

# Critics of Liberal Peace: Are Hybridity & Local Turn Approaches More Effective?

Written by Juleus Ghunta

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JULEUS GHUNTA, DEC 13 2018

Victory in the Cold War not only assured the West of the superiority of its democratic worldview, but also of its intrinsic duty to intervene in international conflicts and reorient the governance structures of Global South states. These post-Cold War interventions were grounded in the tenets of liberal democratic peace. As the miscarriages of liberal peace piled up into the early 2000s, so did the critiques by scholars who accused the West of neo-colonialism and condemned its disregard for indigenous peacebuilding paradigms.

This essay puts forward a critical analysis of the liberal peace debate, assessing the pros and cons of two alternative approaches to liberalism. Section I provides a definition of liberal peace and a brief overview of the main contentions in the debate. Section II highlights the core arguments in the 'local-turn critique' of liberal peace. Section III offers a brief critique of the local-turn. Section IV outlines a more recent critique of liberal peace known as hybridity. Section V discusses these alternative approaches and concludes by arguing that they are mostly conjectural and conceptual and have largely failed to point the way to more effective peacebuilding.

### Overview: Liberal Peace Debate

Liberal peacebuilding [also known as liberal democratic peace or Western peace] is the imposition of Kantian irenicism on illiberal states by Western governments, IFIs and INGOs (Mac Ginty 2008:143). In the early 1990s, liberal peace advocates began to promulgate the merits of global democratisation and marketisation with considerable fervour (Paris 2010:388). These early proponents "attempted to unite the world under a hegemonic system that replicated liberal institutions, norms, political, social and economic systems" (Richmond 2011:1). They were convinced of their duty to rescue the Global South from itself, even if this, ironically, resulted in the propping up of illiberal strongmen and states (Mac Ginty 2008:149, Mac Ginty 2014:394).

Neoliberalism's Post-Cold War peacebuilding agenda tilted strongly toward interventionism and reformation. This agenda engendered "ethnocentrism, cultural biases, and a narrow set of interests, bounded by Hobbes and Locke" (Richmond 2011:2). In the early 1990s,—under Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali—the UN was considered the bastion of liberal ideology. Its 1992 *Agenda for Peace* was firmly grounded in the tenets of internationalism (Shelby 2013:62). All of the UN's post-1989 intrastate peace agreements are laden with liberal creeds (Peace Accord Matrix 2017, Richmond and Mac Ginty 2014:178).

In some quarters, the critique of liberal peace is considered a critique of Western values and dominance. Nonetheless, this critique has moved some pro-liberal scholars to question the "emancipatory framework of liberalism" and acknowledge the virtues of alternative approaches (Richmond and Mac Ginty 2014). However, the 2011 *New Deal* (IDPS 2017) and other alternative peace and development agreements have failed to undercut the neo-liberal hegemony. Paris (2010:380) argues that despite evident failures, liberal peacebuilding projects "have done more good than harm". He points to the growing influence of BRIC and G7 countries as evidence of the utility of this approach. He contends that even the most hypercritical critics have not unequivocally dismissed the liberal agenda.

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Two of these critics, Richmond and Mac Ginty (2014), initially argued that contemporary peacebuilding projects are most effective when they are localised. They condemned the West's neo-colonial approach to peacebuilding, arguing that local states should be empowered to diagnose and solve their problems. In recent years, Richmond and Mac Ginty have emerged as the main exponents of hybridity, a new alternative to liberalism. Hybridity refers to the amalgamation of local and liberal practices. Jarstad and Belloni (2012:4) argue that the hybrid approach provides legitimacy and gravitas to domestic institutions. However, given the distinctiveness of international conflicts, the standardisation of hybrid approaches is practically impossible. This difficulty underscores a major flaw in the pro-local-hybrid outlook. Liberals maintain that "without clear alternatives...liberalism...remains the most sensible foundation for post-conflict peacebuilding" (Paris 2010:360).

Though the contemporary facet of this debate is merely three decades old, some critics (Hameri 2011) contend that it has reached its zenith. Pushing against this tide, Richmond and Mac Ginty (2014:173) purport that pro-local-hybrid intellectualism has been suppressed under "the material power held by the mainstream". In arguing for the continued critique of liberal peace they question the "positionality of those who engage in the debate" (Richmond and Mac Ginty 2014:172) vis-à-vis their alignment to the status quo.

## The Indigenous/Local Turn: Critique of Liberal Peace

The local-turn in peacebuilding emerged as a response to the failed interventions and intellectual assaults of liberal peace actors into and against illiberal states. This *turn* is buttressed by the kind of post-structural and anticolonial scholarship that proliferated during the Cold War (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013). Exponents of the local-turn argue that liberal peace practitioners are duty-bound to (re)orient local institutions and mores toward westernisms. They argue that the liberal peace focus on individualism, structural functionalism and state centrality may worsen rather than improve dystopic states, leading to pacification instead of constructive change (Richmond and Mac Ginty 2014:178). They note that liberal peace actors usually command considerable material and psychological resources which are often used to enforce compliance among local recalcitrants (Mac Ginty 2010:399).

Much of the opposition to liberalism comes from social anthropologists, whose ethnographic studies highlight how an understanding of grassroots narratives may lead to the creation of more effective intervention methodologies (Mac Ginty 2008:149). These studies have revealed that many indigenous societies have spent years perfecting complex peacebuilding practices. In some instances, their approaches are markedly dissimilar to democratic notions of peace (Mac Ginty 2008:149). Oliver Richmond (2009:557) believes that peacebuilding interventions should be tailored to the needs of locals. He argues that westernisms are "ethically bankrupt...coercive...unfeeling...insensitive". Proponents of the local-turn decry liberalism's disregard for indigenous traditions, ingenuity and collective ownership (Richmond and Mac Ginty 2015). They posit that the "participatory and relationship focused" approach of indigenous peacebuilding leads to greater buy-in than liberal operations (Mac Ginty 2008). Mac Ginty (2010:401) claims that liberal peace "cannot cope with radical difference". He asserts that liberalism "prioritises rights over needs", that its top-down economism peripheralises the poor. In other words, liberal peace's claims to universalism are far-fetched and quixotic (Hughes et al. 2015:818). Richmond and Mac Ginty (2014:179) maintain that local peacebuilding is "people focused and harbours suspicions towards conventional ways of seeing". Richmond and Mac Ginty (2014:74) opine that peacebuilding may not be the focal point of liberal actors. They posit that liberal intervention strategies are usually crafted in places that are far removed in distance and worldview from illiberal states.

Many of these strategies are being rejected by locals who feel they are better placed to diagnose and resolve their conflicts. In some cases, the implementation costs of locally-generated projects are comparatively low (Mac Ginty 2008). Mac Ginty (2008:143) argues that the empowerment of local actors and the utilisation of local resources lead to long-term commitment to peace. This pushback has compelled the West to "give indigenous issues a much higher profile" (Mac Ginty 2008:140). Supranational organisations such as the UN, ILO and Inter-American Development Bank have created policies aimed at protecting the "rights and dignity of indigenous peoples" (Mac Ginty 2008:140).

## 'Secondary Critique': Brief Critique of the Local-Turn

According to Hughes et al. (2015:818), the focus on the local-turn has widened the scope of peace research

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regarding “the relationship between power, agency and freedom”. While this is welcome, they argue that unbridled romanticisation of indigenous practices downplays the despotic tendencies that are endemic in some local states. Mac Ginty (2008) agrees with Hughes et al. that indigenous interventions must be subjected to the same level of scrutiny as liberal projects. He notes that even though indigenous peacebuilding practices are no longer well-regarded in some societies, unscrupulous disputants use them to acquire absolution and eschew punishment (Mac Ginty 2008:157). Locals’ incomprehension of alien notions of peacebuilding may also be used to justify the prolongation of violence. And in some cases, the prioritising of indigeneity leads to localism. Mac Ginty’s (2008:158) critique that Western peace does not address the “socio-psychological consequences of violent conflict,” can be levelled against indigenous peacebuilding as well, especially in light of new findings in the study of emotions in conflict, developmental psychopathology and interpersonal neurobiology (Nair 2008, Van der Kolk 2015:2).

## Hybrid Peacebuilding

Hybrid peacebuilding is comprised of a “composite of exogenous and indigenous forces” (Mac Ginty 2014:392). Mac Ginty and Sanghera (2012:4) define hybridity as “a condition that emerges from top-down and bottom-up interactions”. This concept is new to mainstream peace and conflict literature. According to Jarstad and Belloni (2012), hybridity should not be regarded as a seamless concatenation of liberal and illiberal actions. On the contrary, hybridity encompasses a variety of tangled interactions between liberal models and indigenous paradigms. Richmond and Mac Ginty (2014:185) also warn against the promulgation of simplistic interpretations of hybrid peace. Hybridity, they suggest, should be understood as a “window on complexity” rather than a binaric blend of liberal/illiberal praxis. They laud critics who do not dwell on the clichéd dichotomies between the West and East, but endeavour to underscore the “intersectionality that characterises complex transactional processes” (Mac Ginty 2014:181).

Hybridised peace has its roots in the long history of intercultural relations between the West and indigenous communities (Mac Ginty 2008:152). Early Western explorers and colonialists were forced to assimilate and adapt to “forest diplomacy” which reflected “indigenous dominance” (Mac Ginty 2008:152). Colonialism enabled the West to redefine peacebuilding in accordance with their interests. Proponents of hybrid peacebuilding routinely cite the reconciliation commissions in East Timor and Rwanda to advance their stance. In 2002, the UN set up a Commission in East Timor to investigate human rights violations by Indonesian soldiers and locals during the nation’s pre-independence struggles (United States Institute of Peace 2017). Like Rwanda’s *Gacaca* tribunals, East Timor’s *Nahe Biti* [traditional restorative justice forum] was used to address thousands of mostly small-scale conflicts. This merger between liberal and indigenous practices was hailed by many as a success (Mac Ginty 2008:153).

Similar attempts at hybridisation did not bear equivalent results. Mac Ginty (2008) warns against the artificial resuscitation of traditional peacebuilding practices. For instance, after Afghanistan’s Taliban were ousted in 2001, the US used *Loya Jirga* [gathering of tribal leaders] to establish a transitional government (McLean and McMillian 1996). This traditional decision-making forum had not been done since 1946. The *Loya Jirga* was subjected to Western style evaluations that included the participation of women and discussions on universal human rights. Many of the 1500 participants did not get an opportunity to speak. This caused great displeasure and confusion (Mac Ginty 2008:156). Also, in practice, a hybrid peace process may require the making of concessions to warlords (e.g. in the case of Colombia’s FARC), as well the institutionalisation of traditional deviances such as clientelism, feudalism and sexism into the new democratic apparatus (Jarstad and Belloni 2012). An independent judiciary, free market economy, free elections and other liberal paragons may be counterbalanced by some illiberal states’ preference for patrimonialism, caste-based segregation and gender disparities (Jarstad and Belloni 2012:3).

Despite its shortcomings, Richmond and Mac Ginty (2014) argue that strong advocacy for hybrid peacebuilding has induced pro-liberal scholars to theorise peace through new prisms. However, they admit that most citizens [including academics] of the Global South have been excluded from the debate. They believe that this exclusion has something to do with “the political economies of publishing and research” (Richmond and Mac Ginty 2014:183). While this view should not be dismissed, it should be noted that being a scholar from the Global South does not preclude one from being pro-liberal.

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## Discussion: Local–Hybrid Model—More Effective Peacebuilding?

Hughes et al. (2015:822) note that the literature that has provided fuel for the local–turn is written largely by Northern male academics who, in many instances, receive funding from liberal IOs. This raises a crucial question regarding the localness of the local–turn. Additionally, Richmond and Mac Ginty (2015:171) warn against the tendency to assume that the findings of critical intellectual projects will influence the decisions of policymakers. Some critics contend that hybrid peace concepts rarely morph from theory to practice (Paris 2010). Pro–local/hybrid scholar Oliver Richmond (2009:578), for instance, suggests that post–liberal peace should be grounded in “eirenism” and “focus on everyday care”. While this sounds optimal, his instructions regarding how this can be achieved are vague. For Tom (2015:4), it is critical that hybrid practices are considered “as varied forms of peace...rather than measuring them against a liberalising norm”. Again, this is a theoretical proposition. In practice, as Willis et al. (2015:159) point out, merging local and liberal systems often lead to “misappropriation and instrumentalisation of local practices with hybrid approaches...damage their legitimacy (and) jeopardise their contributions to reconciliation”. As a result of these complexities, some pro–local scholars (Richmond and Mac Ginty 2014) have openly declined to recommend practical alternatives to liberalism.

Western peacebuilding models, “given their power and structural biases”, continue to supersede local forms (Mac Ginty 2008:157). Nonetheless, the institutionalisation of ADR approaches means that indigenous actors now have a seat at the negotiation table. But in the complex whirlpool of international peacebuilding, this is not necessarily a sign of credible progress. Mac Ginty (2008:142) points out that some agreements are driven by locals’ wish to secure resources and international actors’ desire to obtain donations. Additionally, many illiberal states are vastly segregated and hierarchical. In some instances there is a greater affinity for conflict than peace. Certain ‘concessions’ may be geared toward the suppression of dissent (Mac Ginty 2008:150). Also, the artificial union of worldviews and tyranny of participation sometimes create new challenges and distractions (Cooke and Kothari 2004:3).

## Conclusion

Less than a decade after they first advanced the merits of the local–turn, Richmond and Mac Ginty (2015) are now leading figures among the coterie of scholars who are conceptualising and publicising hybridity. If nothing else, this shows the evolving nature of this discourse, which both Richmond and Mac Ginty concede is largely conceptual. Paris (2010) argues that a major weakness of the arguments for the local–hybrid–turn is their proponents’ fixation on theory. Nonetheless, as was noted earlier, the discourse has compelled some liberal scholars to theorise peacebuilding through new lenses. The local and hybrid stances have jolted liberal hegemony, but have failed to uproot it. Pro–local–liberal proponents have not pointed to a clear path to more effective peacebuilding. In coming decades, as this discourse matures, greater clarity and practical alternatives to liberalism will begin to emerge.

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