

Review - Peacebuilding and NGOs

Written by Oliver Richmond

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OLIVER RICHMOND, JAN 28 2013

Peacebuilding and NGOs: State-Civil-Society Interactions

By: Ryerson Christie

London & New York: Routledge, 2013

This critical interrogation of the evolution of NGO contributions to peacebuilding is a welcome addition to the literature. It engages with the latest debates on peacebuilding (drawing on critical security studies), and in particular the fine balance of power between the liberal peace system, the state and civil society. It pushes the concurrent debates on NGOs and civil society forward, especially in their conceptual (and conjectural) transferral, north to south. It is critical of the northern perspective that 'civil' society may be constituted mainly by NGOs, often externally funded (p.3), thus ignoring the many local actors engaged in their own versions of peacebuilding. It is vital to both society and the state. Yet the social contract itself is the source of contestation (p.10). Civil society is supposed to be dependent on international norms and support, assist in reforming the state whilst also integral to it. Ryerson notes how civil society around the world rarely supports western neoliberal models, and indeed often sees their work as to mitigate their local impact (p.55). Furthermore, it is hardly plausible to expect an alien and underfunded civil society to hold a predatory state accountable (p.200) (and even a state that is reforming is unlikely to take its responsibilities seriously to civil society in the current international paradigm of neoliberalism, officialdom/elitism and rationalism).

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Thus, the author argues that peacebuilding has produced unintended consequences- partly because of its contradictory western-oriented and ahistorical nature-, which has highlighted new aspects of conflict while trying to address old ones.

This study illustrates how the progressivism associated with northern stabilisation and development- state formation and building peace- has been associated with the creation of a copy of civil society propagated around the world's trouble spots, more specifically in the case of this study, in Cambodia since the Paris Peace Accords. In Cambodia, civil society has been seen as an answer to the problems of the previous epoch and a vibrant civil society has come into being. Through it international actors have sought to tame state formation processes and provide security. The quality of life and access to institutions have improved as a result. However, this civil society is not fully representative of local aspirations because it has been mainly externally driven and often is unrepresentative of local context. (p.140). Indeed, many NGOs in Cambodia have not emerged indigenously (p.12). This approach to civil society has also created new contestations, both within Cambodian society over power, representation, law, development, and accountability, and between international and local conceptions of the role of society in a state. The state itself has moved into civil society to neutralise many of the qualities that NGOs and internationals deem to be necessary for stability, and it has done so via its superior power (p.12 & p.190). New contestations have arisen over personal power, bureaucratisation, identity, and the meaning of politics (p.11-14). Furthermore, neoliberalism has not produced wealth evenly, and indeed inequality has increased since the peace accords (p.94).

Civil society in Cambodia is very different to what internationals expected, both in terms of its socio-political structure, drawn from its own history, and because of resistance to any diffusion of power from state elites. Thus, while it has offered a space for critical forms of politics, which influence peace and the state (p.7.), it is also constrained by international conceptions of peace the social contract and their difference with local approaches, as well as resisted by many elites. The case study material on Cambodia provides a fascinating and diverse glimpse of local and state politics, and echoes similar debates emerging in other peacebuilding cases around the world about the limited nature of the liberal peace when viewed from the local perspective.

This is an interesting study containing many important ideas. It has identified several theoretical paradoxes, and also explored them via a well-chosen and executed case study. It has done so in critical vein while also maintaining the possibility that the very processes it critiques can be improved. It is also historically and ideologically aware. It echoes lessons elsewhere. It also offers some important caveats on civil society and local agency, warning of their limitations and narrowness, as well as the parallels between critical and liberal scholarship (p.201). One of the most interesting studies on civil society, the role of NGOs, and peacebuilding published recently, it has much to recommend it.

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Oliver Richmond is a Research Professor in IR, Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Manchester, UK. He is also International Professor, College of International Studies, Kyung Hee University, Korea. His publications include *A Post Liberal Peace* (Routledge, 2011), *Liberal Peace Transitions*, (with Jason Franks, Edinburgh University Press, 2009), *Peace in IR* (Routledge, 2008), and *The Transformation of Peace* (Palgrave, 2005/7). He is editor of the Palgrave book series, *Rethinking Conflict Studies*, and co-editor of the Journal, *Peacebuilding*.

About the author:

Oliver Richmond is a Research Professor in IR, Peace and Conflict Studies in the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute at the University of Manchester, UK. He is also International Professor, College of International Studies, Kyung Hee University, Korea and a Visiting Professor at the University of Tromsø. His publications include *Peace Formation and Political Order in Conflict Affected Societies* (Oxford University Press, 2016), *Post-Liberal Peace Transitions: Between Peace Formation and State Formation*(with Sandra Pogodda; Edinburgh University Press, 2016), *Failed Statebuilding* (Yale University Press, 2014), *A Very Short Introduction to Peace*,

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