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Research on Liberal Peacebuilding

How do you analyze the present status of research on liberal peacebuilding?

The literature on contemporary peacebuilding and statebuilding is increasingly being framed by what has been dubbed the “liberal peace” debate. Liberal peace refers here to the idea that certain kinds of society will tend to be more peaceful, both in their domestic affairs and in their international relations, than “illiberal” states. Hence, liberal peacebuilding implies not just managing instability between states, the traditional focus of the IR discipline, but also to build peace within states on the basis of liberal democracy and market economics. The liberal peace encompasses socio-cultural norms associated with peacemaking, as well as the international and national structures instrumental to promoting the liberal peace. The liberal peace’s main components vary, but usually include democracy promotion, the rule of law and good governance, promotion of human rights, economic reform and privatisation. The blurring and convergence of development and security – dubbed the “security-development nexus” – is at the roots of the liberal peace, in the process bringing together two previously distinct policy areas, and different sets of actors and agencies. The double dynamic of the radicalisation of the politics of development and the reproblematisation of security entails the transformation of societies to fit liberal norms and Western expectations. In the wake of the failure of international efforts to create and support liberal institutions, assumptions underlining international peacebuilding efforts are increasingly questioned, by internationals as well as by locals.

At the centre of the liberal peace debate lies a complex dichotomy between “critical scholars” and “problem solvers,” a dichotomy actually based on the work of Robert Cox (in his seminal article “Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory”) and Max Horkheimer. The “problem solvers” are believed to focus on performance issues, while the “critical scholars” are more inclined to question the values and assumptions underpinning the liberal peace. The “efficiency camp” seeks ways to improve the performance of liberal peacebuilding, analysing conditions on the ground that prevent the full realisation of this goal. However, the “emancipator ethos” of the critical literature rules out extensive external political coercion to promote peacebuilding and statebuilding. On the security-development nexus for instance, problem solvers debate whether the merging of security and development is possible, while critical scholars actually seek the end of the state.
development concerns is the best way to achieve coherent and well-managed policy or if this “new agenda” entails sacrificing development to security needs, while critical security theorists posit that the development agenda has already been subordinated to Western security concerns and question the implications of the securitization and subordination of the development agenda. On democatrisation issues, problem solvers will analyse sequencing of democratic transitions, while the critical perspective will look at the normative assumptions behind democratrisation processes and the ideological underpinnings of democratrisation. This division can take the form of a debate between “critical” and “uncritical” scholars, or “critical” and “hyper-critical” scholars, depending on your stand in the debate (Lemay-Hébert 2013).

They are many variants of the liberal peace, and different authors have suggested typologies of “liberal peace”. Similarly, the dichotomy between problem solvers and critical thinkers is to a certain extent linked to the broadening of the “liberal peace” category, stretching its meaning to the limits. It is also arguably a feature of the evolution of the current liberal peace debate, and its progression beyond the limited group of scholars who promoted the debate in the 1990s, reaching new audiences, and in the process fostering new debates.

*In your opinion, how will the situation likely evolve over the next five years?*

While critical liberal peacebuilding debates have been incredibly fecund in the last decade, leading to innovative conceptualisations of the limits of the exogenous imposition of political institutions to so-called fragile or weak states, critical scholars have been recently challenged to develop ‘sharper theoretical tools to understand and explain the complex empirical cases that are thrown up by the liberal peace’ (Heathershaw, 2013: 275; See also: Zaum 2012). I agree with this statement, even if liberal peacebuilding debates are far from moribund, and many research avenues have been hinted at in recent years. Some scholars suggest an agenda based on resilience and human security. Others focus on hybridisation processes as a way to capture the complexity of the interaction between internal and external actors in peacebuilding contexts. Finally, there is also a group of authors looking at the political sociology of the state and state formation behind specific peacebuilding and statebuilding approaches. At the same time, the “problem-solvers” continue to question the dilemmas inherent to the promotion of the liberal peace, and look at difficulty of promoting norms of liberal governance from the outside. All these research agendas contribute to highlight the limits of a clear-cut division between “policy-relevant” and critical studies, even if some perpetuate it, and will likely enrich the liberal peacebuilding debates in the next years to come.

*What are the structural long-term perspectives?*

As conflicts evolve, taking new forms and shapes, and as do international interventions
As conflicts evolve, taking new forms and shapes, and as do international interventions in a similar fashion, liberal peacebuilding is likely to remain a central feature of the field of international relations. Hence, liberal peace debates will most certainly remain vibrant, even if we cannot foresee exactly how peace studies will evolve in the long-term; as peace studies are first and foremost dependent on the nature and shape of Western and non-Western interventionism. Liberal interventionism seems to face a crisis of confidence following the Iraqi fiasco, exemplified by the reluctance of the United States and European powers to embark into a similar adventure in Syria, but it would be short-sighted to proclaim the “end of intervention” or the end of liberal peacebuilding. We have witnessed other periods of relative isolationism in international relations, which have all been followed in one way or another by a revival of liberal interventionism: the American Foreign policy of isolationism in the 1930s, followed by the Second World War, the denazification of Germany and the Nuremberg trials, as well as the MacArthur administration of Japan and the drafting of a new constitution; the crisis of confidence in peacekeeping following the Congo intervention by the UN (1960-1964), which almost bankrupted the organisation and claimed the life of the Secretary General at that time, Dag Hammarskjöld, but was nevertheless followed by a new wave of peace missions in the 1980s and 1990s; the subsequent crisis of peacebuilding in the early 1990s, marked by the Srebrenica debacle (where Dutch peacekeepers stood powerless while acts of ethnic cleansing were taking place), the Mogadishu trauma (where the bodies of American soldiers were dragged in the street by rebels), and the Western inaction in face of a genocide in Rwanda, followed by ever more intrusive peace missions in Cambodia, Kosovo and Timor-Leste at the turn of the century. All these examples demonstrate the relative resilience of liberal interventionism, and should act as a cautionary tale to new prophets, quick to proclaim the end of liberal peacebuilding and eager to decipher and forecast the future of interventions. Beside that, it is useful to point out that international interventions have always taken different shapes beyond the most blatant muscular military interventions – economic and proxy wars are now more than ever part of the diplomatic arsenal of powerful states (however these features of the international life can hardly be considered ‘new’).

With regard to the scholarship on liberal peacebuilding, it is likely to follow the aforementioned dichotomy between “critical scholars” and “problem-solvers,” with a schism separating the UK and continental Europe to a certain extent from the United States, deeply embedded in the ‘scientific revolution’ of social sciences that started in the 1950s and 1960s. This methodological divide has a natural impact on the questions the researchers ask themselves on each side of the Atlantic, and the lenses adopted to read peace and conflict phenomena, contributing to the creation of quite distinct bodies of work in the field of peace studies. However, these academic spaces are hardly homogenous (thankfully), and researchers acting as “bridge-builders” exist in each community.
Sources:


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