From the Liberal Peace to Pragmatic Peacebuilding to the Reality of Post-conflict Zones

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Introduction

Over the last decade the liberal peace has suffered a fierce critique. Scholars have highlighted the problems of intervening from a top-down and externally driven perspective to build peace (Pouligny 2009; Richmond 2011; Roberts 2012). Practitioners from international organisations have admitted their failures too (OECD 2011). Very few wish to defend the legacy of the liberal peace today (Paris 2010). The liberal peace, in its most domineering and ambitious approach, has been discarded. Yet, notwithstanding the criticisms, international practitioners have fought back. International peacebuilding seems more vibrant than ever, although it is appearing under a new guise.

This short paper is an attempt to conceptualise peacebuilding after the critique of the liberal peace. It engages with the object-oriented philosophy of Graham Harman to argue that peacebuilding is increasingly adopting a turn to ontology: opening up to the reality of conflict-affected zones. The paper is divided into three parts. The first section examines the epistemological assumptions of the critique of the liberal peace. I then move in the second section to analyse Harman’s philosophy. In the third section, I finally argue that after the critique of the liberal peace there is a move towards the reality of conflict-affected zones.

Critique of liberal peace: the limits of understanding the local

Since the early 2000s, the critics of the liberal peace flag up the problem that international policy-makers have failed to recognise the importance of the ‘diverse infra-political areas’, as Oliver Richmond (2011) puts it, of the conflict-affected societies intervened upon. These areas are considered to be the ‘social, historical, cultural, political and economic realities, in their everyday contexts’ (p. 198). It is believed that the negligence of these areas by liberal peace practitioners is primarily responsible for the poor track record of
liberal peace interventions. The critical literature discusses two main (fairly interrelated) reasons for this lapse. The first is that peacebuilders propose neoliberal strategies, security-based policies and human rights principles in a subtle neo-colonial form which privileges a West-dominated world order to the detriment of the local population of non-Western countries. As Mac Ginty and Richmond (2013) succinctly put it,

peace building and state building strategy appears to confirm a longstanding colonial narrative that places the global North in a dominant, selfish and also vulnerable position. The West exercises structural and governmental power against the local, simultaneously preaching democracy, human rights and accountability and assuming the subaltern has little agency (p. 773).

The second reason to explain the negligence of the ‘infra-political areas’ of the local underlines a crucial epistemological assumption: the reality of the local cannot be comprehended, represented or governed from an externally driven perspective. On this assumption, the critics of the liberal peace condemn the methods and practices of more than twenty years of peacebuilding. This paper is interested in examining this second critique.

Let’s start by looking at the work of Beatrice Pouligny to illustrate the cardinal points of the critique of the liberal peace. After her extensive experience as practitioner, Pouligny (2005) has documented how the liberal approach to peace overlooks the ‘stories written at the community level’ (p. 507). Pouligny (2006) argues that international practitioners have obtained unsatisfactory results because they have focused on state-centric, elite-bargaining processes and formal institutions. Moreover, they have applied one-size-fits-all prescriptions and have used homogenous and simplistic categories to approach conflict-affected societies. Instead, Pouligny’s research is intended to be a step further toward the comprehension of local subjectivities. She analyses societies ‘from below’, by examining the complexity of everyday practices that resist organisational structures. She uses a reflexive methodology. Knowledgeable of local languages (or working closely with linguistic and anthropologist colleagues and local experts), she pursues formal interviews as well as informal contacts with diverse people in the street, in markets or in buses and pays a careful attention to daily life to get as close as possible to the views of local actors (Pouligny 2006, pp. ix-xvii). For Pouligny, the richness of the local requires a deep appreciation; advances for peace cannot be promoted from ‘above’.

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1 For an early critique of how social science lacks an analysis of how people in their everyday life individualise or reappropriate the organizational techniques of power and institutions, see De Certeau (1984).

2 Harman uses Heidegger’s distinction between Zuhandenheit, readiness to hand or ‘tool-
Critics of the liberal peace thus understand that the dynamic forces of the everyday resist external forms of governance (for an overview, see Richmond 2006, 2009, 2011). From the peacebuilding efforts in the former Yugoslavia to the War on Terror operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, it is believed that liberal peace practitioners have held a superficial approach to ‘the local’, based on a mere fixing of formal institutions and an engagement with (liberal) civil society. The result is a non-plural, non-contextual and non-inclusive peace. Or worst, a peace co-opted by unrepresentative elites or nationalist entrepreneurs in which society enters into a spiral of long-lasting confrontation (see Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013; Richmond 2011; 2012). For Boege and colleagues (2009), for example, the success of cases such as Somaliland or Bougainville and the failure of others such as East Timor depend on ‘the involvement of traditional actors and customary institutions’ (pp. 606–610). Whether these cases are successes or failures is beside the point. What matters for these scholars is that peace must ‘invariably emerge from below’ (p. 611).

International administrators are increasingly developing bottom-up approaches that respect and engage with the infra-political areas of the local, as reflected for instance in the policies of local ownership or strengthening society resilience to violence. But the critics of the liberal peace consider these efforts insufficient. Boege and colleagues (2009) argue that the recent talks of ‘local ownership’ are only about paying ‘lip service’ without actually taking others’ customary laws or rules into account (p. 6011). It is believed that the ‘local turn’ is only happening rhetorically, as a tactic to improve the legitimacy of the international authorities, but not in practice, wherein the parameters of peacebuilding are decided and established from an external perspective (Belloni 2012, p. 35; Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013, p. 775; Richmond 2012, p. 120). Critics of the liberal peace thus stress that there is the need for more profound and context-sensitive investigations to determine what is required in each case to build a lasting peace. Alternative proposals to improve the errors of the liberal peace do vary among these authors (post-liberal, hybrid or popular peace), but these generally call for a greater attentiveness, respect and comprehension by international partners of the infra-political areas of the local. As Roberts (2011) argues, ‘popular peace is the outcome of hearing, centring and responding to everyday needs enunciated locally as part of the peacebuilding process, which is then enabled by global actors with congruent interests in stable peace’ (p. 2543). A renovated form of peacebuilding would be an approach open to difference and the everyday, led by representative local actors and supported by self-reflexive and responsible international counter-parts (Richmond 2011, pp. 213–214).

In the third section of this paper, I will analyse the advancement of international peacebuilding after the critique of the liberal peace. At this point of the argument, it is important to address the epistemological assumptions of
the critique of the liberal peace. The point is that the critics of the liberal peace understand the infra-political areas of the local continuously as a sphere that cannot be governed or managed from an external perspective. Therefore, ever more context-sensitive analyses of the undercurrents of the everyday seem to be necessary to achieve the aim of respecting the local needs and developing a plural process of peace. Meera Sabaratnam (2013) demands to push the argument a bit further. She also criticises the critics of the liberal peace. She argues that the critics and their ‘bottom-up’ proposals are, like the liberal peace practices they seek to correct, reductionist of the political, cultural and social dynamics of the local. For this reason, the critics of the liberal peace also fail to grasp the multiple possibilities emanating from below. Sabaratnam (2013) argues thus for an even more sensitive approach, one that pursues ‘an extended appreciation of the historical political presence of societies targeted by interventions, and of forms of rule, power and resistance that existed in the territories concerned’ (p. 271). For the critics of the liberal peace, every attempt to understand and embrace the needs of the local in order design a plural and inclusive strategy for peace appears to be failing to do justice to the irreducible particularism of the local (Bargués-Pedreny 2015).

From this perspective, the liberal peace is in crisis. Indeed, there seems to be little room to renovate peacebuilding, as every new attempt to respect and appreciate the infra-political areas of the local will most probably fall short of the promise. However, this critique has not ended with international peacebuilding. Indeed, it is not hard to notice that international organisations have recently revitalised peacebuilding. Although the heyday of humanitarianism and muscular interventions are long gone, there is a growing emphasis on a different form of conflict prevention, crisis management, mediation and peacebuilding. The External Action of the European Union, for example, counts with over fifteen ongoing civilian and military missions in conflict-affected zones, which are increasingly different from the liberal peace externally driven operations, as practiced since the mid 1990s. It is important thus to capture this shift away from the liberal peace. I will argue that, after the difficulties of understanding the complex infra-political areas of the local as argued by the critics of the liberal peace, today international peacebuilders have decidedly turned themselves over to the reality of post-conflict societies. I will conceptualise this shift as follows: from one which centres on questions of epistemology – questions related to the difficulties of closure, of comprehending the real needs of the local – to a matter of ontology – opening up to the reality of post-conflict zones. The next section seeks to introduce this shift by looking at the object-oriented philosophy defended by Graham Harman.
Towards the reality of objects: a window to rethink peacebuilding?

The purpose of this second section is to use Graham Harman ‘object-oriented philosophy’ to examine the critique of the liberal peace and introduce how peacebuilding is currently in process of redefinition, undertaking a radical turn towards the reality of conflict-affected societies. This section is divided into two parts. First, Harman insights enable us to trace the conceptual limits of the critique of the liberal peace. As I will argue, these are the impossibility to surpass the dichotomy international and local – even when this dichotomy is deconstructed – which both liberal peace practitioners and their critics so fundamentally rely on. Second, I will focus on Harman’s analysis of objects to show the direction that peacebuilding is travelling to. To clarify, the intention is not to claim that Harman’s philosophy is being applied in contemporary policy strategies. The point is that Harman’s different look at ontology is useful to understand how international peacebuilding is currently renewed, escaping the liberal peace trappings of the earlier era.

Harman is a prolific writer, leaving a legacy of over a dozen books in the last ten years. For reasons of scope and simplicity, though, I will examine his 2010 collection of essays and lectures, Towards Speculative Realism, which provides a satisfactory overview of his philosophy of objects. Harman (2010) means by ‘object’ that which ‘has a unified reality that no external observation can ever exhaust’ (p. 160). In this broad sense, every entity, every being, every thing is an object: ‘the simple fact that something is or seems to be one thing’ (p. 148). Electron, table, soul, wind or lion are considered objects. In post-conflict zones, one encounters objects such as burnt houses, land mines, bullet-riddled walls, shrapnel or dusty roads. The local may be seen as an object too. So much as the internally displaced, homeless, civil society groups, policemen or nationalist leaders; so much as the songs, popular beliefs, oral history or ethnic stereotypes. The point is that, following Harman, these objects have a unified reality that human relations (say, for example, international administrators) can never exhaust. The reality of the object always runs deeper, silent, indecipherable. When someone observes, uses or analyses the object, reduces it to a mere caricature.2 The impossibility to know objects – e.g. the infra-political areas of the local in peacebuilding settings – has been the source for the critique of the liberal peace, as examined in the previous section.

However, Harman does not only use this observation (the human impossibility to comprehend objects) to criticise (human) discourses that affirm to happen to know objects. Instead, he turns the back on humans and

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2 Harman uses Heidegger’s distinction between Zuhändenheit, readiness to hand or ‘tool-being’, and Vorhandenheit, present at hand, to account for the two faces of the objects: their inner reality and the reduced way in which another entity encounters it.
their discourses and looks at or “speculates” about the reality of objects. Therefore, his philosophy ushers one to see beyond human centred theories that either focus on the hubris of humans to govern and shape the course of objects in the world (e.g. liberal peace) or highlight the human discursive or practical unfeasibility to know or use the objects in the world (e.g. critique of the liberal peace). Following a non-conventional reading of Martin Heidegger’s analysis of tools, Harman takes two unforeseen steps (admitting that these are taken against Heidegger’s intentions). First he undoes the difference between subject and object by arguing that all subjects, all entities, like objects, have a unified reality that another entity cannot exhaust (Harman 2010, pp. 54–55). That is, by objects, Harman does not refer distinctively to the objects or tools used or known by humans, but to all entities, inclusive of humans. Harman gives no privilege to humans over non-humans, as humans have also a hidden reality that is not revealed when they encounter someone else or when they are conscious or think of themselves.

This is relevant to reconsider the role of international administrators in processes of peacebuilding. They are no longer considered godlike subjects, who for instance seek to cure, guide or govern other objects, as in liberal peace frameworks. Nor loyal subjects, who adopt a secondary role to support, empower or strengthen other objects, as in the critique of the liberal peace. International peacebuilders, like the rest of objects, are not users or used, they are; and their inner being always exceeds their appearance when relating to another entity (Harman 2008, pp. 51–54). Hence, they may be understood as having the same status, the same structure, as local actors and other everyday objects. By placing subject and object on the same footing, the landscape of peacebuilding differs from the heretofore representation of it as a space negotiated by international and local actors, regardless of who is supposed to lead the process. Now post-conflict zones can be perceived as spaces saturated with subjects qua objects that superficially relate, deliberate and quarrel over peace, while their deeper realities remain isolated.

The decision to abandon a human-centred approach carries a second step that is even more fundamental. The key thus is not to see humans as objects, but to look at objects regardless of or separated from human consciousness. As Harman argues: ‘we are faced with the reality of objects that also exist independently of any giant network that tries to objectify them’ (p. 114). The reality of objects thus exists prior to humans. It exists out there, without this meaning that Harman is willing to return to a naïve realism of accessible laws. With this move, pointing at the reality that runs independently from human understandings, Harman has moved away from the legacy of continental philosophers, who emphasised that no reality can be known outside discourse, to turn towards discussing the deep reality of things (see also Brassier 2007, Grant 2006, Meillassoux 2008). Rather than dancing around questions of epistemology, he revitalises ontology. As Harman writes: ‘while
human philosophers bludgeon each other over the very possibility of ‘access’ to the world, sharks bludgeon tuna fish and icebergs smash into coastlines’ (p. 94). Objects relate and experience one another. They for example effect, hold, curb or caress each other, irrespective of whether they are inanimate, microscopically minuscule or fictional, before any human discovers them.

The question of how does Harman and other ontologists talk about ontology disregarding epistemological matters (for instance, how do we ‘know’ or ‘explain’ that an object collides with another object) is not so much important here (see Harman 2010, 131–139). Indeed, this question would imply to pull Harman’s argument one step backwards and reappraise the (non)distinction between subjects and objects. Then, perhaps one would dismiss Harman’s contributions beforehand. But my intention is not to problematise his philosophy as such, a task I humbly leave to contemporary philosophers. The purpose of this paper is to use his insights (to repeat, the turn towards the inaccessible reality of objects that exist independently from human consciousness) to illustrate how peacebuilding is in the process of being redefined, away from the human-centred cul-de-sac that has trapped the liberal peace and its critique. This is important because the discourses of peacebuilding have repetitively called for the need to improve or rethink the relation between local and international stakeholders. However, meanwhile, to paraphrase Harman, the rain floods the roofless church and land mines await silently in the muddy field.

From pragmatic peacebuilding to the reality of post-conflict zones

The purpose of this final section is not to argue that international peacebuilding has the same positioning regarding ontology as Graham Harman’s object-oriented philosophy, but to indicate that contemporary peacebuilding is travelling towards a similar direction. This direction should be read as a move away from both the liberal peace and the critique of liberal peace – qua a critique that emphasises the limits to understand and govern the Other from an externally driven perspective – towards an understanding of peacebuilding. In order to understand this shift, it is important to recall the two steps that Harman takes to radicalise the heritage of Continental philosophy: the first is to argue that humans do not have special prerogative over non-humans to use, understand or relate to other objects; the second is the consideration that objects exist out there, regardless of any human relation. I will use these two steps to capture the redefinition of peacebuilding. The conclusion is that after the critique of the liberal peace, there is an ongoing shift to open infinitely to the reality of other objects in post-conflict spaces.
One of the recent commonplace lessons in the practice of international governance is that external organisations can ‘do more harm than good’ to the processes of peacebuilding (OECD, 2011, p. 3). The complexity and fragility of post-conflict operations imply that inadequate strategies may carry ‘unintended consequences’, harmful to the peace process (OECD 2011, p. 15). “Do no harm” is a message of humbleness that indicates the need to be aware of the difficulties of intervening. This message reveals the new role adopted by international peacebuilders. They are no longer seen as the leaders of the process (who can only do good), but as the facilitators or supporters of an endogenous or nationally driven process of peacebuilding (who take a cautious attitude and avoid doing harm) (UNDP, 2012, p. 101). Local villagers such as youths, mothers or tribal leaders are considered the key drivers of peace. International actors thus step back and work in the background, enabling local actors to use their own resources and adapt to impending challenges (De Carvalho, De Coning, & Connolly, 2014).

Yet this new position is read as being insufficiently modest (Ganson and Wennmann, 2012). The notion of godlike international statebuilders able to guide or govern post-conflict societies has long been abandoned. But the notion of international peacebuilders as “facilitators” of a more locally engrained peace will soon be transcended too. The humbling experience of failing to fix states and of effecting structural changes has led to an increasing marginalisation of the role of international peacebuilders. Indeed, the critical literature of the liberal peace, so much as the self-criticisms admitted recently by international policy-making (e.g. OECD 2010, 2011), can be summarised with the following precept: there is the need for external actors to be more humble and admit the inaccessibility of the infra-political areas of the local. The consequence of this critique has not been the withering away of international missions. We are not witnessing a return to a world divided by autonomous sovereign spaces. I argue that the result is to increasingly see international peacebuilders as objects, rather than subjects. They are objects roaming in war-affected zones, having the same status to local actors and to other resources identified in the everyday. International and local actors, so much as the existing resources of all sorts, thus form a conglomerate of objects that contact, relate and negotiate in search for new avenues of peace. As Harman insists, though, their level of exposure to each other is always superficial. No matter how deeply they interact, their inner reality remains unreachable.

I calculate that neither the critics of the liberal peace nor contemporary international organisations regard this ongoing anti-humanist trajectory as bad news. Liberal peace has been discarded. It has been firmly criticised because by focusing on fixing institutions and governing post-conflict societies it does not engage sufficiently with the local. As Richmond (2011) argues, the liberal peace ‘has sometimes been built on force rather than
consent, and more often conditionality, and it has failed to recognise local cultural norms and traditions’ (p. 16). In order to correct past wrongs, therefore, critics of the liberal peace and practitioners of peace alike are renovating the idea of peacebuilding. Today, peacebuilding consists in a long-term process conducted by inclusive and flexible partnerships made of diverse national and international actors. In short, it is believed that a hybrid – the rich and dynamic interaction between different actors – and long-term process of peacebuilding – iterative practices and lessons learnt from errors – will consolidate ‘national infra-structures for peace’ (Kumar and de la Haye, 2011, p. 13; OECD, 2012; UNDP, 2012).

Contemporary international peacebuilding may be thought of as a “pragmatic approach to peacebuilding”. Instead of assuming a model for peace beforehand and then acting accordingly, today peacebuilding consists on a hybrid and process-based approach. It privileges conscious and unconscious practice, abductive reasoning, iteration, errors and lessons learnt from errors (Goetschel, 2011; Halas, 2015; Richmond 2011). The aim of this pragmatic endeavour appears to be the finding of a context-sensitive and inclusive peace after a long process of everyday praxis. However, this is not the whole story. Pragmatism does not fully encompass the meaning of the peacebuilding ‘turn to ontology’ or ‘turn to the reality of post-conflict zones’ that I am trying to capture in this paper. Harman (2010) makes the point clear when he compares theory and praxis, and distinguishes both from his object-oriented philosophy. ‘It is not only theory that objectifies the world, caricatures it, or reduces it to a small number of properties in comparison with its inscrutable implicit depth. Practices does this every bit very much’. He continues: ‘the difference between theory and praxis … can never be radical enough to do justice to the reality of things’ (p. 112–113). For Harman, therefore, both theory and praxis fall short in their attempt to grasp the being of objects. The missing step is a turn to ontology.

Today, international peacebuilding is increasingly radicalising its approach. After assuming that the infra-politics of the local can never be accessed from an external perspective, not even using the most context-sensitive praxis (e.g. Sabaratnam 2013), international administrators appreciate that the infra-political areas exist, regardless of any external observation. In other words, after the critique of the liberal peace, peacebuilders are faced with the (fugitive) reality of post-conflict zones. The reality of post-conflict spaces gathers a multitude of objects, humans and non-humans, which relate without ever exhausting each other. Openness to the myriad of objects, rather than looking for closure, seems to be the way forward. For the policy advisors Chetan Kumar and Jos de la Haye (2011), ‘conflicts are not limited to the primary protagonists alone, but extend through the different levels of society, from political and civic leadership down through to communities, and over issues such as land, natural
resources, and governance’ (p. 13). I want to suggest, in lieu of a conclusion, that there has been a shift from liberal peacebuilding to pragmatic peacebuilding and now there is an ongoing shift to the reality of conflict-affected zones. There are no more theories of peace to be discussed, not even praxis to be pursued. In the reality of war-affected zones, refugees, clans, mothers, ghosts, peacebuilders, land mines and taverns interact endlessly without disturbing their inner being. There is no more peacebuilding to be done, no puzzle that needs to be solved.

References


