

# Liberal Peace Transitions: Towards a Post-Liberal Peace in IR?

Written by Oliver Richmond

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OLIVER RICHMOND, SEP 3 2009

It has become generally assumed that 'Liberal Peace Transitions' offer a way out of local, civil, regional and international conflict, as well as complex emergences and development problems. From Cambodia and Somalia in the early 1990s, to Bosnia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Liberia, DR Congo, Kosovo, East Timor, Afghanistan, Iraq, and also including Cyprus and Israel/ Palestine, international actors like the UN, US, UK, the EU, NATO, World Bank, and other donors, and analysts have assumed that liberal internationalism, democratic institutions, liberal notions of civil society and a rule of law, and market development offer a silver bullet for dealing with conflict in the long term. This was to be scientific, normative, and technical process of peaceful governance for the as yet uninitiated. All military, humanitarian, diplomatic, political, economic, and social, interventions since the end of the Cold War have been geared to this programme, with limited success and many obvious pitfalls (not least the adventurism and self interest of the interventions/ invasions from Kosovo to Iraq, in which many have argued that the liberal peace-as-statebuilding was merely a cover for more duplicitous intentions on the part of the West or key Western actors). With these failures, and the choppy waters of democracy and international capitalism, such agendas have become relatively more difficult to 'sell' to eager recipients. This programme has been dogged by setbacks, 'backsliding', violence, inefficiencies, and limited resources, not to mention a marginal impact upon conflict actors and ordinary people in post-conflict areas. Many have complained about a lack of representation, of rights, of needs redressal, and of a mutual miscomprehension between international peacebuilders and local actors and communities alike, not to mention arrogance and heavy-handedness. Internationals have often felt great concern themselves (often in private rather than public) at the implications of the projects they were themselves engaged in across such a diverse array of contexts.

It is not surprising that local resistance in many regions subject to peacekeeping, peacebuilding, development, structural adjustment, and statebuilding programmes has now emerged, in multiple forms. These are sometimes violent, organised as 'national' agendas or resistance movements, sometimes as embryonic social movements, or as hidden and everyday acts of marginal resistance. These place international organisations like the UN, donors, international financial institutions, peacekeepers and enforcers, and even NGOs, in a position of propagating an ideology (liberalism and neoliberalism), and indeed of introducing it through subtle or open coercion. Thus, a 'post-colonial response' (ie criticising interventions as self-interested, imperialistic, orientalist, and focusing on the intervenors' interests rather than local interests) on the part of subject communities, leaders and individuals alike, has often emerged, which is now reflected in the more critical wings of IR and related literatures. A local attempt is underway to reclaim political agency and autonomy from the new post- Cold War 'civilising mission', which has over the last twenty years, shown itself to be unable to provide for basic needs, rights, security (state or human) or to respect or understand local differences and non-liberal, and even non- state patterns of politics. Its human security, responsibility to protect, do no harm, local ownership, doctrines seem very empty from the perspective most of the peoples they have been visited upon. Non-liberal/ western forms of politics, of economics, society, and custom, are clamouring for discursive space in many post-conflict zones, with mixed implications for sustainability and for the purpose of achieving a normatively (to liberals at least) and contextually acceptable, locally sustainable peace.

These dynamics have become clear in recent research by my own team working on Liberal Peace Transitions at the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies in St Andrews, and in that of others around the world. The discourses of peace

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implicit in the liberal paradigm of peacebuilding has been shown to be varied, from crude to cosmopolitan, but they are unable to engage with acute alterity, and generally ignore the local and its political, economic, social, customary, cultural, and even spiritual dynamics. It has especially ignored its needs, its culture, its tradition, its identities, and all but the most basic aspects of security. Liberal peacebuilding has fallaciously assumed that post-conflict individuals, from Kosovo to Kabul, were colonial children to be mentored, engineered, guide, coerced, and beckoned into adulthood, and that liberalism itself was universal rather than culturally constructed. This has meant that social contracts between communities and emergent states in these areas have not arisen not least because of the neoliberal focus on ownership, property, production and consumption rather than with needs stemming from rights in a contextually influenced, not to say determined fashion (context here means local, customary, state, market, regional and international, not merely the 'local' it is often taken to mean). Furthermore, it has meant that international social contracts between the recipients of international engagements with their conflict areas and polities have failed to emerge, meaning that millions of people around the world do not have adequate rights or needs provision, nor proper access to representation, despite the best intent of liberal peacebuilders.

Due to such unintended consequences (one hopes they are unintended) moves are underway, via local resistance, open and discursive, to reopen spaces for local agency, from Timor Leste, the Solomon Islands, Mozambique, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan. This resistance means the vocalisation of alternative epistemes of politics, society, economy, and of peace itself. They are often elite and localised or civil and derived from evolving alternative social movements, which are quite often transnationally connected. They have appeared decisively from Iraq and Afghanistan, to Timor, the Solomon Islands, Mozambique, Kosovo, and Bosnia, among others, often in subtle ways (manipulation of political systems and markets to maintain traditional elites or create states, or very obvious (violence, demonstrations, social movements, applying localised law or welfare through customary institutions, or amalgamating tribal or chiefly councils into the modern state, etc). They should not be seen as negative necessarily, though they often do mean that extreme Shariah, discrimination, corruption, anti-market and anti-democratic practices, among others persist. These may however, be heavily modified by their prolonged contact with the agents of liberal and neoliberal reform over the longer term. For it is in the exercise of such agency, that both democracy, rights, needs, agency, and autonomy may develop, allowing for a more stable form of local and regional peace to emerge, based on more locally resonant forms of politics as compared to the virtual states and dependencies that recent neoliberal forms of statebuilding have led to. This indicates a shift beyond the types of peace identified by my earlier work[i] (these are hyper-conservative, conservative, orthodox and emancipatory peace) to a more everyday form of peace, in which the liberal and to the local engage in a complex negotiation process with each other. Very difficult issues arise here for 'international planners' and analysts of IR, not least in how they respond to such confrontations with difference, alterity, and mutual rejections of liberalism or localism, or the synergies which may arise, if sensitively handled and properly understood.

This move indicates that liberal peacebuilding from the Balkans, the Middle East, across Sub-Saharan Africa, and parts of Asia, as well as more distant areas of the Pacific, is now caught up in a post-colonial encounter with its 'others'. Initially international actors responded by deploying the usual form of Orientalisation, infantilisation, and coercion, while writing off local agencies and autonomy. Resistance predictably emerged in the form of local agency from Kabul to Dili and their provincial 'outlands', and has illustrated the resurgence of political agency and some autonomy, though of course the preponderant weight of the 'liberal peace's' hegemony should be noted.

This has seen non-liberal ideologies, warlords, tribal leaders, chiefs, customary and traditional forms of governance and political, social, and economic arrangements, not to mention alternative approaches to property and land, move into very uncomfortable relationships with would-be liberal peacebuilders, from which a *post-liberal peace* is now emerging.[ii] This form of peace raises very difficult normative, procedural, technical, legal, social, economic, and institutional choices and compromises, as we are seeing even now: recent discussions of re-opening negotiations with the Taliban in Afghanistan have shown or attempts to introduce aspects of Shariah into the national constitution, or moves to associated the modern governmental state with traditional governance in Timor, or the Solomon Islands, or calls to introduce a national welfare system in Iraq or Timor, show. But in the end, this emergent local-liberal form of hybridity, which leads to a post-liberal form of politics, will be more locally relevant, stable, autonomous, agential, while also reflecting widely agreed international norms, which themselves will be altered by these developments.

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In this sense, it might achieve for Afghanistan, DR Congo, Bosnia, Cyprus, Israel/ Palestine, Timor or the Solomon Islands, what emancipatory liberalism tried and failed to achieve: a locally sustainable, regionally stable, and internationally acceptable form of peace, one which reflects thin cosmopolitan norms and thick local expectations (from where a social contract must emanate). To achieve this, policy makers and academics must be open to the process of negotiation between local and international elites, and alternative voices emerging from non-traditional (or indeed very traditional) discursive sites in post-conflict zones. It might be said that resistance to the strictures of western and liberal versions of IR, practiced most obviously in juxtaposition to peacebuilding and statebuilding since the end of the Cold war, is where the very local agency and autonomy reside that emancipatory and institutional versions of liberalism (in an uneasy alliance with more 'realist' notions of national interest and international structures, whether market or military, or inspired by post-Marxist dependency or social justice claims) seek to promote. International and regional organisations, IFIs, international NGOs, donors, state foreign policies, and the various mechanisms and processes of international intervention would do well to become far more aware of these dynamics and their implications.

*Oliver P. Richmond is a Professor in the Department of International Relations at the University of St. Andrews. His primary area of expertise is in peace and conflict theory, in particular its interlinkages with international relations theory. Recent publications include *Peace in IR* (Routledge, 2008) and *The Transformation of Peace* (Palgrave, 2005). This article is derived from two research projects run by CPCS, and including Jason Franks and Audra Mitchell. See *Liberal Peace Transitions: Between Peacebuilding and Statebuilding*, Edinburgh University Press, 2009. See also [www.st-andrews.ac.uk/intrel/cpcs/richmond](http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/intrel/cpcs/richmond)*

[i] Richmond, Oliver P. (2005) *The Transformation of Peace*. Basingstoke: Palgrave; Richmond, Oliver (2008) *Peace in International Relations*. Oxon: Routledge.

[ii] Richmond, Oliver P, "Eireneism and a Post-Liberal Peace" *Review of International Studies*, Vol.35, No 3, 2009.

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## 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*, (Oxford University Press, 2014), *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 Peace and Conflict Studies*, and co-editor of the Journal, *Peacebuilding*.