What is the Problem with Peacebuilding?

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REVIEW ESSAY

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Peacebuilding in crisis: rethinking paradigms and practices of transnational cooperation, edited by Tobias Debiel, Thomas Held and Ulrich Schneckener, Routledge Global Cooperation Series, London and New York, Routledge, 2016, pp. 256+index, £36.99 (pbk), ISBN 978-1-138-85859-6

Decolonising intervention: international statebuilding in Mozambique, by Meera Sabaratnam, Series Kilombo: International Relations and Colonial Questions, London and New York, Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017, pp. 146+references+index, £85.00 (hbk), ISBN 987-1-78348-274-0

Understanding quality peace: peacebuilding after civil war, edited by Madhav Joshi and Peter Wallensteen, Series Security and Conflict Management, London and New York, Routledge, 2018, pp. 284+index, £29.99 (pbk), ISBN 987-1-138-30768-1

The idea that international peacebuilding is in crisis is not new. Since the early 2000s several scholars have pointed out the contradictions and limitations of this major project in international social engineering. Recent scholarship has further pointed to what seems to be a major ontological shift in the policy realm, where the very meaning of peacebuilding has changed due to the realization that such an ambitious exercise in social engineering is, ultimately, doomed to fail. According to this perspective, it is time to lower our ambitions and opt for a more pragmatic approach to international intervention. But what is it that went wrong? And is this really the end of peacebuilding, as some authors have proclaimed? Alternatively, how can we move forward to a better understanding and better practices of peacebuilding? The three books under review here engage with these questions, offering different interpretations about these matters.

Peacebuilding in Crisis: Rethinking Paradigms and Practices of Transnational Cooperation offers a comprehensive view of this debate. Its introduction, by Ulrich Schneckener, is particularly didactic. For starters, Schneckener circumscribes the crisis to how and by whom peacebuilding is conceptualized and conducted. In other words, 'Peacebuilding, understood as a holistic approach to building peaceful relations among people, covering political, economic, and social, cultural-symbolic, educational and psychological aspects, is not in crisis' (p.2). This simple distinction is important, as the emphasis on the idea of

'crisis' may offset the endurance of the broader human search for peace that transcends the short timespan through which peacebuilding is often analysed, namely, the post-Cold War period.

Understanding this crisis also requires differentiating between the ways peacebuilding is epistemologically portrayed, that is, whether as a normative project (either to be promoted, reframed, or dismissed), an analytical tool or concept (aimed at describing or explaining social processes or political outcomes), or as a distinct set of social practices (involving different actors and levels to be studied and evaluated). As Schneckener highlights, these different understandings lead to different, albeit connected, debates, where the first revolves around the normative and ethical foundations of peacebuilding; the second focuses on the conceptual-analytical level, questioning the rationale of the standard peacebuilding concept and its underlying theoretical assumptions; and the third relates to the critical assessment of the strategies and operational policies of international peacebuilders. Cutting across these debates is a fourth dimension that relates to the ambivalent interaction between 'local' and 'external' actors. The remainder of the book, and the additional two books discussed here, can be understood in line with this systematization.

Peacebuilding in Crisis is divided into three thematic parts, each one incorporating different aspects of three debates just mentioned. Part One, 'Reflecting peacebuilding paradigms', includes three chapters that engage predominantly with debates about the normative and ethical foundations of peacebuilding and the conceptual analytical level, bringing together issues such as the problem of paternalism in peacebuilding and the idea of complexity and its implications in terms of policymaking and academic analysis.

Part Two, 'Revisiting peacebuilding practices', includes six chapters dealing with different fields of policymaking in peacebuilding. While focusing on the operational aspect of peacebuilding policies, these chapters also engage with the three strands of the debate, highlighting how normative aspects also affect operational problems. While discussing the case of democracy promotion, for instance, the key problem identified by Jonas Wolff is the aspiration of the liberal project to 'create a world after its own image', which leads to a crisis of legitimacy (p.73). A similar rationale pervades the chapters on power sharing, transitional justice, truth commissions and gender, and security sector reform, where the issue of representativeness and understanding of the normative values of local actors is central. Contrasting the normative elements of the peacebuilding agenda and local values leads to the visualization of power struggles that often result in absences (such as the absence of other forms of gender violence in the analysis of peacebuilding) and important expressions of resistance (as exemplified in the case of security sector reform and the rule of law). This disconnect is portrayed as an explanatory factor for the failures of peacebuilding projects. A different critique of peacebuilding is offered by Michael Pugh, who talks about 'corporate peace', that is, a peacebuilding project that is fundamentally based on a neoliberal vision, and which fails to deliver social welfare and dealing with the oligarchic legacies of war.

Lastly, Part Three, 'Rethinking promises and pitfalls of "the local"', comprises four chapters that engage with the cross-cutting theme that emerges all through the previous chapters: the 'local' domain of peacebuilding. Key issues discussed here are the nature of the local and its heterogeneity, the extent to which researchers can actually access the local and thus faithfully represent it, the contradictions that exist in the reproduction of the international discourse of local ownership, as well as the methodological limitations within the literature that discuss the local turn. On the latter, Debiel and Rinck rightly note that as much as liberal approaches to peacebuilding are trapped in their 'methodological nationalism' reductionism, post-liberal critics fail to incorporate issues of power and domestic politics in their analysis, often romanticizing the local. Moving away from this reductionism depends upon further engagement with power, domestic politics and authority.

The book lacks a general conclusion, which would have helped summarize key points from the different chapters. Overall, *Peacebuilding in Crisis* stresses the idea that, regardless of the many debates surrounding peacebuilding and its crisis, the way international actors interact with local actors is a central component that contributes to this crisis. A key element related to this is the problem of legitimacy associated with international intervention, precisely because of the absence of a genuine dialogue and understanding of local values. It would have been interesting, however, to further reflect on 'what is next?' and 'what is the expected outcome of this crisis?' Do the editors agree that peacebuilding can be 'fixed' or 'improved'? Some of the authors, such as Chandler and Pugh, seem sceptical about this possibility. However, most authors seem to believe that there are ways to improve peacebuilding – that is, this crisis, however profound, is not the end of the political agenda. Moreover, improving peacebuilding entails not only revisiting its operational aspects, but also rethinking some of the analytical tools used to assess it.

More generally, while the book offers a summary of the current critical debate on peacebuilding, it misses the opportunity to present a more integrated agenda to move the debate forward. A hint of what could be a way forward is mentioned in the introductory chapter, where Schneckener refers to an emerging political sociology of peacebuilding, a theme that could have been further explored in a concluding chapter. The last chapter, by Debiel and Rinck also points towards an important challenge in the literature, which is the need to move away from the liberal/post-liberal divide in the peacebuilding debate, but their answer goes back to the widely discussed idea of hybridity, instead of pursuing what could be a new avenue of research methodology.

Undoubtedly, the issue of 'how to move the agenda forward?' is a challenging one. As pointed out by critics, a key challenge seems to be how to move away from a critical debate that has become to a large extent self-referential. A welcome effort in this regard is *Decolonising Intervention: International Statebuilding in Mozambique*, by Meera Sabaratnam. Focusing on the more general idea of international intervention, as opposed to peacebuilding, the argument presented is that 'interventions fail – *and keep failing* – because they are constituted through structural relations of colonial difference which intimately shape their

conception, operation and effects' (p.4). From this perspective, propositions such as improving the relations between local and international actors, focusing on hybridity, better sequencing, and increasing local participation are doomed to fail because they do not address the bigger problem, which is the colonial nature of the relationship between actors in the context of intervention. In this regard, the book aims to decolonize research in international relations, particularly the analysis of international intervention. This objective is pursued, first, by providing an epistemological and methodological critique of intervention and statebuilding (Part I) and, second, by examining the case of intervention in Mozambique (Part II).

In the first part of the book, Sabaratnam provides a very thorough critique of the existing critical literature on intervention, including the 'local turn'. She argues that even the more critical accounts present several manifestations of Eurocentrism, in the sense that 'the targets of intervention remain located as mute objects or data points rather than serious interlocutors with an alternative standpoint or traditions of knowledge' (17). Two criticisms are worth highlighting here. First, she refers to the 'ontologies of the otherness', captured in the liberal/local dichotomy often cited in the critical peacebuilding literature. The problem here, according to her, is 'not simply that there is an account of alterity or cultural difference within the politics of intervention' (29), but that the distinction between the 'liberal' and the 'local' appears to be 'the central ontological fulcrum upon which the rest of the political and ethical problems sit' (29). In this regard, it is as if the authenticity of the local is measured in line with its disconnection from the 'liberal'. I partly agree with her. The liberal/local dichotomy does not seem to capture the complexities that exist in the realm of intervention, even less the complexity of those encapsulated under the term 'local'. Yet, there have been many efforts to move away from this simplification. Sabaratnam herself recognizes that not all research related to the 'local turn' is focused on this ontological cultural binary, but she focuses mainly on the work of Severine Autesserre as key reference. In fact, her critique on hermeneutic containment, the second critique here highlighted, is based on her analysis of Autesserre's *Peaceland*. Yet several scholars have worked with a more complex and pluralistic understanding of the local, including the importance of not to essentializing it. In this regard, the critique on hermeneutic containment seems to have minimized what seems to be a growing debate on the complexities of the local turn. What seems to be less explored (and rightly pointed out) is the diversity of the international and the extent to which this 'collective other' is in fact 'liberal'.

Sabaratnam's concern, however, is less with the intervener, but more with the 'targets' of intervention. Noticing how power is manifested in the constitution of knowledge – that is, the portrayal of 'the other' – her purpose is to reinterpret what the 'targets' of intervention say by engaging with their own standpoint. For this, she proposes a series of strategies to decolonize intervention. First, she suggests three ways to reconstruct subjecthood, namely recovering historical presence, engaging political consciousness and investigating material realities. Second, she engages with feminist standpoint theory. The argument here is that states or societies targeted by intervention experience them differently

than the interveners (p.50). Moreover, 'the material position of being politically subordinated is *epistemically generative* – that is, gives rise to a different and more holistic way of seeing that particular structure' (p.51). This means that, in the context of intervention, its targets are likely to have a more holistic view of the system as a whole and thus provide an alternative account of intervention. Sabaratnam's epistemological discussion is very enlightening and extremely rich. It calls on us to rethink our positionality as researchers and to think of alternative strategies to grasp local voices. At the same time, her strategies also present challenges, some of which become visible when she moves to the empirical part of the book.

In Part II, Sabaratnam discusses three different instances of intervention in Mozambique: the health sector in the context of statebuilding, the policies for agricultural development since the end of the war, and the anti-corruption agenda. Her proposal is to use, in each of these instances, the strategies outlined in the first part of the book. In each case, based on many quotes from interviews conducted with local actors, she indeed demonstrates that the narratives of international actors are quite different from those of local actors when it comes to explaining the limitations of the different policy strategies. Nevertheless, what is not very clear is the extent to which her empirical analysis is any different from other studies located in the 'local turn' literature, particularly in-depth ethnographic studies. This is partly so because the strategies she offers are not followed by a more detailed methodology.

For example, the idea of recovering historical presence is an important one. Yet one may wonder how far one should go in time to accomplish this? What is the parameter to define what historical timeframe is the most relevant for understanding current realities? In fact, what would be the *local* parameters to define the key timeframe? Looking at the case studies, the historical timeframe is centred on the post-war intervention, preceded by a brief recount of the post-independence period. One may consider whether recovering historical presence should not include at least a more detailed account of the transition to independence and Frelimos' first years in power, in particular its experiments in social engineering, which, ironically, also presented problems in terms of lack of engagement with different strata of the population. How do narratives from socialist times endure and change, and how do they affect current reactions and interpretations about the role of the international?

Similar challenges can be observed when it comes to the idea of engaging political consciousness and investigating material realities. How exactly should one do this in the context of a case study? While criticizing the 'liberal/non-liberal' dichotomy in the local turn, Sabaratnam seems to rely on a parallel dichotomy that emphasizes the division between 'internationals' and 'local actors'. This makes sense from the point of view of her theoretical analysis, where most authors were indeed focusing on the problems of colonialism. We may ponder, however, to which extent similar relations occur *within* societies. In this case, investigating material realities could entail looking at the different degrees of dispossession *within* Mozambique and the different local narratives that justify inequality. More broadly, this begs looking at the heterogeneity of local actors

and the different expressions of political consciousness, which are often quite contradictory. Or, going back to the Debiel and Rinck's proposition, a more integrated discussion of issues of authority, domestic politics and power could have shed a different light on some of the dynamics of intervention. This does not mean that colonialism does not affect these internal dynamics. It just suggests that other power channels may be equally (sometimes even more) important in the way dynamics of power unfold in the 'international/local' interface. Emphasizing coloniality, while aiming to (re)capture the relevance of the target of intervention, risks, in fact, overemphasizing the power of the 'international' while minimizing local expressions of power and agency.

In her conclusion, Sabaratnam suggests that 'to decolonise intervention, it is necessary to contemplate abandoning its central intellectual assumptions, its modes of operation and its political structures, in order to remake a terrain for solidaristic engagement and, where appropriate, postcolonial reparation' (p.142). Pragmatically, she calls for the reframing of the North-South discourse where aid is not seen as a kind of philanthropic assistance, but as form of reparation for healing the 'colonial wound'. She further suggests a de-escalation of *protagonismo*, disposability, entitlement and disposition within Western intervention – the four structural elements highlighted in the local narratives. It seems unlikely that donors would take the lead and pursue such a task. Assessing the feasibility of this kind of transformation would require engaging with actual incentives for change. Unfortunately, in the very last section of the book, Sabaratam herself recognizes the constraints of the current international political agenda, i.e. 'the morbid, populist-authoritarian-racist-fascist symptoms of the present' (p.145), which, sadly, have only grown since her book was published. While not abandoning a certain degree of optimism – as she sees the present as an opportunity for change in international intervention – she concludes with a note on the role of academics and a call for them to improve their ability to 'work with the perspectives of the disempowered by relations of coloniality' (p.145). I support this suggestion. While it is true that not all knowledge influences politics, the strengthening of a critical agenda that points to the need to engage with the voices of those at the margins of power seems not only a place for reassessing dominant narratives, but also a means to train new academics not to take knowledge and methodologies for granted. In this regard, Sabaratnam's book seems like a good place to start.

A different approach to peacebuilding and its efficacy is presented in *Understanding Quality Peace: Peacebuilding after Civil War*, edited by Madhav Joshi and Peter Wallensteen. This book follows *Quality Peace: Peacebuilding, Victory, & World Order* (2015), also by Wallensteen. Both are part of a larger project developed at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, at the University of Notre Dame, since 2006. The general idea of the project is to understand the different scenarios that follow peace accords. The concept of quality peace was the term chosen to help 'identify the specific conditions in the post-accord environment that were the most conducive to a durable peace that also met basic human values' (p.xviii). In this regard, the book presents a very practical approach to peacebuilding, engaging predominantly with the debate related to

the critical assessment of the strategies and operational policies of international peacebuilders. Ultimately, its aim is to identify correlations between variables that lead to successful peacebuilding implementation.

The central argument is that

> the quality of the changes in a post-accord state is directly related to the extent to which peace accords are implemented as well as the agreed mechanisms for the non-violent resolution of the armed conflict, and the social spaces available for civil and political actors. (p.5)

The dimensions of quality peace explored in the book are examined considering this argument; the selected dimensions of quality peace are assessed along their potential and actual contribution to successful peacebuilding. The book consists of 17 chapters, including an introduction and conclusion by the editors, and it is divided into six thematic sections, five of them discussing specific dimensions of quality peace and the last one offering case studies where all five dimensions are evaluated.

Taking as a starting point Wallensteen's 2015 book, this edited book advances the discussion on quality peace, while elucidating some aspects that were previously unclear. For starters, the editors clarify the option of using quality peace as an alternative concept to positive peace based on the understanding that the latter focuses on the absence of structural violence, which, in turn, would concentrate on issues of governance while leaving aside important dimensions to evaluate peacebuilding, including, for example, security. The book also expands upon the components of quality peace. While in 2015 Wallensteen focused on three specific qualities of peace (dignity, security and predictability), here the emphasis is on five dimensions: post-war security, governance, economic reconstruction, reconciliation and transitional justice, and civil society.

It could be argued that a combined analysis of positive and negative peace could be used in such a way to fulfil the five dimensions explored in the book, as other projects have attempted to do (e.g. the Global Peace Index and the Positive Peace Index, developed by the Institute for Economics and Peace). Yet, quality peace speaks directly to the extent to which 'the objectives of the peace process are achieved' (p.9). In this regard, it is more specific in its time frame, which in turn narrows the scope of what is to be measured. In fact, key to the idea of quality peace is the need to provide clear metrics to evaluate peacebuilding.

While the engagement with these five dimensions certainly make the concept of quality peace more concrete, the specifics of the concept and its use still deserve a more detailed methodological discussion. In fact, the very choice of these dimensions could be justified more clearly in the book. The editors explain this choice briefly in the conclusion (278), saying that they were based on previous theoretical considerations and earlier contributions. Yet, why these and not others? What were the specific criteria to determine their inclusion and the non-inclusion of other dimensions, such as local empowerment or access to public services (these two are also mentioned in the introduction as dimensions to be explored)? Furthermore, how exactly should each of these dimensions be

measured? And how do they relate to the other qualities previously explored by Wallensteen (i.e. predictability and dignity)?

The lack of an in-depth methodological discussion is also reflected in the different ways through which each of the authors engage with quality peace in each chapter. Some chapters draw on qualitative research, others on quantitative research. In parts I to V some authors discuss a specific dimension through literature review, while others draw on case studies. The starting question or assumption of the chapters also vary, as do the authors' epistemological stands. The same goes for the four case studies presented in Part VI. While the editors highlight that this is positive in the sense that the idea of quality peace is compatible with a multitude of perspectives (p.278), it becomes very difficult for the reader to put everything together and find a precise path regarding the use of the concept. The editors themselves recognize the methodological challenges present in the study, but they see this as a 'necessity for a novel concept like quality peace' (281). While it is useful to have a new concept that is still open and flexible, such a variety of methodologies makes it difficult to provide general conclusions, including from the case studies presented.

One issue that appears in *Understanding Quality Peace* as much as in the other two books is the local/international interface. Methodologically, this could bring at least two additional issues to the discussion on quality peace. First, as the editors observe in the conclusion, what does 'quality' mean in different societies? We could further ask how the idea of quality varies *within* societies, that is, 'quality peace for whom?' (a topic partly explored in the chapter by Louise Olsson, while talking about security equality). Here the discussion on issues of empowerment and disempowerment seem particularly important. At the same time, it seems relevant to ask how can measurement be comparable if the content of quality suffers cultural and societal variation. Second, the idea of the 'international' – or intervention more broadly – could be systematically included in the analysis of quality peace. This is perhaps one of the main differences between *Understanding Quality Peace* and the other two books reviewed here. Understanding these five dimensions and how they work begs engagement with the role of international actors, which, in turn, calls for the inclusion of a systemic dimension in the analysis. While a few chapters engage with this dimension in the book, including this more methodically in the analysis of the concept could be helpful to understanding the (in)effectiveness of peacebuilding.

So do these three books help us to answer the question posed in this article: what is the problem with peacebuilding? Unsurprisingly, there is no unique answer to this question, though hardly anyone would disagree with the fact that there is a problem – be it the colonial nature of this international enterprise, or the way policies have been designed to date, or the conceptual theoretical assumptions behind these policies. The different views presented in these three books point to different degrees of optimism regarding room for improvement. Still, notably, none called for the radical end of intervention. On the contrary, the predominant element arising from these different views is that there is still a need for better dialogue between the different actors involved in the context of intervention as well as a better understanding of the societies that come out

of violent conflict. In different ways, the three books contribute to this objective. Perhaps what is missing, in the end, is simply more knowledge produced in the very societies where interventions take place.

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