, and welded to territory and status to the point of moribundity. By contrast, the everyday capacity of conflict-affected citizen is often clever, hidden, committed, and ingenious. Increasingly this capacity is transnational and transversal, meaning it is able to negotiate powerful obstacles in subtle ways.

Perhaps it is becoming true to say that if an emancipatory peace is to overcome the contradictions caused in the liberal international system by highly mobile capital and arms, then everyday agency must also be mobile, networked, and agile.

Hints of a new approach?

Peace settlements, responses to structural violence, inequality, poverty, and environmental degradation operate in a core-periphery environment of IR; the most emancipatory step that an individual can take is to migrate away from violence, in the absence of state or international assistance. Indeed this has been the case since at least the 19th Century. The liberal state and the liberal international architecture, along with non-liberal states, are now in some ways obstacles to this sort of dexterous, mobile and networked, emancipatory form of peace.

After the warlords, the dictators, and the nationalists, the modernisers, the conservative state and 20th Century architecture actively block such mobility even where it is urgently needed (as today in Syria). The peace of Westphalia, the UN peace, and even the liberal peace, now look antiquated and anachronistic. Global inequality and untreated direct and structural violence is now causing a 'peace arbitrage' within international relations, where the failure of local politics and economics, the state or the regional and international organisation leads to not voice but exit.

The dexterity of local agency has made mobility through global networks, formal, informal, and shadow connections, the new emancipation and the new social justice. It is highly disaggregated, divisive, and individualistic, not to mention of dubious relational and ethical quality. It is a product (and a moral hazard) of the awkward mix of liberal internationalism, new technologies, and neoliberal and authoritarian capitalism that now dominates IR. It appears to be bypassing much weakened diplomacy, neoliberal states and regional organisations' (like the EU) multilateralism, and international organisation.

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