The Politics of Postwar Reconstruction as the Discursive International Ordering

Liberal Internationalism, Peace, and State-Building: The Politics of Postwar Reconstruction as the Discursive Ordering of the 'International'

This essay sets out to explore the politics of postwar reconstruction – understood as peace and state-building – as a discursive realm complicit in the (re)production of the broader liberal project emerging after the Cold War. Accordingly, the paper starts by situating the emergence of peace and state-building as ordering practices of the 'international' and unfolds by looking at the evolving configurations of state-building as adaptive tools of liberal power-constellations to the contingencies of the international context. The essay concludes by claiming that the shift in the ontologies of intervention (from the 'political towards the 'social') in peace and state-building mirrors the capacity of liberal interests to mobilize the discourse of postwar reconstruction in favour of the (re)production of a situated order and the expansion of its framework of domination over individual and collective subjectivities.

I

The fall of the 'iron curtain' is commonly understood as a watershed in international relations. Accordingly, conventional IR narratives often represent this moment as a pivotal change altering the geopolitical and ideational underpinnings of international order as well as the intersubjective practices (e.g. institutions, norms, relationships) through which it is to be (re)produced. By challenging conventional realist understandings that assumed the international system to be purely anarchical and conflict as the natural rationale guiding inter-state behaviour (Carr, 1939; Waltz, 1979), the end of the bipolar confrontation reinforced the significance of cooperation and multilateral practices in the (re)ordering of the 'international' (Dunne and McDonald, 2013). Furthermore, this new narrative also depicted the demise of the Soviet Union and its bloc as bringing with it an array of emerging challenges to policy-makers, at the same time that it opened up the political space for new practices, experiences and policies to emerge as legitimate answers to those challenges.

Despite the contested nature of what the end of the Cold War meant in the context of international and political theory (see Cox, Booth and Dunne, 2000), this new era has witnessed a burgeoning interest from both academics and policy makers in the Kantian project and the concomitant ideals as an ideological and political framework for international peace. As some commentators have noted, "more than anything, what marked the 1990s out from previous decades was the striking ascendency of the liberal democratic model of governance" (Dunne and McDonald, 2013: 2), giving a new impetus to convert notions such as the 'liberal peace theory' into a concrete political agenda. Conceiving republican representation, universal human rights and transnational interdependence as three causal mechanisms whose coexistence could explain non-conflictual relationships between liberal states (Doyle, 2005), the 'liberal peace' argument provided an intellectual compass upon which the production of a post-Cold War order could be forged and justified. However, it is through specific notions such as 'postwar reconstruction', and the naturalization of its policies as a legitimate responses to tackle global insecurities, that dominant actors have built the praxeological tools intended to institutionalize those ideals and reproduce a specific configuration of the international system.

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II

As the global political space came to be represented as an increasingly complex and integrated playground, the vacuum of power left by the Cold War and the threats thereof (e.g. environment, illiberal states, migration) were seized as the privileged ideational locus to rearticulate public concerns such as security and development into a unified discourse that would soon become hegemonic. Similarly, the renewed interest in global institutions such as the United Nations and the discursive nature of its practice also provided an appropriate political framework to address those issues (viz. through the discourse of human security, peacebuilding) and reproduce order according to the liberal cannon. However, as the structuring principle of the 'international', liberalism did not represent so much a radical ideological change as it epitomized "an institutionalised idea that has shaped order-building for more than two centuries" (Dunne and McDonald, 2013: 1). In fact, as several authors have noted, the liberal order has been characterized by its ability to 'reinvent itself' (Ikenberry, 2009; see also Dunne et. al, 2013), and under the distinctive contingencies of post-Cold War it emerged as a syncretic evolution of its principles and practices.

As G. John Ikenberry (2009) has claimed, the fact that the liberal order has proven able to assume distinctive configurations reflects itself in the contrasting narratives according to which its ideals have been translated into international norms and practices throughout the last hundred years. While in its initial form liberal voices advocated "the building of an international legal order that reinforced norms of state sovereignty and non-intervention", in the last decade liberal articulations of 'the international' have been "marked by increasingly far-reaching and complex forms of international cooperation that erode state sovereignty and reallocate on a global scale the sites and sources of political authority" (2009: 71). According to this influential voice of the liberal school, what we are witnessing today is rather a reconfiguration of 'international liberalism' that mirrors both great powers necessity to impose order at the global level, and the limitations of a 'liberal decade' shaped by the role of multilateralism, cooperation and democracy promotion as the normative guidelines of foreign policy (Ikenberry, 2009). As it will be developed further, in the specific context of postwar reconstruction this adjustment has echoed in the changing ontologies of the discourses of peace, security and development and the distinctive models of external-led (re)construction they ended up legitimizing.

Arguably, this resilient and adaptive character of the 'liberal internationalism' discourse – manifest in the adjustment of its principles and practices to the pragmatic needs of liberal (and mainly Western) interests – can be said to mirror a specific 'power-constellation' in the Nietzschien sense. According to Nietzsche then, a power-constellation can be understood as the set of mechanisms (e.g. practices, discourses, ideas) mobilized by an organism in order to increase its power in the social milieu where it is located, and "the control or domination of other power-constellations which it encounters" (Grimm, 1977: 156). Hence, the liberal discourse can be depicted as a power-constellation whose domination over the 'international' is reproduced by such ordering practices as those intrinsic to the policies of peace and statebuilding. Therefore, the liberal underpinnings of such situated models of postwar reconstruction – legitimized by the ethics of post-Cold War foreign policy – render these models complicit with the institutionalization of specific knowledge asymmetries intrinsic to the liberal international order and on which it depends to survive. Peace and statebuilding policies mirror both the liberal need for control over competing orders and the dispositive through this control is exercised and maintained.

It is within this distinctive and renewed consensus about who and what governs the post-Cold War era that postwar reconstruction has emerged in the form of specific practices of state-building and peacebuilding. And it did so both as discourse and policy for the sake of ordering and policing the 'international', based on a legitimizing principle that has turned 'state fragility' (mainly located within illiberal polities) and gross human rights violations into ethical issues concerning all humankind while providing a practical guide to address them and guarantee the (re)production of the broader international order. Structured upon the idea that external-led intervention at the political level can set up entire societies on the liberal model, peace and statebuilding have therefore emerged as ordering practices serving the normalization or sedimentation of specific power constellations and interests connecting different sets of actors, internal and external.

Accordingly, the politics of postwar reconstruction has enabled dominant actors to articulate liberal interests and (re)produce them at different levels of the global arena. By translating the hegemonic narrative at the

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international/global level into concrete and legitimate policies structuring the political options of those under the gaze and intervention of an 'international community of the willing', state-building has provided an efficient framework to discipline the competing illiberal claims while universalizing and normalizing (at both the individual, societal, and international levels) the normative values upon which it is structured. The discourse of postwar reconstruction works as a productive tool related to a specific power constellation, and while being framed in terms of international peace and development, it also governs much deeper cognitive structures of the global social fabric by globalizing a situated concept of 'the good life' as a prerequisite for peace. In this sense, it can be said to work as a mimicry of imperial and colonial logics that reinforce the domination of specific actors and crystalize their power interests, for whom order works through a Foucauldian framework of governmentality operating in every dimension of the 'glocalized' political arena.

Accordingly, as Western power in the international arena is swiftly eroding and early notions of peace and statebuilding seem to encompass several dilemmas and limitations (Paris and Sisk, 2008), the politics of postwar reconstruction often assumes renewed articulations reflecting both the ongoing challenges to the legitimacy of the liberal order and the mobilization of different forms of power in its (re)production. According to Roland Paris and Timothy Sisk, in its early stage postwar reconstruction was conceived in a fairly restricted way as it "tended to be for very limited periods, focusing primarily on holding a successful post-conflict election, usually within the first one or two years" (2008: 6). During this period of minimalist intervention, peace and statebuilding missions came to be characterized by the "growing recognition that (re)building or establishing at least a minimally functioning state was essential for undertaking political and economic reforms and maintaining the peace, especially in the long term" (Menochal, 2011: 1717).

And yet, despite the fact that this approach placed a significant emphasis on the social dimensions and recognized that forging a legitimate government "necessarily requires attentiveness to the relationship between these institutions and civil society" (Paris and Sisk, 2008: 14), statebuilding remained mainly within an institutional 'top-down' approach, assuming that the democratization of domestic politics and the liberalization of the state's formal apparatus was sufficient to produce a stable polity capable of economic development. As David Chandler has claimed, it anticipated the roots of fragility as laying "in elite blockages to peace and development, to be removed through the export of liberal institutional frameworks of democracy and the market" (2013: 276).

The politics of state-building, whose understanding was initially limited to a rational and linear process led by external actors promoting functional and legitimate state institutions, has showed multiple fragilities at both normative and praxeological levels. These became evident in the repeated failures of specific policies, recurrently unable to produce a lasting peace or forge a state apparatus able to distribute equitably the 'peace dividends' to post-conflict societies. Furthermore, these more or less failed experiments and the imperial logics they sustained led eventually to the emergence of a growing number of dissenting voices in the camp who started questioning 'whose peace' and interests were really being secured by such practices. Guns and elections came to be seen as insufficient and inadequate methods for achieving a sustained peace or producing economic development, as the roots of instability, or rather 'fragility', were not conveniently addressed. This model has focused endlessly on (re)producing liberal (Western) polities as a legitimate ordering tool for non-Western societies, and despite being recognized that the path beyond fragility and towards a sustained peace resided in the ability of the state to fulfill social (local and societal) expectations (see DFID, 2010: 12), such polities were not more than a mere mimicking of Western-cum-liberal experiences.

Therefore, the limitations showed by this rationalist method of statebuilding seemed only natural when it came to "dealing with issues relating to justice, reconciliation, identity, gender, culture, or welfare" (Richmond, 2010: 26), most of which encompassed the seeds of violence and instability. The results of these early 'experiments' highlighted how both the underpinnings of instability and the solutions for state fragility could not be solely found in the political structure of the state. As some critics have pointed out, the societal sphere plays a pivotal role in enabling democratic institutions to flourish. Critically then, the politics of postwar reconstruction should take into account the local and communal norms and subjectivities that often conflict with liberal ways of being and doing (Woodward 2007; MacGinty, 2010).

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Achieving a sustainable peace and producing development therefore implied forging a 'social' sphere that accepts the liberal state as a legitimate source of authority, and recognizing that those goals could only be achieved if this process could adjust the 'liberal' solution to 'local' roots of the problem. Peace ought to assume a 'hybrid' configuration, to be located in-between 'local' and 'liberal' understandings of its meaning (see MacGinty, 2010), as its stable reproduction implies a transformation of the cognitive structures structuring domestic societies, as well as the renegotiation of what the state is for. In this sense, the path beyond fragility is not so much to be forged only through the building of a polity as a rational/bureaucratic institution; rather it depends also on (re)recreating a society as an 'imagined community' in Benedict Anderson's (1982) words.

Postwar reconstruction needs to be negotiated rather than imposed as peace and development are contingent upon the ability of external and domestic agents to reshape "values, principles, interests and power relations" (Menochal, 2011: 1731). As David Chandler argues, within the changing discourse of postwar reconstruction, "the problems of post-conflict or post-colonial societies [came to be] understood as problems rooted in societal contexts and community practices whose ideational and cognitive effects become a barrier to adapting to or accepting liberal frameworks of peace" (2013: 282).

Accordingly, it comes as natural that the shortcomings of early state-building approaches reflected eventually in the changing ontologies of external-led intervention and their strategic shift from the mere restructuring of the political arena towards the total reshaping of the social sphere. Buttressed by notions such as 'capacity building', 'resilience' and 'local-ownership', this discursive shift conceived 'local-knowledge', 'hybrid peace' and 'the social' rather than the 'political' as the new orthodoxies of postwar reconstruction. In fact, "intervention to shape the associational practices of the societal milieu is [now] seen as crucial to both sustainable peace and development" (Chandler, 2013: 284), as contemporary policies came to mirror an understanding of peace and statebuilding as "addressing needs and root causes, connecting the new liberal state or polity with older, locally recognizable and contextual, customary, political, social, and economic traditions, and engaging with grass roots and the most marginalised members of postconflict polities" (Richmond, 2010: 32). However, some critics argue that despite its new configuration, statebuilding remains complicit with the liberal order as the relocation of the subject of intervention and the therapeutic language of its discourse "merely hide the traditional practices of empire or even extends them in new regulatory forms" (Chandler, 2005: 1). Accordingly, and taking Chandler's standpoint (2005; 2012), this discursive adjustment enables Western powers to evade the responsibility for the results of statebuilding experiments, while allowing its emerging practices to keep (re)producing the power asymmetries of the post-Cold War liberal order. This claim comes close to Jonathan Joseph's argument stressing that the ontological shift is "typical of governmentality insofar as it operates from a distance, lowering expectations of what Western governments are prepared to do, while at the same time promoting the need for capacity building to enhance practices of good governance" (2013: 44).

III

Beyond the traditional understanding that took state-building practices as focused on the (re)arrangement of political and economic structures, what some now claim to be a 'post-liberal' shift in postwar reconstruction (see Richmond, 2011) has revealed that "states cannot be made to work from the outside" (Menochal, 2011: 17-31). By placing the responsibility for its policies at the individual and cognitive levels, the emerging discourse of postwar reconstruction (as well as the closely associated discourses of development and security) is legitimizing concrete policies that, as Jonathan Joseph notes, fortify "the organisational structure of the advanced liberal societies through its assumptions about social relations, and it supports the idea of the neoliberal subject as autonomous and responsible" (2013: 40). In brief, these policies mirror the readjustment of the liberal order mentioned by Ikenberry (2009) through the discursive reconfiguration of its (re)productive practices. At the same time, they legitimize the liberal power-constellation to intervene at deeper ontological levels by framing policy options and (re)fashioning the norms and relationships that govern everyday life within both public and private spheres.

On the one hand 'post-liberal' politics of statebuilding depicts "the problems of conflict, underdevelopment and a lack of rights and democracy as being self-generated products of communities or societies themselves" (Chandler, 2013: 277). On the other, they end up reifying power asymmetries since "[w]hat counts as good governance is decided by Western interests and transmitted through a normative and normalising discourse that transfers responsibility to local

agents" (Joseph 2013: 44). The bottom line is that, while early practices of postwar reconstruction have been criticized for mimicking colonial dynamics of dominance, the ontological shift in policy configuration mirrors the adaptive character of the liberal order (as a power-constellation) and its ability to expand its domination over individual and societal subjectivities. As the international liberal subject has been reframed as the individual, rather than the state, peace and state-building end up epitomizing disciplinary practices and productive tools intended to (re)produce and normalize not just a certain order and its underlying power-configurations but more critically also a restricted notion of human subjectivity.

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