# Understanding Peacebuilding: An Issue of Approach Rather than Definition

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MARK BARROW, FEB 17 2022

Peacebuilding studies typically begin with a sentence along the lines of: 'peacebuilding defies a single definition' (Tschirgi 2013, 197), or 'it is difficult to define the concept' (Ryan 2013, 31). However, there is rarely a reflection on exactly why peacebuilding evades definition. Therefore, my aim in this article is to shed some light on what we mean by this concept, by tracing its ontology and application, in the hope of understanding why scholars struggle to define it. In doing so, I argue that there is, somewhat surprisingly, widespread agreement as to what peacebuilding boils down to – an attempt to address and tackle the underlying structures and root causes of conflict. The complexity or difficulty in understanding peacebuilding instead derives from the multiple *approaches* articulated for addressing a conflict's root causes. In addition to explaining this overall argument, the article offers a brief introduction to peacebuilding, which should particularly be of interest to scholars trying to make sense of what has become a diverse field of study.

**Origins of peacebuilding**

Modern ideas around 'peace', in juxtaposition of war and conflict, can be traced back to the Enlightenment period. However, it is Johan Galtung who is credited with first introducing the concept of peacebuilding. In a 1975 essay, he proposed that peace is about the abolition of structural violence and the root causes of war, such as oppression and domination, rather than being solely focused on eliminating direct violence or warfare (Galtung 1975; Cockell 2000; Ryan 2013). He argues that tackling structural violence requires an associative approach towards peace, where the 'antihuman conditions of exploitation, elitism and isolation' are replaced by conditions of 'equity, entropy and symbiosis' (Galtung 1975, 299). In other words, rather than peace being conceived in dissociative terms, where antagonists are isolated or separated from each other, it requires increased interaction channels between all levels of society, including a 'high level of interdependence' and exchange between nations (Galtung 1975, 298-9). Galtung's conception of peacebuilding received some academic attention (Harbottle 1980; Fischer 1993), with a few studies similarly claiming that associative practices, such as 'bridges of communication at all levels', are necessary for long-lasting peace (Harbottle 1980, 131). Nevertheless, peacebuilding remained a largely niche idea until the early 1990s, when several connecting factors made it more pertinent.

**Agenda for Peace**

The publication of the United Nation's (UN) 1992 'Agenda for Peace' report catalysed peacebuilding into mainstream discourse in both theory and practice. Although rarely commented upon explicitly, the report shares Galtung's attention to the underlying structures and root causes of conflict, for it defines peacebuilding as the ability 'to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict' (Boutros-Ghali 1992, para.21). There is a commitment to addressing the 'deepest causes of conflict', such as economic despair and social injustice (Pugh 2000, 6-7). Some commentators claim that the report presents a somewhat narrow definition of peacebuilding, for it positions the term as specifically 'post-conflict', rather than encompassing all phases of conflict, including the 'conflict prevention' and 'conflict management' stages (Ryan 2013; Tschirgi 2013; Paffenholz 2013). The report is certainly explicit in articulating that the avoidance of conflict rests on 'preventative diplomacy', whereas 'post-conflict peace-building' is designed to 'prevent a recurrence' of conflict

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(Boutros-Ghali 1992, para.57). Peacebuilding is therefore equated with the final phase of conflict.

However, the reason why the report sparked widespread interest is its formulation for *how* the international community – namely international organisations (IOs), including the UN, and Western states – can address root causes of conflict within societies and consequently prevent its recurrence. The document claims the 'socioeconomic and political context of conflict' can only be transformed from one of insecurity to one of stability by democratising and developing states in the aftermath of conflict (Pugh 2000, 20). It is argued that 'democracy at all levels is essential to attain peace for a new era of prosperity and justice' (Boutros-Ghali 1992, para.82). This causality between democracy and peace is of course philosophically rooted in Immanuel Kant's belief that the democratic constitution of states correlates with their interest in maintaining peace with other states (Chan 1997; Ray 1998). Kant's argument is that if governments are democratically accountable to their citizens, then they are a powerful force against conflict, for 'if the consent of the citizens is required in order to decide that war should be declared…nothing is more natural than they would be cautious in commencing such a poor game' (Kant 1795, 123).

## Liberal internationalism

Following the publication of the Agenda for Peace, this ideology of democratic peace became synonymous with peacebuilding operations. In subsequent reports, the UN became more specific on the measures it felt essential for democratising conflict-affected countries as diverse as Cambodia, Bosnia and El Salvador, given the assumption that this was 'the surest foundation for peace' (Knight 2003, 253). These measures included 'improved police and judicial systems, the monitoring of human rights, electoral reform and social and economic development' (Boutros-Ghali 1995, para.47). They were designed to support a 'culture of democracy' within conflict zones around the world (Boutros-Ghali 1996, para.46). Simultaneously, a vast amount of academic research was dedicated to theorising and understanding how exactly IOs and Western states were trying to establish democratic elections, marketisation programs, and constitutional reforms codifying civil and individual rights, in areas of conflict (Diamond 1995; Maynard 1999). These international peacebuilding practices became defined as the 'liberal internationalism paradigm' (Zaum 2013, 108). This term was first coined by Roland Paris in 1997, given that market economies, democratic elections and human rights were deemed 'three core institutions' of liberalism (John 2013, 32).

Of course, coming in the 1990s following the end of the Cold War, there are several reasons why liberal internationalism and Western liberal democracy were believed capable of solving all 'fundamental contradictions' within society, including issues contributing towards conflict (Fukuyama 1989, 8). It was an assumption 'widely shared by academics, politicians and publics' (John 2013, 31). The way the Cold War ended, whereby non-violent revolutions overthrew repressive regimes, crystallised the idea that worldwide society was experiencing 'an unstoppable wave of democratisation' (Ryan 2013, 27), producing a mood of 'democratic optimism' (Mayall 2000, 61). It led to a resurgence of studies into the so-called 'democratic peace proposition' (Russett and Antholis 1992; Chan 1997), which centres on the Kantian belief that 'democratic states do not fight interstate wars against each other' (Ray 1998, 27), contrasting with the Hobbesian and realist view of international politics. There is no denying that this proposition became an influential doctrine in the post-Cold War era. It led Bill Clinton to claim that 'democracies rarely wage war on one another' (quoted in Chan 1997, 59). George W. Bush subsequently justified American international intervention by referring to the 'transformative power of liberty' (quoted in Ryan 2013, 27).

A further crucial reason why liberal internationalism was so germane in the 1990s is the changing nature of conflict after the Cold War. Stereotypical wars between sovereign states were largely replaced by complex intra-state, ethnic conflicts, some of which had essentially become free and 'unfrozen' from superpower rivalries (Ryan 2013, 26). The nature of these ethnic conflicts, such as in Bosnia, Somalia and Rwanda, created 'new opportunities for innovation in peace process design' (Sisk 2001, 1). They specifically led to growth in the idea that human rights protection and multilateral humanitarian intervention were now more pertinent than respect for state sovereignty (Hoffman 1996; Chandler 2002). Consequently, liberal internationalism was regarded as necessary and suitably equipped for dealing with these different forms of conflict.

## Critique of liberal internationalism and alternatives

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However, liberal internationalism subsequently faced a barrage of criticism from different directions, particularly when scholars began to perceive this paradigm as being unsuccessful and ineffective in establishing peace. Many commentators, usually underlining their analysis with specific case studies, even began to claim that liberal internationalism destabilises war-torn countries, by contributing to a resurgence of violence and preventing the consolidation of peace (Paris 1997; Knight 2003).

One oft-cited example is Cambodia, where the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) came into operation in 1992. UNTAC conducted elections in the country in 1993, which led to two rival political parties – the 'National United Front for an Independent Neutral and Cooperative Cambodia' (FUNCINPEC), and the 'Cambodian People's Party' (CPP) – forming a coalition government following a hung parliament. However, distrust between both parties prevented reconciliation and led to them competing for authority, with the CPP leader ultimately forcing his FUNCINPEC counterpart out of government (Paris 1997, 65). The UN tried to coordinate elections again in 1998, but these were widely characterised by intimidation, coercion and violence by CPP officials. A further case is Angola, where international mediators secured a ceasefire in 1991 between warring parties, culminating in UN-led elections in 1992 (Paris 1997, 70). However, the elections led to the country 'slipping back into war', as neither side secured a majority, and no provision was made for a power sharing agreement (Ottaway quoted in Knight 2003, 258). Such failures became a familiar story in the 1990s, with the international community presiding over similar outcomes in Bosnia, Rwanda and Nicaragua. In more recent times, academic studies focused on Iraq and Afghanistan have concluded that liberal internationalism did not end insurgency, 'failed to establish a sustainable market democracy and steadily increased the influence of the Taliban' (John 2013, 35).

There are many practical and contextual reasons why liberal internationalism proved to be so unsuccessful. Most war-torn societies simply do not possess the required infrastructure, socio-economic stability or political will to embark on elections (Paris 1997, 57). Furthermore, holding premature elections can stifle rather than facilitate democracy (Knight 2003, 258). One of the main reasons for this is that democracy naturally encourages competition and conflict, for it requires opposing interests and ideas to be presented and debated in the public domain. In some cases, such as Angola and Bosnia, this leads to society becoming further polarised into hostile groups, resulting in exacerbated divisions which only sharpen conflict (Paris 1997, 75-6). Marketisation, or capitalism, similarly invites conflict, as it encourages greater competition for the national wealth, besides creating economic inequalities that deepen societal divides and fuel resentment (Doyle and Sambanis 2000, 782). Ultimately, the many failed cases of liberal internationalism led scholars to conclude that its 'one size fits all' approach to peacebuilding (John 2021, 35), consisting of imposing Western ideals of market democracy onto radically different countries decimated by conflict, is naïve and unrealistic. There was a general sense that alternative approaches to peacebuilding were required.

One such alternative approach rests on the social constructivist interpretation of peace. This ideology asserts that peace cannot simply be imposed onto a particular setting, given that it does not have a universally accepted definition. In other words, peace means 'different things to different actors in different contexts' (Wallis 2021, 77). Peace is therefore said to be socially constructed, based on the ideas and practices of human agents within intersubjective social contexts. Whereas liberal internationalism is centred on the normative universality of liberal peace, social constructivists perceive peace as being reflexive, contextual and dynamic, rather than scientific and rational (Richmond and Visoka 2021, 4; Wallis 2021, 87). Consequently, advocates of this approach believe peacebuilding can only ever be operationalised if practitioners 'dismantle this knowledge hierarchy' – whereby liberal peace is presented a blueprint for peace in all contexts – and instead approach peace from the 'subaltern positionality', thereby allowing local knowledge and dynamics within particular contexts to drive ideas and attitudes towards peace (Wallis 2021, 81).

This more contextual approach towards peacebuilding is reflected in a body of literature termed the 'local turn', which emphasises that addressing underlying structures of conflict requires 'local ownership' and 'local agency'. This equates to people on the ground, who are aware of a conflict's dynamics, being actively involved in the creation and implementation of peace agreements (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013, 769; Leonardsson and Rudd 2015, 825; Odendaal 2021, 627). Most of these studies begin by citing John Paul Lederach. In his 1997 'integrated framework for peacebuilding', Lederach taught that sustainable peace is rooted in local people, who must replace external actors as the 'primary authors of peacebuilding' if peace is to be ordained (Paffenholz 2015, 859). This is said to only

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be possible through 'clearer channels of communication' and integration between all levels of society, including the 'grassroots' and the external IOs and states involved in a particular conflict (Lederach 1997, 100). One school of thought has consequently advocated a 'hybrid' approach to peacebuilding, involving a combined 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' approach, centred on the idealised belief that local actors can bring knowledge and ideas for peace, whilst the international community can 'provide technical support' (Paffenholz 2015, 863). Following the failures of liberal internationalism, the international community now generally advocates the inclusion of local actors, to some extent at least, in peace processes.

A further alternative approach to peacebuilding regards liberal internationalism as an unhelpful distraction from the real reasons why the international community wishes to address the root causes of a particular conflict. Some researchers claim that, since 9/11 at least, peacebuilding has become securitised and essentially represents a 'sub-set of the international security agenda' (Tschirgi 2013, 198). These studies accept that securing liberal peace was the main driver for international intervention in the 1990s, but that 9/11 radically changed the focus to one where tackling underlying structures of conflict means eliminating the international threat of terrorism and organised crime (Zaum 2012, 126). The US-led operation in Afghanistan is the most notable example where securitisation became conflated with peacebuilding. The operation was attuned to deep-rooted humanitarian and human rights issues within the country, but largely used them as evidence of the need to stabilise the country, and the wider world, from the threat of al Qaeda and terrorism (Tschirgi 2013, 203). However, Afghanistan also highlights how international actors do not necessarily share the same motivation or reason for intervening in a conflict, despite the liberal internationalist assumption that the international community collectively regards building liberal peace as an imperative. For instance, whereas the US operation was very much dedicated towards removing al Qaeda, the UN's 'nation-building project' was more aligned to liberal internationalism (Tschirgi 2013, 203), given its emphasis on the respect for human rights, accountable institutions based on the rule of law, and economic integration (Rubin 2008, 39).

## Conclusion

At first glance, this overview of peacebuilding may indicate that the concept invites a variety of definitions, given that it is associated with different ideologies, including liberal internationalism and securitisation. However, I contend that the same definition holds throughout, as the discussion always centres around addressing and tackling the underlying structures and root causes of conflict. These will clearly differ by context and ideology, but can include, for example, organised crime and insecurity, human rights violations, religious and ethnic tensions, and a country's instability and political authority. Relevant domestic and international actors will conceivably have varied opinions as to what they regard the main root causes of a conflict to be, as I alluded to with regards to Afghanistan. However, the point which dominates the peacebuilding literature, and leads to complexity and difficulty in defining the concept, is that of the *approach* advocated for addressing these root causes. As shown in this article, approaches include imposing liberal internationalist ideals of market democracy and constitutional rights, commitment to local agency and grassroots-driven ideas, and the elimination of international threats. Liberal internationalism certainly remains the approach most discussed within academic circles. Alternative approaches which I discussed are, to an extent, driven by countering this approach. In differentiating peacebuilding approach from definition, I hope this article has achieved its simultaneous aim of providing an informative introduction to the study of peacebuilding.

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