

The Local, the 'Indigenous' and the Limits of Rethinking Peacebuilding.

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Abstract

The acknowledgement of the complexities of post-conflict peacebuilding has, in recent times, spurred several critical perspectives seeking to shed light on what is left unexplored by mainstream approaches to peace, focussing particularly on marginalised narratives, experiences and struggles. Since this effort is understood to entail more than the simple extension of local ownership initiatives in essentially unchanged liberal frameworks, critical perspectives have been pushing peacebuilding towards radically different ways of thinking about governance, conflict and peace, by looking at examples coming from societies perceived as not invested in modernity or liberalism. This paper investigates this effort to open up the so-called local turn in peacebuilding to radical difference through engagement with worldviews coming from Indigenous communities, narratives and knowledge. The paper will argue that whilst this appears to have the potential to push peacebuilding beyond its comfort zone, by forcing theory to confront questions pertaining to human-centrism in the context of colonial erasure and structural violence, a turn to Indigeneity operated without a fundamental questioning of the impact of the legacies of liberal peace 'thinking', runs the risk of reproducing forms of appropriation and marginalisation of Indigenous knowledge, and might simply 'save' liberal peacebuilding through the back door.

Keywords: Liberal Peace, Post-Liberal, Relationality, Local Turn, Critique

Introduction

Post-conflict peacebuilding has been the subject of extensive scrutiny amongst academic circles for the past three decades. Supporters and critical scholars alike agree that the endeavour to build sustainably peaceful societies after protracted conflicts is one which involves a wide range of actors and often relies on multi-layered and multi-faceted missions, ranging from democratisation to economic restructuring, to security sector reform, to the establishment of transitional justice mechanisms. The acknowledgement of the complexities of post-conflict peacebuilding has spurred several critical engagements seeking to prove that the problem-solving attitude of liberal actors not only fails to deliver sustainable solutions, but also grossly generalises the perceived causes of conflicts, resulting in dogmatic, imposed solutions based on linear understandings of cause and effect. These critiques, associated in the literature with the so called 'local turn' in peacebuilding, have sought to shed light on what is left unexplored by mainstream approaches to peace, focussing particularly on narratives, experiences and struggles muted in favour of formalised and elite-based engagements. In the past decade, scholars critical of the liberal peace have therefore sought to engage with these marginalised communities, not simply to bring their experiences of conflict and peace to light, but also to critique the manner in which mainstream liberal peace approaches contribute to the marginalisation of these narratives. As such, perspectives suggest that engagement with the 'local', embedded in a power-aware framework that seeks to undermine the primacy and hubris of the liberal peace, can be useful in both empowering local communities (Hughes 2009), but also in rethinking the very premises of peacebuilding theory (Zanker 2017). Since this is understood neither merely as a replacement of top-down with bottom-up solutions, nor as the extension of local ownership initiatives in essentially unchanged donor-driven frameworks, critical perspectives have been pushing peacebuilding theory towards radically different ways of thinking about governance, conflict and peace, by looking at examples coming from societies perceived as not invested in modernity or liberalism. This paper investigates this effort to open up the local turn to radical difference through engagement with so-called alternative worldviews, and particularly those coming from Indigenous experiences, narratives and knowledge. The paper will suggest that critical perspectives are increasingly looking to Indigeneity in order to operationalise this fundamental change to peacebuilding theory. The paper will argue that whilst this appears to have the potential to push peacebuilding beyond its comfort zone, by forcing theory to confront questions pertaining to human-centrism, as well as to unpack the essence of ontologies of relation, a turn to Indigeneity, operated without a fundamental questioning of the impact of the legacies of liberal peace 'thinking', risks reproducing manipulative, appropriative and assimilative practices familiar to liberal modernity. As Māori scholar Linda

Tuhiwai Smith points out, ‘the construction of knowledges which all operate through forms of expropriation and incorporation of the other mimics at a conceptual level the geographical and economic absorption of the non-european world by the West’ (1999, 0.69). With this in mind, the paper finally suggests that openness to alterity should allow engagement with the legacies of liberal peacebuilding. This, in turn should enable a meaningful disruption of key ontological and epistemological assumptions aimed both at avoiding manipulating Indigenous knowledges for the benefit of saving peacebuilding, or framing them as a mere ‘Other’, sitting outside modernity.

The paper is structured as follows: the first section will introduce the logic behind a turn towards radically different modes of thinking about local experiences and struggles. The section will suggest that this represents a deepening of the initial intentions behind the local turn in peacebuilding, and an act to step beyond the notion of localisation as merely the reversal of top-down peacebuilding, towards a fundamental change in the onto-epistemological assumptions underpinning peace ‘thinking’. The second section will then suggest that efforts to radically rethink peacebuilding through engagement with alterity, motivated by relationality and decoloniality approaches, have opened up the field of inquiry to narratives from communities, particularly Indigenous ones, whose cosmologies rely on non-modernist principles. This, the section suggests, has the potential to enable scholars to think about peacebuilding beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries and to push analyses of social and political interactions toward materially significant and context-specific struggles which, in turn can help re-politicise the discussion on local agency. The final section will suggest that a turn to Indigeneity for peacebuilding is, however, not without potential pitfalls. The section will indicate three areas of concern where unchanged foundational attitudes to peacebuilding may reveal the persistence of the legacy of the liberal peace, and therefore the continuation of the hegemonic tendencies of the modernist framing of questions around peace and conflict. Within this unchanged framework, a turn to Indigeneity may, at best, not succeed in enabling a questioning of the endeavour of social transformation at the root of peacebuilding and, at worst, risks engendering forms of appropriation and manipulation of knowledges and experiences. Far from wishing to establish what is suitable for Indigenous communities or indeed how these experiences can be ‘used’, this paper’s ultimate goal is to raise some cautionary notes that might affect the manner in which critical theories of peacebuilding relate to Indigenous knowledge, communities and experiences. For this reason, whilst the insights raised in this paper might appear to paint a pessimistic picture of the prospect of critical purchase in rethinking peacebuilding, the paper’s ultimate thrust remains politically productive in its invitation to unsettle and disrupt some of the totalising and hegemonic makings of a potential shift.

Beyond the Local Turn

Post-war reconstruction and peacebuilding have long been the subjects of extensive scrutiny in the disciplines of Political Science and International Relations. Particularly in the context of increased multilateral as well as unilateral missions after the end of the Cold War, critical perspectives have led the charge against a plethora of problematic practices and outcomes of foreign interventions, from unstable peace agreements, to local resistance, to frozen conflicts, and inorganic post-war state-building provisions that seem to be fundamentally at odds with the needs and wants of local populations at large (Kappler 2013; Lemay-Hébert 2014; Valença 2011).

Whilst some perspectives focus primarily on foregrounding the implementation and operational hindrances to the successful transformation of war-torn territories into liberal democracies (Walter 2002), others aim their critiques at problematising, more fundamentally, the desirability and indeed the possibility of pursuing such liberal internationalist goals of transformation (Jahn 2007; Jabri 2006). The first of these two broad churches can be argued to be working through the problems of exporting liberalism, with a view to, at best, mitigate its by-products (Zartman 2005; Chesterman 2007; Paris 2010). These perspectives recognise liberal peacebuilding's failure to engage meaningfully with local realities; here, the solution is to further extend engagement with (and knowledge of) these unknown actors/agendas, often with a view to minimise local resistance, understand the roots of the conflicts further, and/or be able to decide which local actors may be more representative of realities on the ground (Paffenholz 2011). Where the emphasis on local agency is now ubiquitous across all approaches to peacebuilding theory, the second line of argumentation aims its critique directly at problematizing the liberal paradigm at the root of these peacebuilding failures. Scholars believe it to be fundamentally unable to engage with social orders where interactions are identified as illiberal, or conducive to conflict, without alienating or stereotyping these as 'Other' (Mitchell and Richmond 2011; Jabri 2013; Sabaratnam 2013). These perspectives, now consistent with the widely utilised umbrella term 'local turn' in critical peacebuilding theory (Leonardsson and Rudd 2015) believe that liberal peacebuilding is informed by modernist onto-epistemological assumptions which underpin a will to govern the social conditions it deems to be abnormal, through a mixture of co-option and imposition. This ethos, they argue, has generated inflexible, 'flat-packed' peacebuilding directives (Mac Ginty 2008, 145) which, at best fall short of the peacebuilders' own aims and, at worst, undermine local agency. Where the first set of approaches seeks to redress the issues within the paradigm, often through the extension of local ownership projects, the second focuses instead on the grey areas often disregarded by the rigid formality of problem-solving approaches, in order to operate a fundamental shift in the way in which relationships in conflict-affected societies are engaged with

and understood (Shinko 2008). In particular, perspectives focus on hidden local agendas and marginalised narratives, especially where these have been cast aside or erased by western-centric/northern ones (Boege *et al* 2008; Pogodda and Richmond 2015; Visoka 2012).

Nevertheless, the local turn has recently become the subject of critique for the continued reproduction of elements close to the liberal peace (Randazzo 2016), for its inability to provide clear grounds for a fundamentally different form of empowerment (Millar 2014) and for its power blindness (Nadarajah and Rampton 2015). Despite these shortcomings, efforts to push the reconceptualization of peacebuilding beyond its comfort zone have not relented. Mirroring the emergence of a sensibility towards relational ontologies in the wider social sciences, aimed primarily at rethinking the relationship between humans, the environment and structures of organisation and governance around them (see, for instance Latour 1993; Latour et al. 2011; Grosz, Yusoff, and Clark 2017; Raffnsøe 2016), critical scholars have supported the need for an ontological and epistemological revolution in peace-thinking, by way of relationality. A focus on dynamic relational processes, it is suggested, can help point to agency operating both in informal sites of power, as well within more structured and formalised sites such as organisations and institutions, to shed light on the emergence of politically meaningful and ‘different forms of agencies (discursive, embodied, spatial, material, relational)’ which in turn ‘impact local, national, regional and international politics’ (Visoka 2018, 4). Yet, a shift to relationality more specifically understood as ‘giving greater conceptual importance [...] to relations over entities by attending to the effects of the interactions and exchanges’ (Brigg 2018, 4) represents a quest for the ‘unveiling of the relational conditionality of beings on the planet’ (Torrent 2019, 4). This is meaningful to critical peacebuilding debates in that the unveiling of relationality is said to have profound effects on our understanding of the agential capability of humans in the world, including on the social engineering experiment we call peacebuilding. The emphasis on relationality, in particular, sheds light on the manner in which ‘different forms of thinking [...] do not necessarily reproduce a teleological historical narrative in which the human is the starring role’ (ibid, p.5), and often disrupt and resist linear and problem solving approaches, of which the liberal peace is a seminal example. This is an engagement with relations which seeks to push the debate away from ‘identitarian’ thought (Brigg 2018), suggesting that merely stressing the social construction of entities and identities might not be sufficient for radical alterity. This represents a step beyond the cultural relativist angle typical of most constructivist approaches to critical peacebuilding. As Bruno Latour suggests, even where cultural relativism can give space to accounts of conflict and peace which can allow for multiple experiences, the underlying premise is still one that universalises and flattens diversity by bowing to mononaturalism: ‘to the eyes of the cultural relativist, those cultural

differences make no real difference anyway, since, somewhere, nature continues to unify reality by means of laws that are indisputable and necessary' (2002, 15). Instead, relationality, offers a way beyond the nature/culture divide that can allow the social sciences 'to recognise the role of apparently inanimate matter in affecting and configuring situations and events' on the one hand (Cudworth and Hobden 2013, 445), but also to engage with the processes of co-becoming that shape the effects of what we perceive as agency itself.

This paper thus focuses primarily on the latter set of critical literature in order to interrogate the shift towards particular post-liberal, and especially Indigenous, modes of thinking, reflective of this relational sensibility within critical peacebuilding theory, which contend that a more fundamental overturning of the primacy of modernist assumptions about the world requires a radical openness to alterity and plurality beyond what is available to Northern/Western modes of thinking. For peacebuilding, this is a shift which, as Morgan Brigg suggests 'challenges conventional approaches, including cause-effect understandings' (2016, 65), and questions inflexible understandings of representation, participation and organisation. The shift is enabled by a reflection on the nature of the social and the political by engaging with 'burgeoning relational commitments and applying the idiom of relationality to maximise its potential in peacebuilding' (ibid, 62). As will be suggested below, this effort to engage with alterity appears to present critical approaches with the potential to push the reconceptualization of peacebuilding well beyond the comfort zone that has seen it primarily engaged with a generalised and entity-based understanding of resisting agency, under the local turn. The next section outlines how a turn to Indigeneity informed by relationality and decolonial thinking can address both the uncritical representation of decoloniality under a singular resisting form of agency, as well as the potential for inaction related to the fragmentary forces of acknowledging relationality.

Relationality and Decoloniality: Repoliticising the Critical Debate

At first glance, the endeavour of rethinking the premises of our engagement with conflict-affected territories does not appear to be fundamentally dissimilar to the ethos of the early local turn. Yet, the premises of this shift are different in several respects. In the first instance, critics note that 'everyday' approaches to agency in local turn perspectives have paid 'little to no attention to the relations through which individuals or institutions come into existence', thus often overlooking the manner in which power and political relationships structure the world (Brigg 2016, 63). As Brigg argues, frameworks that seek to engage with iterative difference and change, such as the promotion of informal 'everyday' agency and the focus on 'hybrid' processes in peacebuilding can

be associated with a 'thin' or a 'thicker' understanding of relationality. These support, respectively, 'ideas of relationship accompanied by the language of participation and empowerment' (ibid, 62), and a more substantial focus on the relations between entities rather than the entities themselves. Yet, whilst these two perspectives reveal something of the dynamic logic of change which affects the way in which individuals, institutions, communities and processes change over time, they are still understood as 'always necessarily a derivative effect of already constituted entities' (ibid, 60), where, in fact, emphasis on the relations themselves would reveal continued hybrids 'all the way down' (ibid, 60). Secondly, whereas early local turn efforts sought to promote engagement with the local, the 'local-local' or authentic local (Richmond 2009), understood as a general proxy for various different forms of marginalised agency, perspectives that focus on radical difference are also aware of the need to promote more efficient context-specific and power-aware engagements with emphasis on the individual conditions of exploitation which led to the marginalisation of certain communities and narratives. Specifically, for instance, Nadarajaha and Rampton (2015, 70) suggest that local turn perspectives focused on hybridity operate a shift in focus to the level of the 'local and the everyday', but retain an unchallenged reliance on liberal goals including the 'ideal end of "one state, one nation, one citizen"'. Additionally, as Sabaratnam (2013) noted, the turn to 'locality' in critical peace and conflict studies has so far done little to displace the core euro-centrism and western-centrism of narratives of peace and conflict, to the extent that even critical perspectives may simply be articulating the 'local' as yet another form of 'Other'.

How, then, to reflect on this continued flux, 'all the way down'? Brigg suggests the need for an approach which promotes 'increasing interest in complex and nonlinear systems and a willingness to explore – and in some cases to embrace – the possibilities of unintended consequences and emergent change' (2016, 65). In this framework, interactions and relations do not happen to 'already established' entities, but are fundamentally co-constitutive of the elements themselves, 'all the way down'. This is a framework which therefore places ontological priority on the 'nature of the relationships between entities rather than the characteristics of the entities' (Hunt 2017, 10). In the context of this paradigmatic shift, so-called traditional knowledges have come to be seen precisely as the key to acknowledging the limits of conventional ways of knowing associated with Northern/Western knowledge. To be sure, as Brigg (2016, 61) notes, 'these possibilities may already exist, in the underappreciated forms of kinship-based or otherwise laterally networked political community practised by some indigenous or local peoples in their everyday lives'. Indigenous thought and philosophy, it is argued, is driven by questions which often stand in opposition to Western and particularly European traditions' 'emphasis on the need for "concreteness"', for a singular concept that can underpin, construct and make sense of 'what reality

as such, in general is about' (Rosenow 2019, 15–16 emphasis in original). Crucially, this insight is not only important to access the realm of constant flux 'all the way down', but also, as Rosenow suggests, to frame this within an acknowledgment of the apparatus of knowledge production and dissemination at the root of particular ways of observing, acting in, and making sense of the world. Here, engagement with marginalised traditional and Indigenous perspectives are understood to be in opposition to the erosive forces of modernity but are also framed, crucially, as sites for 'innovations' operating 'at the margins' (ibid, 16). In this context, the effort to reach out beyond Western worldviews that have reduced life 'to capital, currencies, and financial instruments' is one which scholars have also suggested lies at the heart of confronting and responding to human-made changes such as climate-related crises, extinction, and conflict: '[humans] need to mobilise multiple worldviews and life- ways – including those emerging from indigenous and marginalised cosmologies' (Burke et al. 2016, 517).

At first glance, interest in Indigenous experiences in theory does not appear to stand in opposition to the direction of policy-making amongst international organisations, which has, in recent times, also exhibited an emerging sensibility towards Indigenous communities and traditional knowledge. The United Nations has expressed its commitment to Indigeneity, particularly through the work of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) Division for Social Development of Indigenous People.¹ The European Union, has also enshrined its commitment to Indigenous empowerment, mainly under the rubric of poverty reduction,² and through the funding of projects which focus on sharing Indigenous knowledge to improve governance of conditions of poverty, conflict and environmental degradation.³ Perhaps unsurprisingly, this policy trend towards promoting traditional and localised forms of community resilience, which starts with the fundamental acknowledgement of the inherent capacity of 'traditional' orders to draw on their cosmologies to respond to crises, has been received quite sceptically by critical scholarship. In particular, efforts to valorise and promote the role of traditional knowledge to feed resilience programmes has been seen as an attempt to sharpen the tools of liberal governmentality, in order to make the control and normalisation of post-conflict societies more likely (Chandler and Reid 2018). Overall, critical theoretical perspectives, particularly in International Relations, have acknowledged that even with local ownership in mind, Indigenous communities have been largely left out of the focus of theoretical as well as practical frameworks for analysing peacebuilding and

¹ See UN DESA website: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/Indigenouspeoples/focus-areas/post-2015-agenda/the-sustainable-development-goals-sdgs-and-Indigenous.html>

² As stated in Europeaid's web page: https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sectors/human-development/social-inclusion/Indigenous-people_en

³ See for instance the EU-sponsored 'Sustainable Local Development in Colombia', and the FAO sponsored 'Using Indigenous Knowledge to Reverse Land Degradation in Angola'

development assistance thus far (Wilson 2017; Brigg and Bleiker 2016). Although the promotion of local ownership provisions is now endemic and explicit in peacebuilding policy (see Pouligny 2005; Bargaés-Pedreny 2016), the absence of Indigenous perspectives is noteworthy both as it pertains to the responses to the conflict as well as in the manner in which those conflicts are understood. In Guatemala, for example, post-conflict settlements have not sufficiently taken account of the needs of Indigenous communities, despite the demographic significance of the latter (Brett 2013). In Burundi and Rwanda, mainstream conflict narratives have focused primarily on two main ethnic identity groups, thus side-lining the Batwa Indigenous group who has, nevertheless, also being substantially affected by the conflict (Kipuri 2017, 73).

Critical perspectives have been clear in decoupling the conceptual value of turning to Indigeneity from its policy co-option, particularly in order to identify the practical limitations of placing the openness to relational ontologies in service of policy as, on the one hand, ‘codification involves a rigidifying effect that compromises the relational flux and responsiveness of embedded Indigenous process’ (Brigg and Walker 2016, 267) and, on the other hand, the risk of formal adoption of Indigenous process continue to include appropriation (Odora Hoppers 2002). Instead, it is suggested that a focus on Indigenous experiences and knowledge is not a mere proxy for a zooming in from the macro to the micro level of the ‘very’ local, nor is it simply a matter of observing pristine and alternative solutions to conflicts kept by ‘traditional’, pre-modern communities, but represents instead a substantial interest in opening up to the fundamental complexity and co-constitutive and self-organising quality of social orders. As such, efforts to reconceptualise theoretical framings require not just ‘openness’ but a fundamental recentring of research and praxis around methodologies that privilege relations as a way of ‘structuring assumptions, values, concepts, orientations and priorities’ (Smith 1999,185). With relationality in mind, this means articulating ‘notions of critique, resistance, struggle and emancipation’ on the basis of ‘arguments of difference [...] based on spiritual relationships to the universe, to landscape and to stones, rocks, insects and other things, seen and unseen’ all of which might be ‘difficult arguments for Western system of knowledge to deal with or accept’ (Smith, 1999, 77-78). For peacebuilding theory more specifically, the promise of this shift in focus through relationality, is in its potential to enable wider reflection on the impact that fundamentally dynamic and iterative logics have on the very possibility of instrumentalising realities on the ground.

To be sure, the critical step towards the uncertainty that emerges from opening up to continually shifting processes, is not without risk. As Brigg notes, acknowledging the endless possibilities of emergent change can potentially lead to the ‘surrender of peacebuilder agency and responsibility, including self-reflexivity’ by virtue of ‘doing away with entities and structures’ (2016, 61) or, as

Bargues Pedreny suggests in relation to recognising the effects of complex and relational emergent realities on peacebuilding, enable 'humble' peacebuilders to embark on missions where iterative processes lead to the continued deferral of action (2015, 12). Nevertheless, supporters of relationality suggest that openness to alterity can allay these risks by re-introducing 'the possibility for people to participate in the governing of their lives somewhat outside the framework of dominant institutions' (Brigg 2016, 61), and to scrutinise peacebuilding practices which enable interveners 'to be present without acting' (Brigg 2013, 17). The value of what Brigg calls a 'relational sensibility' here is identified in its simultaneous ability to 'identify its positive effects whilst also partly disowning and critiquing it' (ibid). In this sense, whilst it may not assuage the concerns of those looking for a 'new and reassuring formula for realising good' (ibid, 18), the kind of critical intervention envisioned by supporters of relationality in peacebuilding theory and practice aims to grasp 'forms of peace and socio-political order[s] [...] which are simply not captured well by existing conceptual and practical analytical tools' (Hunt 2017, 218), whilst opening up space on the very possibility that these might be instrumentalised. Here, material engagement with what Joseph (2018, 428) terms 'social-structural conditions of possibility' becomes essential to a grounded theoretical reframing and re-focusing of relationality in order to mitigate the effects of 'a world evacuated of cause and effect where process, interaction and exchange reign runs the risk of removing responsibility for effects' (Brigg 2016, 65). Decoloniality, in particular, invites reflection on ways of 'ordering the world' whilst being cognizant of the manner in which these have been forcefully marginalised, consumed, disavowed and appropriated (Brigg and Walker 2016, 265) or seen as 'blank spaces' (Tucker 2018, 9). More widely associated with examinations of regimes of domination, exploitation and oppression, particularly in the context of work by Latin American political theorists such as Walter Mignolo (2007), and I.R. theorists such as Zeynep Capan (2017) and Christina Rojas (2016), decoloniality's emphasis is on refocusing critique towards 'actual demands and practices of existing decolonial struggles *at concrete sites*' (Rosenow 2019, 2 my emphasis). Decoloniality speaks particularly to the necessity to embrace a materially engaged and context-specific understanding of the experience of marginalisation itself, to acknowledge that there is 'no uniform experience of colonialism' and marginalisation (Beier 2005, 38; Tucker 2018, 9; Beier 2005, 40) and, relatedly, there is not one singular resulting form of emergent resisting agency. The decolonial approach aims to repoliticise the process of reflecting on these contingent struggles by directing the fragmentary effects of relational ontologies 'beyond invocation about the contingent and the indeterminate', repurposing them to face up to 'the enormity of the problem' (Darby 1997, 17).

The potential of this for reconceptualising critical peacebuilding theory comes in sharp relief: engaging with what are identified as post-liberal frameworks *on their own terms* could engender deep discussions on the very nature of marginalisation itself as on the multiple expressions of agency that emerge from it (Dauphinee 2015). Here, what are perceived as alternative practices - or ecologies of knowledge, as Boaventura De Sousa Santos (2018) qualifies in the specific case of Southern epistemologies, are neither reducible to homogeneity or singularity (Boaventura De Sousa Santos 2018, 44) nor necessarily dependent on the centrality of a hegemonic Western narrative (Jabri 2013; Beier and Arnold 2005; Sabaratnam 2013). Instead, to paraphrase Bhabha, practices typically seen as constituted ‘otherwise than modernity’ (1994, 6), but fundamentally enmeshed within it in complex and interconnected ways, stand out as a dynamic kaleidoscope of different ways of being as well as ordering the social and the political, some of which may be dependent on or working with the structures of modernity, or choose to borrow from and reshape the language of modernity, or work to subvert and reject it altogether⁴.

For peacebuilding theory, foregrounding struggles on their own terms, might enable identification of what the local turn points to as the agency of those subject to peacebuilding missions (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013, 770), though without resorting to dichotomies such as elite/everyday which may rely on pre-relational conditions, and without focusing solely on forms of agency that emerge as a representation of resistance against any given liberal actor. Instead, in this context, engaging with alterity would bring attention to the role knowledge and practices associated with Indigenous communities play in enabling these to make political claims, such as, for instance, reclaiming ownership of ancestral lands for Aboriginal communities in what is known as Australia, or rehabilitating customary practices largely overshadowed by forced modernisation such as it the case for pastoralism and nomadic lifestyles in the Niger Delta and in Kenya. Multiple and diverse practices involving conflict management, thus, might then not come to be seen as generic expressions of the ‘hidden’ voices of local communities (i.e. ‘the local’ or ‘the informal’) emerging to resist the liberal peace, but as agential expressions of complex relational processes which have always existed and are constantly emerging, not simply ‘discovered’ by a liberal modernity in search for a cure to its own crisis. Within critical peacebuilding perspectives attempting to undermine linear thinking and bringing to light the limitations to governance brought forward by relational processes, engaging with multiple ontologies is not just about seeking ‘inspiration for developing

⁴ de Sousa Santos points out that epistemologies of the South do not necessarily rely on a complete rejection of specific forms of knowledge or techno-science; on the contrary, these are often integrated in ‘ecologies of knowledge’ and used as ‘a useful tool in the struggles against oppression’ (2018, 45). As an example, the Indigenous principle of Pachamama, which rejects dichotomies between human and non-human, is also included in the Constitution of Ecuador, where it is used to grant nature the same rights as humans, and instrumentally adapted to mainstream understandings of rights and representation grounded in Western cultural and political discourses (ibid, 9-11).

alternative approaches' to liberal peacebuilding (Brigg and Walker 2016, 265) by fishing in a general pool of non-liberal or post-liberal cosmologies. Instead, the aim is to interrogate ways to engender a deep openness to difference without being bound by rigidity as it pertains to the nature of the agents in question and, by virtue of a decolonial commitment, without using relationality in order to defer, dilute or disavow responsibility for outcomes, failures and structural violence. What this shift can potentially contribute to, in the context of re-thinking peacebuilding, is to push the debate substantially beyond its current comfort zone, by disrupting the illusion of certainty produced and disseminated by the 'hegemonologue' of Western modernity (ibid, 2), and, as Russell Bishop suggests by drawing on the example of the framework of Kaupapa Māori - which permeates Māori analytics and cosmology -, to address 'the prevailing ideologies of cultural superiority which pervade our social, economic and political institutions' (Bishop 1994, 186).

Here, foregrounding struggles in their own terms expects a level of engagement with ontologies of relations which goes beyond co-option or adoption, and which thus has substantial implications for theory-building. As Zanotti (2017, 362) clarifies, working with relationality implies re-assessing the 'organising principles of the whole' through embracing uncertainty. This also implies a reconfiguration of the practical methodologies employed for governing, planning, and acting in the world. Reconfiguration, here, is not limited by the parameters of a structuralist critique which places emphasis primarily on the power of the 'organising principle of the structure' (Zanotti 2017, 366), and thus invites practical political action which is not merely passively resisting of the effects of structure. This is, in other words, a reconfiguration which 'troubles the political' through the heterogeneity of multiple ontologies which represent sites of agency, where the 'mark of difference between indigenous peoples and the West' can be reclaimed through what Smith identifies as their indecipherability, and incommensurability to the West (Smith 1999, 78), but where concepts and principles are not simply employed by the West to create an opposite Other image (Blaser 2014, 50). As such, rethinking the basis of our engagement with alterity is significant, since 'ontological and epistemological positions have a bearing upon the way we understand agency and validate ethical and political decisions' (2017, 363). In practical-political terms, relational ontologies in particular, force us to focus 'on the making of things' rather than on the qualifying elements that describe entities, or on the structure within which entities may be embedded (Zanotti 2017, 366, 369).

Nevertheless, the premises of the type of engagement described above raises ulterior important questions, which can threaten the coherence of the potential shift in theory, whilst also highlighting practical concerns. Dealing with 'a multiplicity of worlds animated in different ways' (Blaser 2014, 51) raises the spectres of essentialism, categorisations and indeed the very dichotomies critical

peacebuilding theory has attempted to disavow. Indeed, as Blaser points out, the danger with a turn to relationality might be that approaches may merely try to unsettle the world by reaching out to more-than-human elements and categories (objects, animals, climate phenomena, diseases, amongst others) to ‘reanimate’ the world, without ‘taking ontological difference’ seriously. With relation to Indigenous worldviews, Blaser (2014, 52) suggests that concepts and principles may then be mobilised as metaphors to deconstruct our chosen object of critique (be it globalisation, neoliberalism, capitalism, or liberal peacebuilding), and thus used as tokens for what cannot be grasped or comprehended instead of being understood as alive, active, productive and even sentient.

Blaser’s intervention raises the question of whether it is possible to reconceptualise peacebuilding in a way that addresses radical alterity without falling into essentialisms. What follows is a sketch of three lines of argumentation aimed at fleshing out the implications of theorisation of a post-liberal peacebuilding which relies on non-liberal, and particularly Indigenous, thought to theorise this shift. Whilst the conclusions drawn for peacebuilding theory can appear to be less than optimistic, these can be valuable in allowing critical perspectives to trace the implications and unintended effects of advocating for such a potential shift in theory and in practice too, and thus to enable these critical reflections to open up space for political imagination and action to the ‘morphogenetic effects’ inherent in scrutinising truth production (Zanotti 2017, 366, 369).

The New Frontier in Peacebuilding? The dangers of the new turn.

As mentioned above, the emergent shift to Indigeneity is one that closely mirrors developments in social sciences, with several disciplines also looking to engage with, learn with, and explore Indigenous knowledge, thought and philosophy (Bohensky and Maru 2011; Howitt and Suchet-Pearson 2006; Shaw 2002). To be clear, concerns over the implications of this turn to Indigeneity in the social sciences have long since been clearly expressed, particularly by critical Indigenous sociologists, philosophers, political theorists and activists alike (Whyte, Caldwell, and Schefer 2017; Tallbear 2016; Moreton-Robinson 2016; Innes 2009). The following section will draw on those concerns in order to reflect on the implications of a possible turn to Indigeneity in the context of rethinking peacebuilding. It is important to point out that the critique articulated herein does not seek to speak on behalf of Indigenous communities, nor does it offer an indication of how Indigenous analytics can or should add to peacebuilding theory. Instead, the aim is to invite critical scholars of peacebuilding to reflect on the wider impact that engaging with what is identified as Indigenous knowledge can have on the paradigm’s own professed aim of radically stepping away

from modernist principles. Specifically, this section will argue that such a shift in peacebuilding, whilst representing an effort to open up to alterity, is hindered by the permeation of the modernist legacy of the liberal peace in several ways. This manifests itself in three aspects, namely the unchanged nature of peacebuilding agents, the bias and selectivity inherent in specific understandings of agency, and the tensions emerging from the normative core of the concept of peacebuilding itself. Finally, it will be argued that despite the allure of resetting mainstream understandings of governance through exposure to alternative orders, engagement with so-called Indigenous knowledge alone may not be sufficient to fundamentally reset these three permeations of the legacy of the liberal peace and may, instead, come to frame Indigenous knowledges and experiences as representative of an 'Other' situated outside modernity, to co-opt, embrace, or resist.

In the first instance, where the call to open up to alternative and particularly non-liberal modes of thinking has been promoted in theory, the question of the manner in which this is to be implemented relates to the structures and *agents* of governance available within the traditional modern state system, within which peacebuilding has been conceptualised and operationalised to date. Specifically, if engagement with alternative knowledge is to rely on existing actors' willingness or indeed ability to relate to and understand alternative approaches to issues such as conflict transformation, environmental conservation, rights and representation, it is possible to then question the extent to which international governmental organisations, or NGOs, would be capable of participating in locally attuned peacebuilding endeavours without prioritising mainstream frameworks. The nature of several of these actors, which follow agendas driven by essentially modernist understandings of political and social orders within nation state structures often tied to legacies of imperialism and settler colonialism, might in fact impact their ability to participate in unsettling pre-conceived ideas pertaining to the ontological field of inquiry. What is at play, as Tucker (2018, 7) suggests, is a set of complex and 'dispersed practices through which colonial hierarchies and erasures are (re)produced in the global governance of "traditional knowledge"'. These practices drive the routinization of 'modes of interaction amongst government officials, international organizations secretariats, NGO workers, indigenous leaders, academics, and others in spaces such as networking events, public forums and research collaborations', which ultimately promote and embed 'a legalistic approach to "traditional knowledge"' at the expense of local, "non-market-oriented" approaches closer to Indigenous communities and their practices (ibid, 8). Similarly, as Tom suggests has been the case in the South African context, the rejuvenation and adoption of Indigenous practices (such as *Ubuntu*) can be seen not just as an 'ontological possibility, but also as political opportunity' for neo-liberal governments to politically profit from

a type of 'national branding aimed at attracting foreign investment and enhancing market opportunities' (2015, 15). More generally, given the degree of openness to alterity required for this shift in attitude and practice, one could question whether organisations fundamentally modern in nature, are able to adapt their own internal logic to practices which are, at their core, not based on modern and linear conceptions of time, space and agency (de Coning 2016).

Second, though it is possible to recognise – as was suggested in the previous section - that a turn towards Indigenous knowledge and experiences can provide, to some extent, an answer to issues of abstraction inherent in earlier approaches to the so called local-turn in peacebuilding, by locating agency firmly within clear socio-political struggles for self-determination, it is nevertheless possible and indeed necessary to warn against the possibility and the impact of continued *bias* (Bargués Pedreny and Mathieu 2018). In cases where Indigenous practices clash with principles and agendas which peacebuilding theorists and practitioners alike might find non-negotiable, the fragile realities of this balancing act appear especially clear. This is best elucidated by the tensions between Western conceptions of environmental conservation and local practices of ecosystem management. In some cases, as in Tanzania, the establishment of wildlife sanctuaries in certain regions has met the reality of displacement and appropriation of Indigenous lands (Kipuri 2017, 72); elsewhere, in North America, Indigenous practices such as fire ceremonies have clashed with Western environmental guidelines (Whyte 2017). More recently, concerns have voiced with regards to the continued side-lining of Indigenous communities' claims to land reclamation in North America (along with narratives of impact of climate change on minorities), by what are perceived to be increasingly less inclusive climate activist movements (Green 2.0 2019). More specifically to peacebuilding, traditional practices which contain elements not considered to be suitable for Western understandings of representation, might also come to be perceived as problematic and thus also be subjected to a hierarchisation of practices.⁵ Not only does this raise the spectre of manipulation but it also fails to conceptualise a resolution to the paradox of selectivity which has already been pointed to as plaguing both the liberal peace and the local turn in their identification of and engagement with agents, behaviours and agendas (Randazzo, 2017). Beyond the practice of peacebuilding, it is also worthwhile mentioning that the actors responsible for theorising such an engagement with multiple ontologies are not exempt from the potential for problematic bias and selectivity. Specifically, theorists face the problem of addressing difference in academic contexts

⁵ Arguments against the romanticisation of Indigenous solutions might contribute to the problematisation of processes coming from Indigenous communities, and their subjection to Western standards for assessment. In the case of Rwanda's *Gacaca* court, for instance, Mac Ginty points to 'the potential of this restorative justice system to 'perpetuate a culture of impunity' and undermine attempts to establish transparency in the rule of law' (2008a, 140), with the latter point exemplary of the permeation of Western epistemological frameworks for the comparison and assessment of Indigenous praxis.

that are permeated by Western hubris, on-going colonial and settler-colonial displacement and erasure, along with unchanged modernist epistemological presumptions.⁶

Third, the permeation of the liberal peace's legacy onto reconceptualisations of peacebuilding relates the core normative vision associated with the label of 'peacebuilding' itself. For the past two decades critics of peacebuilding have extensively critiqued the normative project that lead liberal peacebuilders to view post-conflict territories as abnormalities to 'fix' (Lemay-Hébert and Visoka 2017). The latest shift might still have to contend with unchanged teleological goals, inherent in the framing of the boundaries of the peacebuilding paradigm itself. Nowhere is this clearer than in critical peacebuilding's reticence to *discussing* the possibility of withdrawal. Whilst being critical of peace interventions in both intentions and outcomes, critical peacebuilding has, to date, been mainly resistant to conceptual engagement with calls for non-intervention (for an exception, see Bargués-Pedreny and Randazzo 2018). Yet, a call for radical openness that indeed deals with the resistance politics of self-determination struggles against settler-colonial domination for Indigenous communities would indeed come face to face with the possibility of conceding to demands that reject the interventionist semantics (and liberal baggage) of peacebuilding. This latest shift, in other words, would likely face the possibility that openness to other worldviews may require (or at least request) engaging with communities calling for no peacebuilding interventions (Bargués-Pedreny and Randazzo 2018). This reluctance may be the result of a form of engagement with alterity which remains, at its core, concerned primarily with matters of discourse and epistemology, and does not pay sufficient attention to the material effects of structures which permeate, are permeated by and embody power. When relational sensibilities remain confined to the discursive level, practices of hierarchisation, as well as material claims for political representation, sovereignty and, in the case of many Indigenous communities, land reclamation, could be downplayed, and engagement with alterity, could become a matter of how difference is socially produced, rather than how it plays out, and where and how it is constructed (Joseph 2018, 428). This could reduce the world 'to the knowledge we have of it' and thus diminish the significance of 'social and politically meaningful action' (ibid, 429), in all of its form, including claims (such as those to withdrawal) which may challenge the premises of the engagements we identify as unproblematically peace-affirming.

⁶ The danger, according to Blaser (2014, 52), is that to avoid 'Othering', Western scholars may be attracted to 'saming', a process by which analysts may choose to see specific and material struggles simply as 'a symbol of strategic essentialism', or a token for a generalised understanding of struggle. With the example of Andean Pachamama practices in mind, saming might reduce these to a metaphor for environmentally-sensitive resistance, rather than actually considering them as the expression of 'an active and sentient being' (ibid, 52).

Finally, critical approaches seeking to engage with Indigenous cosmologies, and experiences in order to provide substance to the emancipatory claims of the local turn may also have to face a vast array of normative implications emerging from the very endeavour to look beyond the liberal to address the crisis and shortcomings of modernity. Indeed, viewing a shift towards alterity as a fundamentally different solution that can act as panacea against all ills of liberal modernity, might continue to frame Indigeneity as an ‘Other’ outside modernity. Whilst this might help identify moments of resistance from ‘hidden and marginalised’ collectives, this would ultimately do little to unsettle those modernist assumptions that underpinned liberal modernity’s hubristic claims over knowledge and commensurability of the world. The reconceptualization of peacebuilding via radical openness to alternative cosmologies is not just about complementing a humanist paradigm and western cosmology with a varied menu of alternative choices, ‘supplemental’ (see Whyte 2017; Champagne 2007), nor about simply widening the spectrum of what we consider to be agency (beyond the human and non-human dichotomy), but more fundamentally about displacing our most basic ‘cognitive predispositions entirely’ (Beier 2005, 16) and about embracing the discomfort and unsettlement Brigg described as emerging from the acknowledgement of the continuous status of emergence of the social (2016).

The significance of the three cautionary elements outlined above is thus clear: a shift towards Indigenous knowledge might indeed open up peacebuilding to further scrutiny, but the danger of manipulation and appropriation is real, severe and possibly unavoidable, particularly if the legacy of the liberal peace which underpins peacebuilding conceptualisation is not disturbed in its entirety. Here, reflecting on alterity to displace a hegemonic narrative, and not merely ‘using’ alternative knowledge as a supplemental tool to unlock peacebuilding within comfortable frames, is key. And whilst this may seem to be mainly operating at the theoretical level, this paper has also argued that there are **practical political** implications of thinking through relationality, manifested in the creation of a space for new and radical methodologies of enabling political action, or in other words, to ‘trouble the political’, as Blaser (2014, 51) put it. Indeed, if turning to Indigeneity as an expression of alterity is about exploring multiple ways of doing and being in the world, and to disrupt hegemonic narratives and related assumptions, it stands to reason that the boundaries of what we think of as ‘peace’ and ‘conflict’ are also not exempt from being unsettled.

Conclusion

Recent debates on critical peacebuilding theory have pushed the boundaries of what is expected when critique points to the limits of a powerful and hegemonic paradigm such as liberal

peacebuilding. The paper has suggested that critical debates on conflict and peace are stepping considerably beyond the articulation of local agency initiated by early conceptualisations of the so-called local turn. Debates have turned to pointing out how the limits of liberal peacebuilding are symptomatic of a much bigger acknowledgment about the limits of linear thinking and social engineering, brought about by the fundamental acknowledgement of the boundary-blurring effects of relational processes making up the messy realities of the social and political phenomena observed. Mirroring trends in critical social science research, perspectives interested in moving the debate away from the modernist precepts of the liberal peace have deployed an emphasis on radical alterity and relationality which has pushed critiques towards rethinking how social orders emerge, function and self-organise in constant flux.

For these critical perspectives, rethinking peacebuilding is much more than extending local ownership to communities subjected to peacebuilding, as it is about reflecting on how problem-solving approaches have failed pay attention to processes of emergence, self-organisation, adaptation and transformation. Engaging relationality allows critical peacebuilding scholars to challenge the onto-epistemological categorisation of social phenomena typical of liberal peace interventions. This effort of re-thinking peacebuilding requires the acknowledgment of the fundamental inability to separate actors from the structures they shape (and are shaped by), and a move towards understanding them as essentially co-constituted elements, entangled in processes and relationships. For critical perspectives, this radical insight into different ways of being and perceiving the world and its constitutive interactions can be found in some social orders such as those offered by Indigenous communities, whose ontologies and politics have often been sidelined or exploitatively appropriated in liberal peacebuilding processes. Far from promoting the further co-option of traditional and Indigenous knowledge, critical scholars have suggested that engagement with alternative cosmologies such as Indigenous ones might enable a deeper interrogation of the marginalising effects of the 'hegemonologue' of Western modernity (Beier 2005), as well as draw out insights into complex social entanglements. This, critics suggest, is a question of relocating ontological privilege onto the relations between actors and entities rather than only on the actors themselves.

Whilst this is a shift that appears to bear promise, through its potential to ground resistant struggles in specific decolonial practices and histories that identify the material consequences of liberal exploitation, and through its ability to recapture and repurpose the fragmentary and deconstructive tendencies emerging from recognising hybridity 'all the way down', the paper has suggested that this shift is likely to require a deeper disruption of the foundational narratives of peacebuilding beyond what has currently taken place in the discipline. As the paper has suggested, the degree of

openness to alterity required for a fundamental shift in peacebuilding is currently limited by the permeation of the legacy of modernity in peacebuilding as a concept, visible in the continued reproduction of normative bias, selectivity, and an unchanged reliance on liberal actors to deliver change and transformation.

Indeed, the fundamental reconceptualisation of the tenets of peacebuilding which this shift promises, might require dealing with observations, claims and arguments that might be seen as uncomfortable, pessimistic, discomfiting or incompatible with what peacebuilding has traditionally been associated with, an issue that comes into sharp relief when considering some Indigenous communities' resistance to reconciliation, or collaboration with what are perceived to be structures of continued settler-colonial dispossession. A fundamental reconceptualization of peacebuilding beyond its liberal legacy, predicated on the disruption of key epistemological and ontological assumptions through engagement with alterity might indeed demand deconstructing the possibility of 'peacebuilding' itself. Without unsettling or questioning the concept, reconceptualization of peacebuilding through engagement with 'Indigeneity' risks framing the new iteration in peacebuilding conceptualisation not as a genuine engagement with cosmologies that can contest and disrupt the primacy of mainstream ideas about governance and social orders, but as a rhetorical reaching out to an imagined alterity, a form of co-opting of what is continually and instrumentally rendered to be an 'Other' outside of modernity, which may ultimately simply succeed in 'saving' liberal peacebuilding through the critical backdoor.

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