

SWA: Post-Conflict Peacebuilding

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Paris, 2010

Paris responds to criticism of peacebuilding from both flanks. One side argues that peacebuilding efforts are too superficial and that the powers needed to actually nation-build are impossible to attain – because public support is fickle and sovereignty is enshrined in the international system. The other side argues the opposite, that peace interventions wield too much power and short-circuit the organic development of democratic norms. Anti-imperialists go farther and argue that peace-building since 2001 is just a façade for military adventurism and neo-colonial exploitation. I’m inclined to agree with this, especially in the Persian Gulf. Paris says that this discursive backlash is as hyperbolic as the initial cheerleading for peacebuilding was naïve. Paris was writing in 2010; a decade later, it’s clear that the cynics whom he dismissed were more right than he is.

I think the discourse needs to recognise that the unconscious model which we reference as a peacebuilding “success” is Japan and Western Europe post-bellum. In both cases, a highly industrialised society was levelled and rebuilt by their conquerors, who rehabilitated elements of fascist regimes to fight off a new existential threat. This presence of an neighbouring threat in Taiwan and South Korea also underpinned unilateral reconstruction (I argue that our understanding of peacebuilding is in fact reconstruction). Peacebuilding fails when at least one of those three conditions – prior-industrial economy, rehabilitation of old elites, presence of an existential external threat – is not met. And by “fail” I mean “doesn’t succeed in near-to-mid term.”

Paris argues that some thinkers define the liberal peace too “broadly.” This reveals an important presupposition: Paris thinks the liberal peace either *can*, *should*, or *does* exist. I object to this notion, and there are *plenty of others* whom we’ve read who have raised similar doubts.

Paris writes on page 344: “This argument also built on other researchers’ findings that civil wars ending in military victories tend to produce longer-lasting peace than those ending in negotiated ceasefires,” citing Luttwak’s “Give War a Chance” article in 1999 as well as Hartzell and Hoddie from previous weeks. I think Paris is overreaching here, since disaggregating civil wars can reveal hidden patterns. Moreover, civil wars since 2010 are just simply not ending at *all*, which I don’t think political scientists don’t understand well enough to make generalisations about.

One question I would like to ask Paris if I had him cornered in an elevator: “What about Haïti?” The ongoing UN mission there is an embarrassment, but

the blame isn't entirely on their shoulders. The fact is that peacebuilding in Haïti is always under the covert influence of US empire. Since the Moïse Assassination in 2021, there's been a trickle of information suggesting what was already safe to assume: [Colombian Mercenaries trained by the US had some role to play](#).

Paris also writes that the economic benefits of peacebuilding stand for themselves as proof that it is a worthy pursuit. Which I found odd – the loss of productivity is hardly the worst thing about violence, but this line of argument means he assumes that the people of war-torn countries stand to benefit economically if war ends and business can resume. That is not guaranteed! Is he really so naïve as to expect that a “safe business environment” will benefit the locals most, and all locals equally at that? I'm not arguing for a continuation of war, and it's easy for me, in my ivory tower thousands of miles away, to make sweeping generalisations. But Paris is treating all parties in all wars as morally equivalent, and that is ridiculous. Just imagine applying this idea to the American Civil War, which at the time was a late-industrialising country with absurd political corruption and wealth inequality. Paris would be asking both sides to reach a compromise, because of the loss of productivity worldwide caused by a cotton shortage. This is why a centrist like Paris can't comprehend the critique from the left: I don't think he really understands that a capitalist economy only works as long as surplus labour value is stolen from those at the lowest level of production. He misses the point of anti-imperialist critiques of peacebuilding because he is implicitly predisposed towards a liberal economic order.

His solipsism extends to his appraisal of “alternative approaches” to peace building. He writes that other authors who espouse “emancipatory peacebuilding” offer no realistic alternative:

Duffield describes an emancipatory approach as one that enhances the ‘solidarity of the governed’.⁹⁰ Pugh, for his part, suggests that it would involve greater ‘participation of local actors’ and more ‘pro-poor engagement with local populations’, which he contrasts to the ‘subjugation’ of the prevalent liberal model. Who could disagree with appeals for emancipation, phrased in such vague terms? If these authors offered more specific recommendations, it would be possible to evaluate these alternative approaches in greater detail. It would also allow us to understand the degree to which these emancipatory approaches are genuinely distinct from liberal peacebuilding. (356)

Paris never takes the challenge himself, which reveals a true poverty of creativity and imagination. He still conjectures, “we may discover that emancipatory peacebuilding is not really opposed to liberal peacebuilding at all,” which underscores that same unfamiliarity with critical theory and lack of predictive thinking. Pro-poor policies aren't necessarily at odds with all “liberal peacebuilding” but they are at odds with liberal *politics* broadly.

For instance, intellectual property protections like patents are among the oldest of liberal political achievements. They allowed a class of petty capitalists to punch above their weight by assigning a market value to a non-material asset: ideas themselves. Patent protections, for better or worse, are now used as a cudgel to control the agriculture of the developing world, charging people a premium for the seeds they need to feed their families. Even outside of agro-business, patents on medicines needlessly increase the cost of living for people in underdeveloped countries. Removing these patents would be a free-trade solution – ostensibly a liberal idea – but it cannot happen so long as the global bourgeoisie have an instrumental interest in keeping patents around. It might seem that this is unrelated to conflict resolution, but it is already well-established (in this very article!) that violent conflict makes life and livelihood more precarious. Medicines become scarce, militias steal food, and farmlands become minefields. It is not difficult to imagine ways that post-conflict peacebuilding can be kneecapped by liberal politics, and that’s before the careerist peacebuilders arrive.

Indeed, Paris paraphrases Thatcher’s “No Alternative” line *twice*: first for liberal institutional design (357) and then liberal economics as peacebuilding strategies (361). What more indication does one need that he’s drunk on neoliberal Kool-Aid (pun intended)? He argues that the bottom-up Autesserre approach will devolve into strong-man rule or be tainted by association with foreign interference. He eventually argues that there is nothing about liberal peace that mandates “inflexibility” towards “local conditions” (360) – including, but not limited to, entrenched patriarchy, institutional violence towards LGBT people, social castes, etc. There are ways for international interveners to “lean” on traditional customs and influence people to change their minds, but Paris is evidently unfamiliar with those methods. Instead, he argues that liberal republicanism is entirely compatible with local conditions. With his impoverished imagination, he clearly hasn’t considered that liberal charters will *heighten and consolidate* those inequalities. Nor will it cross his mind that there exists a material basis for these problems, and that materialist peacebuilding can transcend these contradictions.

It takes far longer to explain why Paris is wrong than it takes for him to say it in the first place. He arrives, unconsciously, at an Orthodox Marxist position, stating that societies must first pass through a phase of capitalist development and proletarianise their peasants. (361) That is indeed how Europe and North America won their preeminence – along with lots of free real estate stolen from their colonies. But once arrived, he stops there. All that remains is the twiddling of knobs on the machinery at the end of history: “altering and customising, not abandoning, the economically liberal elements of peacebuilding.” (361)

In Paris’s more recent [blog posts](#), he has argued that the collapse of the US puppet state in Afghanistan is *not* in fact a watershed moment. Evidently, he’s the exact same person who wrote this article 11 years ago, arguing that the Loya Jirgas of the countryside were instrumental in transition from Taliban rule (359)

– he never once imagined that the same tribal assemblies would come to view the Taliban favourably again after decades of “liberal” peacebuilding under US occupation.

Menocal, 2011

Barma, 2012