



Post-Conflict Peacebuilding and the Idea of Virtual Peace

John Heathershaw¹

This synthesis discusses critical responses to liberal peacebuilding which contend that international peacebuilders generate a 'virtual peace' in post-conflict environments as an alternative academic tool which seeks to explain both the vast gap between international representations and local experiences and the implications of this gap. The paper looks at three ways of thinking about the virtual politics of peace: as a misrepresentation of peacebuilders, a hyper-reality of the illusion of global governance and as a social practice integral to the practice of international development, and concludes with some implications for reflexive peacebuilders who seek to move beyond the reproduction of virtual peace in post-conflict societies.

Almost since its inception post-conflict peacebuilding has been criticized for its imposition of an abstract model of peace on places ill-disposed to such social transformation. UN Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali deployed apparently neutral language in defining post-conflict peacebuilding in 1992's *Agenda for Peace* as "action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict" (Boutros-Ghali, 1992: 11). However, it was immediately clear that this action would take the form of economic and political liberalization modeled on the experiences of industrialized (largely Western) states.

This synthesis discusses critical responses to liberal peacebuilding which contend that international peacebuilders generate a "virtual peace" in post-conflict environments. Firstly, the paper briefly summarizes Paris' criticism of the liberal peace and his and others' attempts to reform the liberal peace model, arguing that the fundamental fallacies of this approach remain in the new orthodoxy. Secondly, it introduces the concept of the virtual peace as an alternative academic tool which seeks to explain both the vast gap between international representations and local experiences and the implications of this gap. Finally, the paper looks at three ways of thinking about the virtual politics of peace: as a misrepresentation of peacebuilders, a hyper-reality of the illusion of global governance, and as a social practice integral to the practice of international development. In lieu of a conclusion, I raise some implications for reflexive peacebuilders who seek to move beyond the reproduction of virtual peace in post-conflict societies.

Beyond the Liberal Peace?

The immediate intellectual context to the emergence of the idea of "virtual peace" is Roland Paris' criticism of post-conflict peacebuilding for imposing a "liberal peace." Paris characterized peacebuilding both as "Wilsonian" (1997), in that it represented the ideals of rapid transformation towards universal international law and national self-determination enshrined in President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, and as a "*mission civilisatrice*" (2002), in that it echoed imperialist assumptions regarding the right and power of an external party to transform a backward and foreign place for the better. As such, he argued, peacebuilding involved "transplanting western models of social, political, and economic organisation into war-shattered states" (1997: 56). His contention was that liberalization

¹ John Heathershaw is a Lecturer in International Relations at the University of Exeter.



pursued with such speed and ambition was necessarily destabilizing and often led to a return to violence as Rwanda and numerous other cases seemed to show.

The influence of this argument on the development of peacebuilding concepts and theory has been considerable. It has raised questions of how the liberal peace can be “saved,” of the need for “new perspectives” (Newman et al 2009) and of what lies “beyond” the liberal peace. It has spurred Paris’ (2004) own work on “institutionalization before liberalization” (IBL) as well as Doyle and Sambanis’ (2006) arguments for international transitional administrations which substitute for the lack of capacity and consensus between local parties. These arguments have provided intellectual support for more consistent, frequent and extensive interventions in post-conflict setting as captured variously by the ideas of “responsibility to protect” and “statebuilding,” in the policy report *A More Secure World* (UN 2004) and institutionalized in the UN’s peacebuilding commission.

Yet these new concepts and policy prerogatives remain committed to the ‘liberal peace’ model including its tenets of liberal democracy and market economics. They offer incremental change in an expansion of the powers of international interveners, a lengthening of the duration of intervention, a greater role for the military, and expansion into new sectors of peacebuilding. According to such literature it is not that elections should not take place but that they should be delayed until the time is right. Equally, it is not that Western forms of civil society should be promoted but that such forms should have good, not bad, functions. As such Paris’ new axioms are little more than graduated versions of the very liberal peace that he himself criticized. Thus, the critique of the liberal peace has led to its resurgence in a moderated form – what may be characterized as *Liberal Peace-plus*.

However, an alternative response to the old and new Liberal Peace consensus has emerged in the literature. It constitutes a second generation of critical scholarship, largely from Europe, that opposes the Liberal Peace and its reformed successor on normative and empirical grounds (Chandler 2006; MacGinty 2005; Richmond 2005). Normatively, these authors oppose the Anglo-Saxon market capitalism, elections, and neo-liberal ideology of governance which they associate with post-conflict peacebuilding. Many of these critics favor an alternative model akin to European social democracy which privileges welfare and a social safety net – positive freedoms above negative freedoms. Others decline to offer an alternative model, which they see as necessarily seeking homogeneity from a diverse series of settings. Empirically, it is argued that – given these normative and methodological biases – orthodox analysis has distorted the post-conflict predicament. This contention is sustained by a new generation of research which challenges the claims both of Doyle and Sambanis that peacebuilding is improving its record of success and of Paris that previous failures can be attributed to the effects of hasty liberalization. Rather it shows that the primary functions of interventions might be for the international community itself rather than the leaders and citizens of the supposed objects of intervention.

A number of cases of the longer-term progress of peace settlements provide evidence for this claim. Whereas Tajikistan has been lauded as a peacebuilding success story by the UN Tajikistan Office of Peacebuilding, recent research has shown that peacebuilding assistance has been re-appropriated by authoritarian elites while international actors continue to develop their security relations (Heathershaw 2009; Nakaya 2008). Similarly, while Cambodia is claimed a success by Doyle & Sambanis (p. 210), other research has suggested that it has become a police state (Richmond & Franks 2007). In East Timor, victory for peacebuilding was famously declared by the UN until new political violence revealed unhealed divides in society and exposed the inner machinations of inter-elite conflicts. In Bosnia, the “phantom state” (Chandler 2006) is being readied for EU membership by the international community yet the High Representative continues to exercise enormous powers in the absence of a functioning consociational democracy almost

15 years after the signing of the Dayton agreement. Despite these contradictions, many of these cases are looked upon as relative success stories of peacebuilding.

This highlights the extent to which dominant readings of recent history are driven by predominant conceptual and normative frameworks. The problem here is that the assessment of “success” or “failure” is normatively grounded, methodologically questionable, and derived from limited empirical research. The Liberal Peace(-plus) approach is an inadequate academic tool to grasp the kind of peace that is being built from one post-conflict context to the next. Moreover, as the dominant mode of policy practice, it creates an illusory veneer of peace in the policies and programs practiced in post-conflict settings.

The Virtual Peace

Although the critical literatures introduced below are disparate and lacking in consensus, their authors share a belief that contemporary interventions are engendering a “virtual reality” of post-conflict peacebuilding. These authors are critical in that, unlike the problem-solving work they oppose, they seek to understand not simply the instrumental effects of post-conflict peacebuilding but its constitutive aspects. That is, it is not just that peace operations rarely come close to meeting their stated objectives. It is also that the process of pursuing those goals and simulating their achievement constitutes an international development industry that flatters to deceive. The idea that animates much of this thinking is captured in the concept of virtual peace.

For Oliver Richmond, who adopted the term virtual peace in his 2005 study *The Transformation of Peace*, the liberal peace is virtual in that it,

is often little more than a chimera, a superficial implant, transplanted into a soil without water, dependent upon foreign resources, and subject to uncertainty about the longevity of external commitment. Here there exists a virtual peace, masking deeper cultural, social, and economic realities of violence. Peace is not war, even in these places, but it is an expression of relative domination or hegemony by outsiders involved at its most basic level (2005: 205-6).

Virtual peace can be defined as consisting of three aspects. Firstly, virtual peace is constituted in a huge gap between an international discourse of liberation and local practices of domination – that is, between the formal representation of Liberal Peace in the international community and its authoritarian working out in context. Secondly, virtual peace is maintained by the long-term continuance of this gap through political practices of virtual peacebuilding despite dissenting voices locally and internationally. Thirdly, virtual peace serves distinct functions internationally as it aims to legitimize the continued expansion of post-conflict intervention and the use of development as surveillance for security purposes.

Importantly, and picking up on this last aspect, virtual peace should be understood not in opposition to reality but as a vital dimension of reality in post-conflict environments. As Debrix (1999: 217) notes:

The term virtual does not mean that peacekeeping has no effect whatsoever on the populations who, as this study has shown, are often disciplined, normalised, governed, or remobilised by these policies. What virtual means, rather, is that the vision of global unity or governance the peacekeeping is designed to mobilise is a matter of illusion.

In sum, the concept of virtual peace captures an international order where large-scale and radical transformations are deemed both necessary and achievable while local experiences and practices of managing conflict go unheard. This argument with regard to aid in post-

conflict states echoes Duffield's claims regarding international humanitarian assistance as a whole. As Duffield notes, the global South, becomes "a mirror which reflects policy decisions and aid fashions that have been formulated elsewhere" (2002: 264).

Three Perspectives on Virtual Peacebuilding

The import of virtual peace for scholars and practitioners of peacebuilding is often obfuscated by the lack of a clear enunciation of the concept and a debate over its aspects. This is puzzling given how many scholars make reference to the general idea using commensurable terms such as "audit cultures" (Strathern 2000), "faking democracy" (Chandler 1999), "empire of denial" (Chandler 2006), "virtuous war" (Der Derian 2001), "virtual war" (Ignatieff 1999), "simulating sovereignty" (Weber 1995), and "re-envisioning peacekeeping" (Debrix 1999) to characterize the means and ends of peace operations. This new research can be divided into three groups. The groups are in no way mutually exclusive; rather they complement one another in building up a fuller picture of how virtual peace is made and re-made.

A first group characterizes peacebuilding as virtual in that the international community wittingly or unwittingly misrepresents its process and outcomes (MacGinty 2006; Richmond 2005). For example, internationals fake democracy in Bosnia rather than accept the failure of their intervention (Chandler 1999). Alternatively the strategic misrepresentation of post-conflict zones might be more the product of institutions than individuals who often remain unwitting of the virtual peace and sincere advocates for peacebuilding. For example, for Richmond, under conditions of virtual peace, "internationals believe in their work, and in the liberal peace, but they too are touched by the weariness that comes with recognizing the vastness of this task" (2005: 206). Thus, for various members of this first group, the remedy is found in how peacebuilding strategies can address these social injustices, at both an institutional and an individual level, brought about by the inclusion of post-conflict states within a global, political-economic network via some form of international social welfare (Pugh et al, 2008). The virtual peace continues because of a failure to diagnose and act upon the fact that international financial liberalization, for example, is a cause of violent political conflict, not one of its solutions.

While for this group "virtual peace" constitutes a mis-reading of peacebuilding, for a second group of scholars' discourses, virtuality is a product of non-reading. To this group peacebuilding, peacekeeping, and humanitarian intervention are almost entirely detached from the everyday life of the post-conflict country (Debrix 1999; Der Derian 2001; Heathershaw 2009; Weber 1995). This discourse circulates in a knowledge economy where signs of success become more important than success itself. These critics interpret virtual peace as one function of a crisis of referentiality or a failure of representation in post-modern societies. For Debrix, UN peacekeeping is virtual in that it "simulates world order in its absence" (1999: 16). Thus, better representation of post-conflict intervention is made impossible by the political production of flows of verbal and visual information. Knowledge is generated by the ideologically informed, vested interests and ideals of the contemporary political economy. Policies of peacebuilding shift to meet contemporary policy fashions rather than responding to events on the ground. In the absence of objective facts, peacebuilding becomes a highly subjective and implicitly self-referential process. Conflict environments are understood in terms of "who we think we were/are" (Weber 2006, p.10). As such, the question of whether international peacebuilders are wittingly or unwittingly misrepresenting post-conflict places is moot. Peacebuilders simply have no other resources with which to make sense of extremely complex political environment than reports and images that already confirm the fundamental precepts, if not all the technical procedures, of the liberal peace.

One reason why this second approach has not proven popular even in wider critical circles, apart from its esotericism, may be that it offers little to those who wish to consider how virtual peacebuilding is sustained in the everyday life of the post-conflict. A final group of scholars in anthropology and development studies explores how virtual development and security are products of the cultural, economic, and political practices of the development industry in its global and local contexts (Bichsel 2008; Duffield 2002; Mosse 2005; Strathern 2000). This research reveals the processes by which knowledge about development is produced and disseminated. Strathern (2000) argues that the "audit cultures" of NGOs presuppose certain outcomes (at least partial "success") as development is assessed exclusively and superficially in terms of the goals of the program rather than its wider social reality. Similarly, Mosse shows how, motivated by the exigencies of organizations and the need to maintain relationships with donors, "actors in development agencies devote their energies to maintaining coherent representations regardless of events" (2005: 2). Duffield, too, finds "relations of accommodation and complicity" between public and private, international and local development and security actors. However, he argues, in practice "there is a susceptibility within global liberal governance to normalize violence and accept high levels of instability as an enduring if unfortunate characteristic of certain regions" (2002:17). These accounts show that the virtual peace is not merely textual. It is manifest in specific acts of misrepresentation according to the prevailing fashions of the international peacebuilding community. But it is also a fundamental part of how peacebuilding is practiced in programs and projects as well as policy (Bichsel 2008).

Implications: closing the gap?

This synthesis has argued that the concept of virtual peace is a useful analytical tool that captures the gaping chasm between international discourses and local practices of peace. The response from policymakers might quite legitimately be: so what? The gap between words and deeds in international peacebuilding is widely acknowledged unofficially and increasingly in academic studies. Indeed, the value of the concept of the virtual peace may remain overwhelmingly academic for the future as scholars debate the plausibility of generic models of international peacebuilding. It remains to be seen, if enough social scientific research indicates that the orthodox conceptualizations and policies of peacebuilding are serving to conceal the harsh realities of elite domination under international assistance, whether they will then begin to fall out of favor. One insufficient response, as is shown by the third group of authors surveyed above, is to fall back on civil society peacebuilding and notions of "bottom-up" and "local ownership." This approach is no less subject to the fashions of the international community than the more "top-down" approach of statebuilding.

However, there is a direct challenge to policy-makers stemming from this research. The concept of the virtual peace suggests that they should begin to listen more frankly and freely to their local project officers and, particularly, ostensible beneficiaries who may tell them behind closed doors that their programs cannot meet their grandiose objectives and often achieve the opposite in their unintended consequences. Moreover, policy-makers should have the courage to make these local perceptions and practices of peacebuilding known to an international audience which demands success stories, however limited. The UN is famous for its particular brand of inward-looking and defensive self-criticism. Yet for such self-criticism to be valuable, it must challenge not only technical procedures of implementation but the fundamental premises of intervention (impartiality, the democratic peace, global governance). A UN and international community which is able to self-criticize without falling back on the dogmas of realist non-interventionism or the hubris of liberal cosmopolitanism is a UN which can begin to deal more directly with the extreme complexities and difficulties of peace operations. Only then can the gaping chasm between policy and practice begin to narrow.

REFERENCES

- Bichsel, Christine (2008) *Conflict Transformation in Central Asia*, London: Routledge.
- Boutros-Ghali, B. (1992) *An Agenda for Peace*, New York: United Nations.
- Chandler, David (2006) *Empire in Denial*, London: Pluto.
- Chandler, David (1999) *Bosnia: faking democracy after Dayton*, London: Pluto Press.
- Debrix, F. (1999) *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping: The United Nations and the Mobilisation of Ideology*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Der Derian, J. (2001) *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network*, Boulder CO: Perseus/Westview Press.
- Doyle, M.W. and Sambanis, N. (2006) *Making War and Building Peace: United Nations Peace Operations*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Duffield, M. (2002) *Global Governance and the New Wars: the Merging of Development and Security*, London: Zed Books.
- Heathershaw, John (2009) *Post-conflict Tajikistan: the politics of peacebuilding and the emergence of legitimate order*, London: Routledge.
- Ignatieff, Michael (1999) *Virtual War: Kosovo and beyond*. New York: Picador.
- MacGinty, Roger (2006) *No War, No Peace*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mosse, David (2005) *Cultivating Development: An Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice*, London: Pluto.
- Nakaya, Sumie (2008) *Paradox of peacebuilding aid: post-conflict exclusion and violence in Tajikistan and beyond* (New York: PhD dissertation, Department of Political Science, The Graduate Center, City University of New York).
- Newman, Edward, Roland Paris & Oliver Richmond, eds. (2009) *New Perspectives on Liberal Peacebuilding*, United Nations University Press.
- Paris, R. (2004) *At War's End: Building Peace After Civil Conflict*, Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
- _____ (2002) "International peacebuilding and the 'mission civilisatrice'," *Review of International Studies* 28(4): 637-656.
- _____ (1997) "Peacebuilding and the limits of liberal internationalism," *International Security* 22(2): 54-89.
- Pugh, Michael, Neil Cooper and Mandy Turner (2008) *Whose Peace? Critical Perspectives on the Political Economy of Peacebuilding*, London: Palgrave.
- Richmond, O. (2005) *The Transformation of Peace*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Richmond, O. and Franks, J. (2007) "Liberal hubris? Virtual peace in Cambodia," *Security Dialogue*, 38 (1): 27-48.
- Strathern, M. (2000) *Audit Cultures: anthropological studies in accountability, ethics and the academy*, London: Routledge.
- United Nations [UN] (2004) *A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility*, Report of the Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, UN: New York.
- Weber, Cynthia (1995) *Simulating Sovereignty: Intervention, the State and Symbolic Exchange*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Weber, Cynthia (2006) *Imagining America at War: morality, politics and film*, London: Routledge.