

Pluriversal Peacebuilding: Peace Beyond Epistemic and Ontological Violence

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The field of international peacebuilding increasingly recognizes that violence is not a unitary phenomenon, but an array of constraints on human flourishing spanning physical, structural, cultural, and symbolic registers (Galtung 1969; 1990; Jabri 1996; O. Richmond 2012; 2016). This recognition provides corollary insights that building peace requires, at the very least, the reduction of violence in its complex and interlocking forms. But despite a normative commitment to reducing diverse forms of violence, the field of international peacebuilding has struggled to address the potentials for epistemic and ontological violence following from the inherent Eurocentrism of its own disciplinary origins and orientations (Walker 2004; Jabri 2013; Sabaratnam 2013; Goetze 2016). As a result of its exclusion of ways of knowing and being not authorized by Western academic discourses, the theory and practice of international peacebuilding frequently presumes the universalizability of Eurocentric modes of social, political, and economic organization viewed as ontologically destructive by Indigenous and other communities that continue to suffer under conditions of global coloniality (Azarmandi 2018; Maldonado-Torres 2020).

To address the paradoxical danger of perpetuating epistemic and ontological violence while seeking to promote peace, critical scholars of peacebuilding have begun to grapple in substantive and sustained ways with various strains of decolonial thought (Sabaratnam 2013; Hudson 2016; Azarmandi 2018; Brigg 2018; Rodriguez Iglesias 2019; Shroff 2019; Omer 2020). While vital for excavating the field's participation in harmful ideological, economic, and political formations, these encounters have produced lamentably few practical tools for unsettling peacebuilding's problematic epistemic politics or mitigating their material consequences (Tucker 2018). The following discussion advances the encounter between decolonial theory and the field of peacebuilding by considering the decolonial concept of pluriversality as a resource for imagining peacebuilding beyond epistemic and ontological violence.

Pluriversality and the Peaceful Violence of Modernity

The concept of pluriversality is associated primarily with the modernity/coloniality framework of decolonial thought. Originating from the work of Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano, modernity/coloniality names the inextricable bond between a Eurocentered modernity and its 'darker side' of coloniality (Quijano 2000; 2007; W. D. Mignolo 2011). Modernity here reflects the historical emergence and self-narration of a Eurocentric modern/capitalist world-system with material and ideological roots in the European colonial conquest of the Atlantic basin. Coloniality denotes the co-constitution of this Eurocentered modernity through patterns of enslavement, dispossession, and genocide against differentially racialized, gendered, sexualized, and territorialized peoples constructed as Europe's constitutive 'others' (W. D. Mignolo 2000; Wynter 2003; Maldonado-Torres 2007; Lugones 2007; 2010). A key aspect of modernity as a discursive formation is the erasure or subalternization ('epistemicide') of the knowledge of non-European peoples (Grosfoguel 2015). The discourse of modernity naturalizes the violences of coloniality by eradicating resources for imagining and enacting possible alternatives to a world structured through modernity/coloniality's intersecting, Eurocentric hierarchies.

Pluriversality, by contrast, denotes the existence of irreducibly plural ways of knowing and being that have survived the on-going violences of coloniality (Escobar 2018; Reiter 2018). Pluriversality carries both ontological and ethical

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implications. In its ontological sense, pluriversality names the survival of myriad ways of knowing and being in the world that deny the authority of any knowledge system claiming universal validity or a transcendent grasp of 'objective' reality (W. D. Mignolo 2011, 70–71). Pluriversality thus affirms the existence of 'multiple ontologies, multiple worlds to be known—not simply multiple perspectives on one world' (Conway and Singh 2011, 701). Because the universalizing discourse of modernity imperils the survival of other ways of knowing and being, embracing the ontological fact of pluriversality impels a corresponding rejection of epistemologies, discourses, and political projects that view the world as knowable and governable from within any single system of knowledge.

This ontological or descriptive aspect of pluriversality directly informs the concept's ethical or programmatic sense, which consists of dismantling systems of power that threaten the survival of diverse ways of knowing and being. Pluriversal ethics minimally entails resistance to the violences of modernity/coloniality through efforts to build 'a world in which multiple cosmovisions, worldviews, practices and livelihoods co-exist, a world where no one particular way of living shuts down others' (Dunford 2017, 380–81), a world often described through the Zapatistas desideratum of *un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos*—'a world where many worlds fit.' In this ethical or programmatic sense, pluriversality provides a touchstone for imagining the proliferation of irreducibly plural, situated alternatives to the violently universalizing tendencies of modernity/coloniality (Querejazu 2016; W. D. Mignolo 2018; W. D. Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Reiter 2018; Escobar 2018).

This two-fold understanding of pluriversality offers critical and constructive insights into peacebuilding theory and practice. On the one hand, pluriversality provides a lens for assessing how peace discourses perpetuate modern/colonial logics and promote ends hostile to pluriversality in its ontological sense. These dynamics become particularly apparent when examining how hegemonic peace discourses overdetermine the content of 'peace' itself, delegitimizing alternative meanings and promoting social, economic, and political transformations experienced as destructive to some communities' ways of knowing and being (Rodríguez Iglesias 2019).

In its programmatic sense, pluriversality also provides insights into how the concept of peace might still function on a decolonial register when delinked from such hegemonic discourses. The cultivation of pluriversality is closely linked to dialogical practices that take shared concepts, or 'connectors,' as the discursive grounds for encounters that bridge epistemic and ontological differences (Delgado, Romero, and Mignolo 2000; W. D. Mignolo 2011; Querejazu 2016; Dunford 2017; Hutchings 2019). Pluriversal dialogue that centers peace itself as a potential connector opens possibilities for constructive encounters around modes of peacebuilding attuned to the dangers of epistemic and ontological violence too frequently perpetuated by the field.

Analyses of the epistemic politics of peacebuilding clarify the urgent need for praxis delinked from modern/colonial logics. In *The Distinction of Peace*, Catherine Goetze demonstrates how the field prioritizes 'Western, liberal, neocapitalist forms of knowledge' that presuppose white, Western, male supremacy in constructing expertise (Goetze 2016, 221). But Goetze also shows how these intra-disciplinary biases are externalized and reified at scale as the field's exclusionary politics of knowledge are translated into expert policy in conflict-affected societies that naturalize racist, sexist, and heteropatriarchal ideological formations within oppressive social, political, and economic systems—all in the name of promoting 'peace.'

Partly in response to these exclusionary dynamics, critical scholars of peacebuilding have advocated for a 'local turn' in the field (O. Richmond 2012; Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013; Hughes, Öjendal, and Schierenbeck 2015; Paffenholz 2015; Leonardsson and Rudd 2015; O. Richmond 2016). At its most pointed, the local turn depicts international peacebuilding efforts of the last several decades as thin veneers for cultural imperialism that use violent conflict as pretext to enforce social, economic, and political transformations in postcolonial states. By contrast, local turn advocates highlight the indispensability of local peacebuilding resources and agency, and describe how contestatory interactions between local conceptions of peace and prevailing 'liberal peacebuilding' approaches can produce 'hybrid' forms of peace offering 'emancipatory' alternatives to both violent conflict and the violent impositions of unreconstructed liberal peacebuilding interventions (Mac Ginty 2011; O. Richmond 2012; 2015).

However, critics employing decolonial approaches demonstrate how international peacebuilding's enduring epistemic Eurocentrism limits the constructive potential of such immanent critiques of the field. Meera Sabaratnam

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shows how local turn advocates fall prey to a 'paradox of liberalism' that cannot fully de-center the liberal/modern peacebuilding approaches they critique (Sabaratnam 2013). As a result, the local turn's emphasis on hybridity constrains the emancipatory potential of peacebuilding by presuming liberal interventions whose necessary hybridization predetermine limits for 'peaceful' modes of social, economic, and political organization (Randazzo 2016; Nadarajah and Rampton 2015). By failing to thoroughly excavate the field's epistemic exclusions and broader metaethical presumptions, the field of international peacebuilding excludes explicitly decolonial alternatives to both hegemonic peace discourses and to critical alternatives developed within the field. It therefore appears that 'surprisingly little is at stake' in the liberal/local peace debates, in which 'fine-grained distinctions' around the local sensitivities of liberal interventions conceal 'a large area of political consensus' around these interventions' indispensability (Campbell, Chandler, and Sabaratnam 2011, 4–5).

Mahdis Azarmandi similarly reveals the modern/colonial dynamics reflected by the 'racial silence' within the field of peacebuilding (Azarmandi 2018). Azarmandi suggests that purported 'paradigm shifts' within the field (such as the local turn) mask underlying colonial continuities by failing to account for the constitutive role of race in structuring discourses around peace and violence. As a result, peacebuilding efforts often reproduce modern/colonial discourses representing Eurocentric social, political, and economic orders as more 'developed,' 'advanced,' or 'civilized'—that is, as more inherently peaceful. Conceptions of peace reflecting colonial logics thus compound the disproportionate harms from direct and structural violence suffered by racialized and colonized peoples by delegitimizing ways of knowing and being that offer alternatives to what Frantz Fanon called the 'peaceful violence' of modernity/coloniality (Azarmandi 2018; Stavrevska and Smith 2020).

Through its naturalization of violence toward racialized and colonized peoples constructed as Europe's 'others,' modernity reveals itself to be what Nelson Maldonado-Torres describes as a 'paradigm of war' (Maldonado-Torres 2020). Peace—as both a hegemonic discursive formation and a constellation of social, economic, and political systems named by this discourse—is similarly revealed by these decolonial interventions as frequently co-imbricated in theory and practice with the project of modernity. Transforming these dynamics requires a systematic accounting of the field of peacebuilding's role in reproducing the coloniality of peace, and new strategies for imagining and practicing peacebuilding delinked from modern/colonial violence.

Peacebuilding in the Pluriverse

The Colombian peace process provides an instructive case study for contestations over the (de)coloniality of peace (Acosta et al. 2018; Rodríguez Iglesias 2019; Zulver 2020; Paarlberg-Kvam 2021). The peace agreement reached in 2016 between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Colombian government ended over five decades of conflict through the most comprehensive peace accord ever produced. The Colombia Barometer Initiative, the body tasked with monitoring the implementation of the peace accords, has identified 578 distinct implementation items stipulated within the agreement, and proponents tout the agreement's intersectional attention to cross-cutting issues around differential experiences of violence and aspirations for peace among 'women and girls, Indigenous peoples, children and adolescents, communities of African descent, small-scale and family farmers (campesinxs), displaced people, LGBTI persons, persons with disabilities, and so on' (Stavrevska and Smith 2020, 6; Bouvier 2016).

However, Ana Isabel Rodríguez Iglesias indicates that the Colombian peace process still risks reproducing colonial logics and violence. Tenets of Eurocentric liberal peacebuilding within the Colombian peace agreement over-determine the significations of concepts like democracy, development, and security in ways that '(re)produce certain identities and alterities,' reinforcing hierarchicalised modern/colonial binaries of 'developed/underdeveloped, civilized/uncivilized, ethnic/white, threat/ally' (Rodríguez Iglesias 2019, 210). These hierarchies are themselves reinforced through both the discursive association of peace with specific forms of social and political organization and political economy within the formal peace agreement, and through the disciplinary powers of the nation-state and its securitization of perceived threats to dominant articulations of 'peace' and 'development.' Peace discourse therefore risks performing epistemic and ontological violence by consigning primarily ethnic minority communities to conditions of coloniality and delegitimizing alternatives to the hegemonic significations of the liberal/modern peace.

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Despite these pressures, Indigenous and Afro-descended communities in Colombia continue to imagine and enact conceptions of peace that directly challenge the hegemony of the liberal peace and the modern/colonial logics it reflects (Acosta et al. 2018; Rodríguez Iglesias 2019; Zulver 2020; Paarlberg-Kvam 2021). While some communities pursue strategies of isolation or non-cooperation with the state, Rodríguez Iglesias notes the constructive, pragmatic interplay that other communities have sought with the formal peace process. Through coalitional efforts, Indigenous and Afro-descended communities secured the late inclusion of the Peace Agreement's 'Ethnic Chapter,' which affirmed ethnic and territorial rights as integral aspects of the peace process. Yet some communities cited by Rodríguez Iglesias worked to shape hegemonic peace discourses despite acknowledging their insufficiency for delivering broader goals of a 'political-epistemological...peace' that would uproot interlocking colonial forms of 'exclusion, discrimination, oppression, and violence...suffered since the establishment of a racial, classist and gendered stratification of society' (Rodríguez Iglesias 2019, 215).

Reading the Colombian peace process through the lens of pluriversality helps to bring the concept's ontological and programmatic insights into view. The existence—and resistance—of subalternized understandings of peace among Indigenous and Afro-descended communities in Colombia reveals troubles the hegemonic significations of key concepts within 'expert' peacebuilding discourses and reductive approaches to 'local' conceptions of peace. Recognizing the complexities around these communities' pragmatic engagements with the formal peace process also helps mitigate the risk of romanticizing or reifying Indigenous and 'local' peacebuilding praxis as homogenous, insular, and static, as such framings reinforce modern/colonial dichotomies and flatten internal power dynamics and intersectional contestations within and among these communities (Omer 2020). Despite examples of pragmatic engagement with liberal/modern peace discourses through the formal peace process, these communities' explicit identification of peace with decolonial horizons indicates the insufficiencies of dominant peace discourses for building a more genuinely peaceful and pluriversal world—a world in which many worlds can fit.

So how can the field of peacebuilding utilize the ontological and ethical insights of pluriversality to engage with understandings of peace that do not replicate its exclusions? One way in which decolonial theorists understand pluriversality to be both disclosed and pursued is through practices of pluriversal dialogue (Querejazu 2016; Hutchings 2019). Pluriversal dialogue describes encounters in which non-reductive conceptions of difference allow interlocutors to bridge—if never wholly reconcile—various forms of difference. Walter Mignolo points to the enabling role that specific 'connectors' play in facilitating instances of pluriversal dialogue, describing connectors as analogous concepts that share a simultaneous presence and distinct and irreducible specificity of meaning across differing epistemologies and ontologies (Delgado, Romero, and Mignolo 2000; W. D. Mignolo 2011). Through the mutual exploration of specific connectors as they function within and across different ways of knowing and being, pluriversal dialogue reflects the ontological fact of pluriversality by acknowledging the existence and validity of these concepts' pluriversal meanings. This acknowledgment in turn provides a platform for concrete practices of collaborative resistance to the violences of modernity/coloniality that remain mindful of the incommensurabilities that inevitably attend the pursuit of pluriversal, decolonial projects (Tuck and Yang 2012).

The role of connectors is linked in part to the violences of modernity/coloniality through the enforced globalization of concepts like democracy, development, and human rights. But the simultaneous, self-conscious appellation of these 'universal' terms to explicitly decolonial projects alongside their continued usages in the dominant Western contexts demonstrates how they can function in ways that do not command universal, hegemonic meanings (W. D. Mignolo 2011). The pluriversal usage of these concepts provides the discursive grounds for forms of dialogue that again indicate both the ontological and ethical aspects of pluriversality. Examples of dialogues across Indigenous, peasant, pastoralist, fisherfolk, and Global South feminist groups show how pluriversal dialogue simultaneously reflects and cultivates pluriversality's ontological and ethical aspects, as these communities 'unpick multiple, intersecting hierarchies and construct, in their place, a pluriversal world' through situated practices of dialogical interculturality (Dunford 2017, 382; Conway and Singh 2011; W. D. Mignolo 2011; Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2014).

The established role of signifiers like democracy and development as pluriversal connectors opens doors onto similarly pluriversal possibilities for the concept of peace itself. Preliminary engagements with decolonial literature and movements disclose ready examples of pluriversal conceptions of peace. Indeed, even the limited example of Colombia discussed above already reveals what Rodríguez Iglesias describes as a plurality of 'local, situated, and

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particular peaces' that contest both the violent impositions of modernity/coloniality and hegemonic liberal forms of peacebuilding (Rodríguez Iglesias 2019, 212).

However, like democracy and development, possibilities for grounding pluriversal dialogue using the concept of peace as a connector are revealed only by the fact that peace is already in use by diverse communities to describe horizons of possibility beyond the violences of modernity/coloniality. Concepts like democracy, development, and peace command no *a priori* decolonial cache as potential pluriversal connectors outside of this fact. And as the examples from Colombia show, pluriversal dialogue around the concept of peace is further complicated by the fact that situated understandings of peace are hardly static, but reflect dynamics of constant internal and external contestation.

The ability of peace to act as a pluriversal connector indicates a capacity to exceed its discursive associations with interlocking violences of modernity/coloniality. But scholars and practitioners of peacebuilding hoping to engage with pluriversal re-imaginings of peace must also be attentive to the risks of privilege that attend decolonial critique abstracted from the lived struggles of Indigenous and other racialized and colonized peoples. Overly purist academic engagements with decolonial thought can actually undermine efforts by marginalized populations to achieve access to recognition and resources needed for survival within existing systems (Cusicanqui 2012, 104).

Returning to the Colombian example, Rodríguez Iglesias shows how practices of decolonial politics by Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities are reframed through colonial tropes to support centuries-old narratives depicting these communities as obstacles to progress and peace, thereby justifying their continued experiences of direct, structural, and cultural violence (Rodríguez Iglesias 2019, 215). Examining interreligious peacebuilding practices in Kenya and the Philippines, Atalia Omer similarly shows how marginalized communities in these contexts maintain a tension between the performance of decolonial politics and pragmatic engagements with organizations whose approaches to peacebuilding—including their mobilizations of the category of religion—perpetuate epistemic and material legacies of colonization. Reflecting on the work of the School of the Living Traditions (SLT), an Indigenous women's organization in Mindanao, Omer describes how participants link the regeneration of Indigenous lived traditions to women's immediate concerns of daily survival, in part through Indigenous reinterpretations and enactments of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Through this 'concurrently regenerative and re-interpretive mode,' the women of the SLT engage in situated practices of interculturality, historical contextualization, and double critique of discourses around peacebuilding, health, and education to negotiate questions of immediate survival alongside non-reductive practices of decolonial politics (Omer 2020, 289–90).

Such examples illustrate the importance of avoiding ahistorical (and thus inherently depoliticizing) approaches to interrogating pluriversal accounts of peace that flatten internal complexities and contestations within and across both modern/liberal peacebuilding approaches and among the colonial 'others' these discourses construct. These examples also underscore the indispensability of intersectional analysis for apprehending the pluriversal character of peace. Thoroughgoing intersectional attention to the specificities, interrelations, and differences that exist within and between situated accounts of peace might yet avoid both abyssal logics of colonial alterity and depoliticizing decolonial critiques abstracted from the lived struggles of racialized and colonized peoples.

Toward Pluriversal Peacebuilding

Like pluriversality itself, a pluriversal understanding of peace reflects both ontological and normative dimensions. On the one hand, the ontological pluriversality of peace acknowledges that other peaces are actual, affirming the already-existence of irreducibly plural conceptions of peace alongside the ways of knowing and being within which they find their meaning. The ontological pluriversality of peace also challenges the authorization of 'expert' knowledge within the field of international peacebuilding, underscoring how a field oriented toward reducing violence ironically perpetuates epistemic violence through its devaluation of other forms of knowledge, and ontological violence through its promotion of social, economic, and political transformations that threaten the lifeworlds within which diverse ways of knowing and being are entwined. Scholars and practitioners of peacebuilding working in settler-colonial contexts bear particularly urgent responsibilities for grappling with the field's implication in epistemically and ontologically destructive processes of Indigenous erasure and dispossession (Walker 2004).

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But the programmatic aspect of pluriversality also reveals the potential role that peace as a connector plays in enabling the pursuit of decolonial projects in manners respectful of various forms of difference. As a pluriversal connector, 'peace' functions as a signifier that bridges ways of knowing and being, revealing diverse and incommensurable meanings not exhausted by the concept's participation in hegemonic modern/liberal discourses. While new strategies for engagement are needed, the pluriversality of peace opens possibilities for dialogue and collaboration across epistemic and ontological differences toward the transformation of global systems of oppression rooted in colonial logics.

Despite pluriversality's association with reducing various forms of violence, pluriversal politics is not without conflicts of its own. Reflecting on pluriversal encounters with and between Andean Indigenous environmental movements, Martha Chaves and her colleagues caution against 'romanticizing' the pluriverse as a place free from power or struggle (Chaves et al. 2016, 5). Pluriversal conceptions of peace may therefore have important roles to play in navigating inevitable conflicts arising even in the shared pursuit of a world in which different ways of knowing and being can coexist. Intersectional and decolonial resources offer possibilities for a chastened and critically reimagined field of international peacebuilding to better navigate its own internal contradictions and contestations, and to discover new roles as one discourse among many participating in the pluriversality of peace. As Maldonado-Torres writes, to truly be 'in peace' it will require collective movement against the racialized hierarchies and 'institutional, symbolic, and epistemological foundations' of modernity/coloniality (Maldonado-Torres 2020). Pluriversality offers an important interpretive framework for understanding how different conceptions of peace contribute to upholding or eroding these foundations.

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