Peacebuilding: Imperialism’s new disguise?¹

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Introduction

Since the early 1990s a growing emphasis on peacebuilding has marked the international community’s responses to conflicts.² Supporters of peacebuilding have promoted it as a new international idea, usually tracing it back to then United Nations Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali’s An Agenda for Peace in 1992 in which he proposes responsibilities and responses for the UN and the international community. Peacebuilding is expressed in different forms – a set of policies, a humanitarian agenda, or a way of conflict resolution – but all involve the idea of efforts made to prevent a relapse into conflict.³

We analyse debates about peacebuilding in order to clarify its character and history. We argue that despite appearing as something new, peacebuilding has the same
assumptions as modernisation theory. Once considered dead, modernisation theory has been reborn, in radicalised form, as peacebuilding. The stages of modernisation, once understood to progress over many decades, have been shortened. Projects are ambitious, at times involving no less than a fundamental change of behaviour and values in target populations and these, too, in short order. Projects are claimed by powerful countries and coalitions of the willing prepared to interfere in domestic affairs, with outsiders’ direct influence on the domestic affairs of countries in the South increasing by leaps and bounds.

Why was this revised form of modernisation needed? Bretton Woods hegemons needed a strategy for dealing with challenges to the status quo.

We start by describing peacebuilding as presented by its promoters. In the second part we focus on various concepts of imperialism. Part 3 considers the discourses of peacebuilding and imperialism together, outlining the main arguments of critics. This is followed by our own critical assessment of these positions.

Our type of discourse analysis is primarily a historical one, starting with the origins of a concept (of imperialism) and following it through the various phases. We are interested in academic and research communities, as well as practitioners and authors of the UN, international financial institutions and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs).

**Terminology**

- ‘Peacemaking’ refers to activity aimed at bringing warring parties to an agreement
- ‘Peacekeeping’ consists of activity to secure compliance with agreements
- ‘Peacebuilding’ refers to efforts intended to avoid a relapse into conflict
- ‘Peace operations’ is an umbrella term referring to preventative diplomacy, peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding

**Part I: Peacebuilding – a description**

The UN and associated scholars describe the conflicts of the 1990s as ‘new’ wars characterised by the breakdown of political, economic and social order; the targeting of civilian populations; the production of an increasing number of refugees and internally displaced persons; and violence that was senseless, gratuitous and uncontrolled. The point was ‘to do something about it’, not because national interests were involved but
because the international community had a ‘responsibility to protect’ and the human conscience was an international creature.\(^9\)

Although it was quickly pointed out that the conflicts of the 1990s were not really different to what had been seen before,\(^10\) the international community expanded its peacekeeping mandate. Before 1989 conflicts tended to be seen as internal affairs, not to be interfered with except with the consent of the parties involved. When peace operations did occur during this period, the main tasks were to separate the armed forces, position troops between the belligerents, and provide humanitarian assistance.\(^11\) In contrast to this first generation of peace operations, second-generation peace operations during the 1990s wanted, besides reducing the level of violence, to construct more just societies.\(^12\)

The involvement of the international community broadened in terms of policy sectors involved, deepened in terms of the engagement with the internal workings of societies, and lengthened in terms of stages of conflict.\(^13\) The early goals were mainly concerned with military demobilisation and political transitions to electoral democracy.\(^14\) *An Agenda for Peace* broadened the agenda to alleviate the effects of war on the population and tackling ‘the root causes of emergencies’.\(^15\)

**How are ‘root causes’ understood?**

Most actors – especially the World Bank and the UN – have mainly focused on causes in the national context. Some highlight ‘ethnic conflict’ or ‘politicised ethnicity’,\(^16\) others ‘failed’ or ‘collapsed’ states, the latter being defined as ‘a situation where the structure, authority (legitimate power), law, and political order have fallen apart … [and] the state itself, as a legitimate, functioning order, is gone’.\(^17\) Other scholars see structural factors as the deepest causes of violent conflict,\(^18\) namely ‘economic despair, social injustice and political oppression’,\(^19\) but again the structures refer to national causes. The way to deal with structural causes is to (re-)build a democratic system and to liberate the market. Economic liberation means both the internal restructuring of a nation into a capitalist economy (for example privatisation of state assets) and its integration in the global capital market (for example opening the market to foreign investment). Benefits will trickle down. Democracy empowers formerly excluded parties and provides procedures for peaceful conflict resolution. Equipped with a liberal democratic polity and a market-oriented economy, war-torn societies are less likely to relapse into fighting.\(^20\) The basic peacebuilding formula is thus:

\[
\text{Democracy + Market Economy} = \text{Peace}
\]

Getting to peace so understood, involves three sets of tasks:

- **Security transition** involves disarming and demobilising combatants; re-integrating them into civilian life; reforming military and police forces; facilitating the return of refugees and internally displaced persons; de-mining; and recovery of light weapons.
Democratic transition involving all the elements required of a free and fair election, as well as support for the judicatory, legislative bodies, and civil society.

Socioeconomic transition involves promotion of a market economy.

Paris is correct when he says: ‘Peacebuilding is in effect an enormous experiment in social engineering.’

As the peacebuilding experience lengthened, actors have been compelled to acknowledge that intentions and impact may have little to do with each other. Political and economic liberalisation in many cases had the ‘perverse’ effect of actually destabilising the peace processes. Some aid was actually harmful. To the question whether peacebuilding actually does build peace, there are usually two (sometimes overlapping) approaches.

The first approach is managerial and reformist in nature, focuses on the micro-level of action such as the design, conduct and outcome of specific operations, and addresses issues of efficacy and professionalism. Inefficacy comes from, for example, the competitive nature of democratic and capitalist systems which can sharpen confrontations in already divided societies. Inefficacy also comes from feeble effort: peacebuilding ‘done on the cheap, from day to day … neither provides a stable long term security guarantee, nor creates the conditions under which local leadership takes over’. The critics typically argue that the existing formula of peace should be maintained but implementation needs to be reformed.

The second approach places peacebuilding in the context of the international system and questions the legitimacy of the enterprise. To these critics peacebuilding has a progressive rhetorical cover but is in fact a tool of riot control or even neo-imperialism designed to re-colonise regions of the South. This perspective favours a historical-structural type of analysis and focuses more on the macro-level, engaging more critically with the relationship between peace operations, power structures in world politics, and ideology.

**Part II: Imperialism and the development discourse**

In the late 19th century the term ‘imperialism’ was used to describe control by a greater power over less powerful territories or nationalities. This meaning has stuck: imperialism and even the concept of neo-imperialism developed in the 1960s refer to a relationship of domination of one set of people over another.

One of the main debates among early scholars was whether capitalism produced or destroyed imperialism. Scholars like Hobson, Schumpeter or Kautsky maintained that …
purely capitalist world’ would contain ‘no fertile soil to imperialist impulses’. In contrast, writers such as Lenin, Hilferding and Rosa Luxemburg argued that imperialism was a logical stage in the evolution of capitalism. Capitalism depended on economically virgin territories not only in the initial stages but more so during its maturity or the ‘highest stage of capitalism’. Lenin saw that in the late 19th century, production and finance had become monopolised. Monopoly capitalism was bound to expand, including by the export of capital, economic penetration, colonialism, conquest and war. Imperialism served the purpose of postponing the collapse of capitalism, albeit for a limited period of time, by acquiring raw materials and markets, creating extra profits and getting rid of surplus.

A second major debate revolved around the impact of imperialism in dominated areas. Marx thought that capitalist expansion would have a progressive effect and without regret noted the destruction of ‘backward’ systems as a necessary stage of history’s path. Later scholars, however, recognised the devastating effects of imperialism despite it eventually leading to capitalism.

What is important about the Marxist-Leninist explanations is their linking of imperialism to the economic interests of the imperial powers. Lake categorises them as metrocentric theories due to their focus on the internal characteristics of imperial states. Post-World War II theories of imperialism by Arendt, Lichtheim and Fieldhouse tended to focus on extreme nationalism but were often as metrocentric as earlier theories. Metrocentric theories naturally attracted criticism, for example for ignoring the role played by indigenous people and their political elites. Fieldhouse, for example, argued that colonial rule resulted from the breakdown of tradition in overseas territories and the inability of the local elites to deal with the political problems caused by European economic penetration. Only when previous forms of cooperation between local elites and European settlers collapse do European leaders feel the need to fill the consequent power vacuum and to reconstruct collaboration. To Fieldhouse, imperialism is a highly complex process.

In another significant innovation, Robinson and Gallagher noted that imperial forces were by no means obliged to constantly resort to the formal means of power. Informal economic expansion, for example, was no less imperialistic than formal territorial domination. British imperialism throughout the 19th century preferred informal control, resorting to formal measures only when they saw their economic interests threatened. Formal autonomy is indeed something of a façade. As Nkrumah argued: ‘The essence of neo-colonialism is that the state … [is] independent and has all trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its internal policy is directed from outside.’

With formal decolonisation in the 20th century, relations were no longer described in the terms of coloniser/colonised but developed/underdeveloped, with ‘development’ meaning that underdeveloped areas were going to be improved. The development discourse is a rather complex and continuously changing battleground; we cannot fully engage with
it here, but some understanding of its main components allows better comprehension of the critique of peacebuilding as neo-imperialism.

In the development discourse, the modernisation school is convinced that the Bretton Woods system is a progressive force. Modernisation theory conceptualises a world divided into areas of modernity and areas of tradition and backwardness, the so-called ‘Third World’. Underdevelopment would be cured by modernising norms and values (for example, about labour and private property). According to Rostow47 all societies lie within one of five historical categories: traditional societies, the precondition for the take-off stage, the take-off stage, the drive towards maturity stage, and finally the age of high mass consumption. The West is in the latter two stages and the West’s experience can be replicated in any other country with one exception: whereas modernising pressures built up gradually within Western societies, the developing countries will be exposed to pressures from the outside and make progress at a fast rate. Fast development in the South or Third World is possible and with the assistance of the developed countries, can secure full inclusion in a global capitalist system.

Theorists of underdevelopment48 saw in modernisation a revised or neo-form of imperialism. Developed areas’ selfishness required exploitation of others: the core was rich because it exploited the periphery.49 Although the causes of underdevelopment related to the international capitalist system,50 modernisation theory suppressed this fact. The way to liberation was exiting the world system, for example through self-reliance, such as subsidising local industries and limiting the importation of manufactured goods.51

By the 1980s the development discourse was not very alive: there was just the Washington Consensus (WC). How did this happen?

Most of the numerous development projects had not fulfilled the hopes placed in them and an ever-greater part of the South was sliding into poverty. The IMF blamed, among others, the bloated bureaucracies of Third World countries, low productivity, and borrowing too much – all national-level sins. Supporters of the WC attacked ‘Third Worldism’ for failing to condemn the behaviour of selfish Third World elites but also, more internationally, low levels of foreign investment, poor world prices for primary products, and worsening terms of trade.52 Whatever the reasons for the crisis, the South was compelled to live under a new orthodoxy: fiscal austerity; control over inflation; trade and capital account liberalisation; privatisation; and deregulation of markets. Drastic cuts in public services and subsidies were required. What was needed was a more efficient working of the market.

The success of the WC was partly due to the demise of the Third World as a pressure group. The Third World split into ultra-rich oil-producing countries, least-developed countries characterised by extreme poverty, and in-between some newly industrialising
countries. Theories of underdevelopment received a final blow with the break-up of the Soviet Union: the major model of alternative development was gone. The WC seemed triumphant; yet, on closer and functional examination, all was not so well.

First, the WC was in general not an emotionally and morally satisfying discourse and in the context of war-torn countries, it was actively dissatisfying. Austerity, for example, could once be inflicted on post-Nazi Germany because ordinary people supported the Nazis. But to argue for imposing extra hardship on innocent victims was something else, and on the victims of ‘new’ wars something else altogether.

Second, the WC had its critics. Even Joseph Stiglitz, then chief economist at the World Bank, warned that liberalisation makes things go from bad to worse. The critics that mattered more, however, were human rights, humanitarian or left-of-centre INGOs because these organisations were the primary, some would say the dominant, actors in the world of development. To satisfy – and thus mobilise – this audience, the discourse would have to speak their language. Peacebuilding, instead of the dreaded WC, could strike just the right notes.

Third, the WC’s policies and mechanisms, like that of modernisation theory, ran in the medium to long term. The effects of the ‘new’ wars, however, could not stop soon enough. Modernisation’s formulas would stay but in a concentrated form and it acquired a suitable terminology, one that conveyed a sense of urgency.

Fourth, the discourse of the WC is highly economistic. But the new imperialists wanted much, much more from the South’s war-torn countries. They wanted to incorporate, for example, new ideas about society, like ‘civil society’ and ‘social capital’.

Finally, the new discourse had to be systematically connected to conflict-resolution discourses. And the connection was found in democracy, understood in minimalist terms as a system that resolved conflict. The pioneer of this school is Schumpeter, although conflict management scholars, for example Lederach, follow the same line.

In short, the Washington Consensus needed a new legitimation that applied to war-torn countries and got it. As Modernisation moved to the house of Peacebuilding, Development arose phoenix-like from the ashes.

**Part III: Peacebuilding – imperialism’s new disguise?**

What are the features of peacebuilding that, according to its critics, make it an imperialistic enterprise? And what, if anything, was new about it?
Root causes

Instead of the micro-level or forces internal to a country, critics have emphasised external factors.

One group of authors is particularly critical of ‘the silence surrounding the role of interventionary core capitalism in perpetuating poverty through discriminatory policies that structure the global economy’. Tandon, for example, notes how explanations of the causes of Africa’s conflicts neglect the international dimension. To him the real causes of poverty and underdevelopment, and hence peacelessness, lie in the unequal manner in which Africa is integrated into the global economy:

[Rich natural resources are taken away from the continent at a fraction of their value. The terms of exchange between Africa’s natural resources and the West’s capital-and-knowledge intensive technologies continue to remain the basis for vast seepage of net value out of Africa and into Europe, the USA and Japan … Africa’s poverty does not just ‘exist’, it is systematically created. It is created not by any conspiracy. It is created by the simple operation of the so-called ‘law of the market’.

Bendaña comes to a similar conclusion. Economic crises, instability and violence are fed by the insistence on market deregulation. The programmes of the IMF, World Bank and other donors which are supposedly aimed at speeding up development and building peace and whose acceptance is often a condition for development assistance or debt relief, are part of the problem. Bendaña quotes a UN Report of 2002 which reveals that poverty is increasing in those developing economies that have the most open trade regimes.

Repressive discourse complements these policies. Fetherston, for example, who approaches discourse in the same way as Bourdieu, Jabri or Nordstrom, stresses how the discourse fails to depict structural violence. Authors are oblivious as to how they construct, reproduce and maintain a particular vision of order, including shameless claims of ‘new’ conflicts created by ‘ethnic rivalry’ and ‘roguish’ behaviour.

Poverty containment, re-imperialisation and unreflexive discourse

The critique that peacebuilding efforts represent a new policy of poverty containment is best expounded by Duffield, who posits that the South or Third World – which is usually ignored by the WC and Bretton Woods – becomes relevant when what is bred there (by underdevelopment crime and ‘terrorism’) threaten international stability. The consequences of poverty must be contained either in a form of ‘international riot control’ and/or the provision of a minimalist international welfare to prevent ‘the poor
and hungry masses of “the south” … from fleeing towards the rich contented “north”.69 The WC’s victims have to be kept at bay70 by doctoring the dysfunctions.71

Instead of arguing that peacebuilding wants to contain poverty, others see a new form of imperialism: the Bretton Woods hegemons talk about a ‘liberal peace’ but actually want to recolonise the South to gain or increase access to its raw materials and cheap labour force.

Tandon, for example, argues that the strategy of ‘liberal peace’ is motivated primarily by profit72 – especially in conquered markets in Africa.73 Even a large proportion of the aid budget here is transferred to multinational companies and other institutions of the North. A recipient country can be by-passed for up to 98 per cent of aid allocated to it.74 Post-war ‘liberalisation’ in Mozambique, for example, is not in the interests of rural producers and cannot meet their current needs. Yet the liberal peace legitimation continues, because it is not about Mozambique but the ‘interests of global capital’.75 The new will to intervene and protect carry preferences of the hegemonic power and its allies, who are able to legitimate their actions by identifying with, and using the language of, the interests of the international community.76

But it is not only the hegemons’ discursive cunning that plays a role in maintaining a certain status quo: most of peacebuilding theory itself helps legitimise the dominant ideology.77 It does so by focusing on the micro-level and by being non-reflexive.

Peacebuilding authors devote most of their attention to ‘policy relevance’ or offering advice to policymakers, concentrating so intently on operational details that they have neglected the role that peacebuilding plays in diffusing norms and institutional models. Paris describes these practices as a ‘modern rendering of the mission civilisatrice’.78 Yet these imperial assumptions go unquestioned. Along with the focus on operational detail goes a claim to be apolitical, which obscure the fact that it is usually the interests, values and priorities of the interveners, not of the victims, that shape peacebuilding. If peacebuilding is to become more politically self-aware, it needs to be placed in a global context of power relations.79

Both Pugh80 and Duffield81 note how countless UN reports, consultancy documents, INGO briefings and academic works contain descriptions of the ‘new’ wars with them–us dichotomies. ‘Their’ wars are presented as illegitimate, internal and identity-based, and are characterised by unrestrained destruction, abuse of civilians, and reliance on privatised violence. By implication, ‘our wars’ are between states, are legitimate and politically motivated; actors show restraint and respect civilians; etc. This binary construction wants to capture the moral high ground to legitimise actions while avoiding the injustices produced by the liberal peace.

Most mainstream peacebuilding theory, by presenting the prevailing international framework as incontestable, by focusing on policy issues, pretending to be apolitical, and
constructing ‘them’ and ‘us’ dichotomies, helps to legitimate what critics regard as either international riot control or the latest phase of imperialism.

Who dominates?

The relationship between internationals and the locals is a key issue in peacebuilding, with local ownership often defined as the key to peace. The level of international control over post-conflict societies has reached such heights, however, ‘neo-imperialism’ is a more appropriate description than ‘peacebuilding’.

Peacebuilding supporters like Ignatieff and Rieff say that direct external control, including by military means and a foreign civilian administration, is a necessary but temporary evil. What these authors fail to see is that foreigners have gained new forms of wide informal influence in the internal affairs of post-war states. The old imperialism stuck to controlling behaviour; the new imperialism wants to reconstruct social relations and change behaviour and attitudes through levels of metropolitan monitoring, intervention and regulation unprecedented since the colonial period.

Some level of multilateralism does exist in the peacebuilding enterprise, but it is the Western powers that are seen to dominate the agenda. And within the West, one nation and its allied multinational corporations call the shots. There are some claims about the essentially benign nature of US hegemony but, besides Foster, critics like Cox and Panitch are convinced US hegemony is deeply yet subtly materialistic, malign, unaccountable and unopposed. These claims are rejected by Paris. Of course, peacebuilding is not a purely altruistic enterprise, he states; it is connected to the national security interests of states. But its costs are exceptionally high and missions have occurred in the poorest and most economically stagnant areas of the world.

In peacebuilding’s brand of imperialism the international community is the intervener and is willing to countenance unprecedented levels of intrusion and degrees of social engineering. Control is not exerted directly or territorially as in the colonial projects of the past; it consists of management of processes and the encouragement of capacities and potentialities. ‘Standards’ of acceptable behaviour are conveyed to war-torn parts of the South.

And with modernisation theory reinvented and radicalised, it has one more chance to work.

Summary and conclusion

Is peacebuilding a new form of imperialism? Our intention in posing this question was not to come up with a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Instead the aim was to highlight and better understand some of the main issues and implications of this unfolding debate.
Peacebuilding clearly legitimates the Bretton Woods hegemons' control in war-torn parts of the world (and more). Outsiders' influence in the domestic affairs of Southern countries has increased, directly, through interim administrations and military presence and indirectly, through the greater dependence on international aid. The quality of influence has also changed. Peacebuilders are concerned not only with rebuilding infrastructure or redistributing material resources, but also attempt to transform societies by changing the attitudes and behaviour of people living within them. Peacebuilders are now ‘getting inside the head to govern the hand’.

Scholars ask of peacebuilding: Is it driven by humanitarian or mainly self-interests? Does peacelessness result from a lack of integration into the global capitalist economy or from the way economies have been integrated (the root causes of violence)? Will the peacebuilders help the majority of people or is the objective to maintain a status quo that benefits a minority (positive and negative peace)? Will the actual impact be as intended?

These questions are strikingly similar to the debate between modernisers and their critics in the 1960s. Peacebuilding gave modernisation a second chance to make development work. Most peacebuilding literature, by focusing on the micro-level and by being non-reflexive, helps to legitimise this second chance of modernisation theory.

Research on peacebuilding has to become more critically self-conscious. Instead of just looking for managerial solutions, future studies on peacebuilding could do well by showing linkages or how the whole fits together. Scholars could do well to address how peacebuilding practices may actually legitimise and help reproduce the social structures that cause violent conflict in the first place.

Notes

1 We are grateful for the comments and suggestions of Professors Mervyn Frost and Markus Kornprobst. All errors are our own.
2 We use the terms conflict and war interchangeably, referring to organised violence involving a minimum annual cost of 1 000 deaths.
4 We use the terms colonialism and imperialism interchangeably, referring to a relationship of domination of one set of people over another and where the domination crosses recognised boundaries, nationalities, and/or sovereign territories.
5 Our definitions are those of the UN. See http://www.un.org/peace/.
8 C M Stephenson, New approaches to international peacemaking in the post-Cold War period, in Michael


10 Kalyvas, ‘New’ and ‘old’ wars, 99–118.


15 Pugh quoted in ibid., 171.

16 H Slim, *International humanitarianism's engagement with civil war in the 1990s*.


19 Boutros-Ghali, *An Agenda for Peace*.


21 Ibid, 56.


26 M Lund, What kind of peace is being built?


29 Ibid, 23.


31 Lake, Imperialism.


35 Mommsen, *Theories of imperialism*.

37 Fieldhouse, *Economics and empire* and *The colonial empires*.
38 Mommsen, *Theories of imperialism*.
39 Ibid, 111.
40 Robinson and Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians*.
41 Mommsen, *Theories of imperialism*, 90.
51 Rist, *The history of development*.
53 Ibid. See also Hart, *Development critiques in the 1990s*.
54 Meaning that ideas have consequences.
55 See the ‘Post-Washington Consensus’ speech in Hart, *Development critiques in the 1990s*.
69 H Slim, To the rescue: radicals or poodles?, Currents 21 (1999), 6.
70 Bendáña, What kind of peace is being built?
72 Tandon, Root causes of peacelessness and approaches to peace in Africa, 166–187.
74 Ibid, 5–10.
76 Pugh, Peacekeeping and critical theory, 48.
77 Studies of peacebuilding and associated topics seem to be largely cut off from the rest of political studies. A Bellamy and J Williams, Thinking anew about peace operations, International Peacekeeping 11(1) (2004), 1.
79 Bellamy and Williams, Thinking anew about peace operations, 6.
80 Pugh, Peacekeeping and critical theory.
81 Duffield, Global governance and the new wars.
83 Ignatieff, Empire lite.
88 Cox, Is there a specifically Canadian perspective in the world?
91 Shaw, Exploring imperia.
93 Ibid, 653f.
94 Duffield, Social reconstruction and the radicalization of development, 1064.
95 Ibid, 1067.