

# Can Peace-Building be an Act of Violence?

Written by Audra Mitchell

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AUDRA MITCHELL, AUG 25 2012

Few spectators of NATO's 2011 actions in Libya (or indeed, prior acts of coalition forces in Afghanistan, Iraq and Kosovo) would argue with the proposition that *intervention* can be violent. Military intervention exemplifies the most commonly recognized trope of violence: physical violence, or the direct, instrumental destruction of material beings (human or non-human). In some cases, this kind of violence is directly and *causally linked* to the goal of building peace. For instance, military force is often used to create safe conditions, or 'humanitarian space'[1] in which processes of peace-building can be carried out. Indeed, the influential 'Brahimi Report' of 2001 chastised the UN's peace operations of the 1990s on the basis that they "did not *deploy into* post-conflict situations but tried to *create them*"[2], sometimes through coercive means. Yet in these cases, violence *appears* to be separate from, and external to, the processes subsequently used to 'build peace'.

I shall argue, however, that violence is also internal to the logics and processes of contemporary peace-building, in particular the increasingly popular 'transformative' approach. Ironically, although proponents of peace-building are increasingly attuned to 'structural'[3], indirect and non-physical forms of violence perpetrated by states and non-state combatants, they be far less aware of how these forms of violence are embedded in peace-building – a problem which this article will briefly explore.

### Violence against 'worlds'

The predominant trope of physical violence suggests that violence inheres in objective actions, leveraged against an object by a subject – whether the dropping of a bomb on a village, or the pummeling of a face with a fist. From this perspective, the defining feature of violence is the deliberate causation of direct, intentional, material damage. However, Hannah Arendt[4] suggests that the crux of violence is its instrumentality, which negates three of the defining features of human life: the uniqueness of each person; the plurality of human communities; and, crucially, the social (material and immaterial) 'worlds' inhabited by human beings. Damage to human 'worlds' in particular attacks the very ontological status of human beings, by removing the conditions in which they can realize and be recognized as human beings. From this perspective, violence is not restricted to acts that damage human bodies, but also those that harm the complex webs of meaning, materiality and action that constitute human 'worlds'. This idea is already reflected in a number of disciplines outside of IR. For instance, anthropologists of violence often argue that violence attacks whole social structures and modes of life[5], or one's subjective sense of 'self' and its embeddedness in social structures[6]. Similarly, the work of Elaine Scarry[7] and, more recently, Martin Coward[8] suggest that the destruction of the material structures that sustain human communal life – cities, villages, homes, public squares and so on – constitute significant acts of violence distinct from attacks on human bodies. But how does this analysis of violence, almost always applied to the acts of aggressors, relate to the process of peace-building?

Contemporary processes of peace-building are highly instrumental, and they interact with human beings and communities in ways that often reduce these phenomena to mere objects of transformation. Indeed, I have argued elsewhere[9] that the recent 'transformative turn' in peace-building frames societies affected by violence as materials for the literal production of peace. Exploring the case of Northern Ireland, I argue that the vast, complex processes used to bring about social transformation – not only during the 'peace process' of the 1990s, but as far back as the 1950s – directly instrumentalized social structures, patterns and ways of life. These processes created a context of mutual, *existential* threat and uncertainty, which helped to galvanize and magnify inter-group threats. The sense of

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social liminality and threat created by sudden and wide-spread transformation has also fragmented, alienated and dislocated many members of Northern Irish society – including ‘dissidents’ (both Loyalist and Republican) who continue to use violence to disrupt the ‘peace process’ today. From this perspective, the attempt instrumentally to transform human worlds (in the Arendtian sense) can be understood as a form of non-physical violence – which may give rise to physical violence.

This example draws attention to the inadvertent violence that may emerge as a by-product of transformative peace-building processes. In some cases, however, the attempt to destroy particular social worlds is overt and deliberate. An interesting example of this can be found in processes of ‘Demobilization, Disarmament and Reintegration’ (DDR). In countries such as Sierra Leone, Liberia, Mozambique, Colombia and Sri Lanka, formal DDR processes saw combatant groups quarantined in camps, divested of their weapons and subjected to developmental processes such as socialization and economic skills training. Such transformative processes are deliberately *designed* to destroy particular social formations associated with violence. As Danny Hoffman[10] and Kimberley Theidon[11] have argued in the cases of Sierra Leone and Colombia respectively, DDR is intended not only to remove weapons or to ‘return’ combatants to their homes, but also to dissolve the structures of collective meaning and social order in which people are socialized as ‘combatants’. For combatants who have been ensconced in such groups for many years, or from a young age, this may involve the sudden dissolution of the social structures in which have learned to engage with the world[12]. I do not by any means wish to suggest that violent social structures such as paramilitary groups should be protected or sustained. My point is simply that, by destroying the social structures through which ‘violent’ subjectivities are engendered amongst combatants, these processes expose combatants to the sudden loss of their social worlds, which may significantly impact upon their sense of vulnerability and fear. Furthermore, in some cases, DDR processes actively commandeer the very violent structures which they seek to dismantle. Many such processes focus on compelling or persuading the leadership of violent organizations and networks to engage in the peace-building process, and to use their power, influence or (the threat of) coercive force to bring more junior, and often young, members of violent organizations into line. They often accomplish this task by using the forms of power available to them, including the threat or actual use of physical harm, punishment, ostracization, pain or even death[13]. In this sense, the DDR process quite deliberately leverages social, psychological and even physical violence (or the threat thereof) as a means of creating peace.

On the other hand, the violence inherent to peace-building can take much more subtle and unintended forms, by doing damage to the social, cultural and cosmological fabric of specific human ‘worlds’[14]. As Roger MacGinty’s[15] work illustrates, there is an increasing trend within dominant liberal-democratic forms of peace-building to appropriate aspects of ‘traditional’ or ‘indigenous’ social belief, often tied to the spiritual, sacred or religious life of a community. Amongst the best known examples of this is the use of *gagaca* courts to deal with the processing of war crimes trials in Rwanda and the *Loya Jirga* used in peace negotiations in Afghanistan, both of which extracted and transposed tribal rituals to processes of governance and peace-building very different from their original purposes[16]. New work on the subject reveals that similar approaches have been used in contexts such as Timor Leste[17] to link processes of democratization and local governance to beliefs in the legitimating powers of deceased ancestors. On the one hand, this approach can be lauded as an attempt to increase the authenticity and contextualization of otherwise homogenizing, externally-driven processes of transformation. On the other hand, however, the instrumentalization of ‘traditional’ or ‘indigenous’ beliefs can have the effect of fragmenting these forms of belief, or depriving them of their sacredness by redefining them in terms of the instrumental goals and norms of intervenors. As Gerard Powers argues, there is a great risk that, “instrumentalizing religion, even for the worthwhile objective of peace-building, will undermine religion as well as the effectiveness of religious peace-building”[18] In other words, the attempt to infuse peace-building with ‘local’ resonance and meaning can have the perverse effect of damaging distinctive social structures, and the human worlds that they sustain.

## In conclusion

This brief discussion suggests that violence, and particularly violence against human ‘worlds’, is *internal* to many of the processes commonly used in contemporary peace-building – including ‘transformative’ approaches. It is not meant to act as a sweeping indictment of peace-building, but rather to draw attention to its paradoxical relationship with violence. This problem is effaced by contemporary discourses of peace-building, which frame it *by definition* as

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the opposite of violence, a misapprehension that has significant effects on international policy-making. For instance, contemporary international norms and regulations are deeply concerned with limiting the destructive potential of the use of coercive force, but assume that non-coercive strategies of peace-building are unproblematically non-violent. Thus, *Responsibility to Protect* offers significant barriers and caveats to limit the use of *military* action. Yet it does not attempt to limit, nor even to identify, harms caused by pre- or post-conflict peace-building activities. If the international community wishes to minimize the (inadvertent) harms its actions may cause, then it is necessary to turn more attention to the forms of violence that may be embedded in strategies used to create peace.

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**Audra Mitchell** is lecturer in International Relations at the University of York. She is author of *Lost in Transformation: Violent Peace and Peaceful Conflict in Northern Ireland* (Palgrave, 2011), co-editor of *Hybrid Forms of Peace: From the Everyday to Post-liberalism* (with Oliver Richmond, Palgrave, 2011) and author of articles in a number of international journals. A new book, *Re-enchanting Humanity: Western Secularity and International Intervention*, is presently under review. Audra's current research focuses on the intersection of post-humanist theory and human protection practices.

[1] See Weiss, Thomas, 2007. *Humanitarian Intervention*. Cambridge: Polity

[2] United Nations, 2000. *Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations (Brahimi Report)*. New York: UN.

[3] Galtung, Johan, 1996. *Peace by Peaceful Means*. London: Sage.

[4] Arendt, Hannah, 1967. *On Violence*.

[5] See, for instance: Nordstrom, Carolyn, 1997. *A Different Kind of War Story*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press and Macek, Ivana, 2000. *War Within: Everyday Life in Sarajevo Under Siege*. Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.

[6] See, for instance, Aretxaga, Begona, 2005 (edited by Joseba Zulaika). *States of Terror: the Essays of Begona Aretxaga*. Reno: Centre for Basque Studies and Das, Veena, 2007. *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

[7] See also Scarry, Elaine, 1995. *The Body in Pain*

[8] Coward, Martin, 2006. "Against Anthropocentrism: the destruction of the built environment as a distinct form of political violence" *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 32, pp. 419-37.

[9] Mitchell, Audra, 2011. *Lost in Transformation: Violent Peace and Peaceful Conflict in Northern Ireland*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

[10] Hoffman, Danny, 2004. 'The Civilian Target in Sierra Leone and Liberia: Political Power, Military Strategy, and Humanitarian Intervention'. *African Affairs*, No. 103, pp. 211-226.

[11] Theidon, Kimberly, 2007. "Transitional Subjects: The Disarmament, Demobilization and

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Reintegration of Former Combatants in Colombia” *The International Journal of Transitional Justice*, Vol. 1, pp. 66-90

[12] Williamson, John, 2006. “The Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers: Social and Psychological Transformation in Sierra Leone”. *Intervention*, Vol. 4, No. 3, pp. 185-205.

[13] See also Jennings, Kathleen M, 2007. “The Struggle to Satisfy: DDR Through the Eyes of Ex-combatants in Liberia”. *International Peacekeeping*, Vol. 14, No.2, pp. 204-18 and Mitchell, Audra and Sara Templer, 2012. “Dilemmas of Protection: the Ulster Defence Association’s role in ‘Keeping a Lid on Loyalists’” *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-856X.2011.00505.x/abstract>

[14] See Laustsen, Carsten Bagge and Ole Waever, 2000. “In Defense of Religion: Sacred Referent Objects for Securitization” Vol. 29, No. 3, pp. 705-739. These authors argue that ‘religion’, and not just human beings, can be the subject of harm and protection.

[15] MacGinty, Roger, 2008. “Indigenous peace-making versus the liberal peace” *Cooperation and Conflict*, 43 (2), pp. 139-63.

[16] *Gagaca* courts, for instance, were originally intended to deal with small-scale disputes over land and property.

[17] Brown, Anne M. and Alex Gusmao... in Richmond, Oliver P. and Audra Mitchell, 2011. *Hybrid Forms of Peace: From the Everyday to Post-liberalism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

[18] Powers, Gerard F., 2010. “Religion and Peacebuilding” in Philpott, Daniel and Gerard F. Powers (eds). 2010. *Strategies of Peace*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 329.

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### About the author:

**Audra Mitchell** is the CIGI Chair in Global Governance and Ethics and Associate Professor at the Balsillie School of International Affairs, Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada. She has published widely in the areas of posthumanist IR, global ethics, large-scale harm, cosmology and violence. Her current research explores the ethics of global extinction.