A spectre has haunted European scholars of peace and conflict studies since the end of the cold war. This spectre is the Liberal Peace. Scholars from Germany to the UK, from doctoral students to full professors, have allied to exorcise the spectre of rushed liberal democratization and capitalist restructuring in post-conflict environments. Where is the case of international intervention that has not been labelled ‘liberal peacebuilding’ by a critical scholar? Where is the so-called orthodox scholar or policy-practitioner who has not questioned this naming of their work and aims? Two things result from this fact: the Liberal Peace (in its various forms) is with us and is not going away; it is high time that critical scholars developed sharper theoretical tools to understand and explain the complex empirical cases that are thrown up by the liberal peace. Three recently published books are each attempts to break down some of the boundaries and overgeneralisations that have beset the scholarly study of peacebuilding over the last two decades.

The liberal peace debate has reached something of an impasse. On the one-hand, the crisis of the liberal peace has not led to a paradigm shift away from broadly liberal frameworks. In recent years European-based academics (including the author of this review) working in critical and interpretivist traditions have proposed new taxonomies of peacebuilding, derived basic descriptive monikers and offered normative critiques borrowed from other areas of the social sciences – the post-liberal, the everyday, welfare, the virtual, hybridity, the indigenous – but have done little to develop explanatory theory or influence policy. On the other hand, this oft-diagnosed crisis has been shrugged off by policy-practitioners and largely North America-based academics in a positivist tradition. They have continued to develop models of building stronger market democracies albeit with sequencing adjustments, longer-term assistance and different kinds of external resources. Some of them have been moved to decry the cynicism of their colleagues across the Atlantic; others have simply ignored this scholarly indiscipline and found partial success for liberal peacebuilding where sufficient international resources have been allocated. If this divide deserves to be called a ‘debate’ it is one which is a dialogue of the deaf.

Fortunately, many of the participants in the liberal peace controversy have begun to realise the limitations of this framing and begun to engage in self-criticism and reconstruction. A good number of the leading protagonists from – unusually – both sides contribute to the edited volume of Susanna Campbell, David Chandler and Meera Sabaratnam, A Liberal Peace?. There is a strong presence
from the European critics of liberal peacemaking including Chandler and Oliver Richmond amongst others. However, a sense of balance is given by a reprint of Roland Paris’ defence of liberal peacebuilding across two chapters of the book and the inclusion of a chapter by Christoph Zürcher which argues for success of liberal peacebuilding in bringing stability ‘when they deploy massively’ (p.83). However, as the editors note, and several of the contributors including Campbell, Chandler and Paris testify, in the Liberal Peace debate ‘surprisingly little is at stake with regard to peacebuilding and statebuilding policy and practice’ (p.4). Sabaratnam’s chapter, an excellent intellectual history of international conflict management from 1990-2010, demonstrates how this has transpired. She shows how what we might call the third party privilege – the assumption of the superior knowledge and impartiality of the intervener – has shaped a one-dimensional field of inquiry centred on the subject-object distinction. This is the study of the effect of the subject (the international interveners) on the object (the parties to conflict and the local recipients of aid), with little regard for the effect on the interveners themselves, nor on the fact that they are in an inter-subjective relationship with their recipients. In this sense, the liberal peace only changes to the extent that interveners redefine the object and rework their strategies of intervention (towards weak-states and with the objective of statebuilding, for example). Building on this promising beginning, Ole Jacob Sending’s chapter seeks to reshape the debate away from subject-object effects to inter-subjective relations and argues that the third party privilege is a fallacy. Very good chapters by Torunn Wimpelman et al and Shahar Hameiri show that these relations result not in hybrids, but, in Hameiri’s words, ‘new forms of political rule and statehood’ (p.197).

Roger Mac Ginty’s recent monograph, *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance: Hybrid Forms of Peace*, engages directly with the questions raised by Campbell et al’s volume and theorise how these new forms emerge. Written with clarity, directness and attention to questions of normativity that is characteristic of the author’s work, it is a concerted but only partially successful attempt to overcome the limitations of liberal peace framings and elaborate a theory of ‘hybrid peace’. Mac Ginty combines theoretical chapters which respectively critique the liberal peace, develop a concept of ‘indigenous peacebuilding’, and sketch an analytical framework for the study of hybridity, with empirical studies of the highly diverse cases of Afghanistan, Iraq, Bosnia, Lebanon and Northern Ireland. He is clearly aware of the perilous path he has chosen in contrasting international-liberal on the one hand with local-indigenous on the other. Mac Ginty’s chapter on ‘indigenous peacebuilding’ is caveated to the point of defensiveness to ensure that he is not committing the cardinal sin of ‘romanticising the local’ or essentialising the indigenous. But however much the author is aware of these pitfalls he cannot quite escape them. Mac Ginty remains constrained by his analytical framework which relies on the bifurcation between ideal-types of local-indigenous and international-liberal (p.54, pp.68-9). ‘While I do not wish to perpetuate another binary’, he notes, ‘it does seem that many international peace-support actors are more comfortable thinking about and exercising material forms of power, while local communities in some settings tend to think about power in terms of legitimacy and moral standing’ (p.46, emphasis added). This is a problematic acceptance of the situational representations of actors. In other settings, internationals may promote their impartial humanitarianism and the importance of soft power over hard, whilst local peacebuilders will brutally apply economic pressure. It is not that geographical scale does not matter, as it still constitutes the primary bases for the formation of political community, but that the attachment of the liberal to the international and the indigenous to the local is both reductive and misleading. Mac Ginty’s ‘hybridisation as a process’ is therefore conceived as the negotiation of
oppositions where the compliance and incentivising powers of internationals are met by local resistance and indigenous alternatives (pp.77-8). This is remarkably similar to the transaction model of Barnett & Zürcher (2009) with its cooperative, cooptive and captured forms of peacebuilding and one is left wondering whether Mac Ginty’s framework might, if developed across the Atlantic, be subject to game theory. Mac Ginty is clear that hybridity is not ‘the grafting together of two separate entities to make a new, third entity’ (p.89) yet it is not clear what else it can be if one builds a model based on the existence of two oppositional and apparently dialectically related forces. Subsequent case study chapters do not offer new explanations for how certain outcomes have been reached but simply richer descriptions of complex and inconsistent processes. When developed in this way, the concept of hybridity limits Mac Ginty’s theoretical argument and his empirical analysis. He remains entrapped by the terms of the liberal peace debate where liberals compete against locals.

If one takes seriously Mac Ginty’s assertion that peacebuilding is not a process of liberal-local ‘grafting’ then there is a need to develop theoretical framings where the subject-object distinction is not reasserted but reinterpreted. Christine Cheng and Dominik Zaum’s timely volume, Corruption and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding, does not quite go this far but it does tackle a sacred cow of the actors of the international community by proposing that corruption (that bete noir of peacebuilders) may actually be necessary to meet the objectives of peacebuilding. Contributors show that ‘corruption’ is a querulous subject matter (‘difficult to identify even when it is obvious’) which can be deployed to speak of all kinds of governance ills from a Western perspective. The stronger chapters are those which situate corruption as part of the political economy in which it has emerged, as in the case of Pugh and Divjaks’ study of Bosnia, Reno’s on Liberia, Goodhand’s on Afghanistan, and Looney’s on Iraq. In the most extreme circumstances of state capture by rent-seeking factions corruption does indeed have a corrosive effect on political stabilisation. However, the overall relationship between corruption and peacebuilding is more complex in that the former’s existence is not entirely independent of the latter. Mark Philp’s conceptual chapter is admirably honest that the ‘objective core’ of any definition of corruption comes from a set of ideals developed and exported from (but never fully realised in) Western states. ‘In this sense’, Philp notes, ‘peacebuilding makes corruption possible, so we should not be surprised that it is there’ (p.40). This is true not only of the normative basis for its identification but also in terms of the peacebuilding resources which fuel corruption – a point well demonstrated in chapters by Le Billon and von Billerbeck. Furthermore, under certain conditions, the reverse also appears to be true: corruption makes peacebuilding possible. Reno notes with respect to Liberia that ‘some types of corruption may entice strongmen to tolerate a political settlement as they go about their business’ (p.127); it is, he argues, ‘the organisation of corruption’ that matters (p.141). Conversely, as Goodhand notes with respect to Afghanistan, ‘standalone [counter-narcotics] efforts are likely to impede such a transition’ (p.160). All this challenges the conventional wisdom, held by some contributors to the volume such as Rose-Ackerman that corruption and peacebuilding are in a relationship of dichotomy. Given these inconsistent findings it is hardly surprising that the editors of the volume offer only very general conclusions – that corruption is a ‘political problem’ and a ‘double-edged sword’ (p.22). This is descriptively accurate but offers little basis for theory-building.

How might one begin to theorise a peacebuilding where corruption is a productive part of the process? Better theory must not simply make post-conflict environments comparable in a very general sense but it must begin to explain how the processes identified lead to certain kinds of
outcomes. These outcomes would pertain to some of the big explanatory questions of peacebuilding: how post-conflict political stability is attained, how just societies emerge, how and when interveners leave. Let us pursue the thought experiment that to build better theory within an interpretivist tradition the bifurcation between liberal and local which has been retained by most critics (including myself), as well as the comfortable dichotomy between liberal and security of the orthodox, must be abandoned. For many on both sides of the liberal peace debate this may seem like throwing the baby out of the bathwater. Surely, a clear hierarchy of subject and object, unambiguous distinctions between dependent and independent variables, and binaries of outcome are necessary for good social science? These axioms seem essential if we are to theorise peacebuilding in terms of ‘multiple stable Nash equilibria’ to use Philip’s terms (p.41). However, such neat delineations do not sit very well with the complex power relations and new political forms found in peacebuilding environments. As Mac Ginty notes in his chapter on hybrid security in Afghanistan, ‘co-option works both ways’. He questions whether ‘it is feasible to ask who was the patron and who was the client?’ (p.113). Given these kinds of empirical realities it is wise to consider that apparently competing and divergent pathways may in fact be concomitant and co-constituting processes. In other words, there is not a dialectical process where a ‘third entity’ emerges but a symbiosis where the process is radically ‘hybrid’ – in that, in a postcolonial matter, it lacks the clear subject-object distinctions we hold dear – and the outcomes are both novel and various. For example, we may not think in terms of sovereign states versus international transitional authorities but various kinds of state, some of which are globally assembled and do not conform to established models of the national-territorial and hierarchical polity (see also Hamieri and Sending in Campbell et al volume).

In this light, the three volumes under review can be reinterpreted as accounts of such peacebuilding. We may observe symbiotic processes in cases where apparent paradoxes are in fact productive processes, where ostensible contentions are in fact collaborations. Firstly, there are processes of liberalisation-securitisation. Modern, secular, western states are said to be organised around two principles have often been considered contradictory: liberal and security. However, scholars of Critical Security Studies have shown that the limits and exceptions of liberal polities have always been set by the practices and discourses of securitisation. Equally, security practices and discourses are set in part by the liberal societies in which they take place: vigilance and surveillance rely on autonomous individuals reporting their neighbours, friends and family members. As with counter-terrorism, so too in peacebuilding we find complex and co-constitutive relations between liberalisation and securitisation. Much orthodox theory from North America has spent a lot of time with regard to the question of sequencing, particularly to the question of how much security or ‘institutionalisation’ ought to be attained before liberalisation can be begun by the interveners. Yet this is an extremely limited and limiting debate. It ought to be self-evident that these things are not either/or but both/and. It ought to be clear that one cannot take place before or after the other. If security is primarily in the hands of the local militias and forces that fought the conflict, this can lead either to relative stability (Tajikistan since 1993) or instability (Afghanistan 2001-2005) depending on the wider context. If security is primarily that of international peacekeeping, this can lead to further violence (Iraq 2003-2006) or relative stability (East Timor 1999-2002) depending on the wider context. Whatever liberalisations occur – which parties are decriminalised, which structures of decentralisation are adopted, what kind of security sector reform is adopted – take place through concomitant securitisations. Critical approaches to peacebuilding have been attendant to the
security imperatives of interventions but have barely begun to explain differences in outcomes in theoretical terms.

Secondly, we can consider processes of internationalisation-localisation. For Richmond (pp.226-244), a focus on international peacebuilding misses the importance of localised resistance. For Chandler (pp.174-190), a focus on local resistance to international liberal peacebuilding misses what really matters: new, post-liberal forms of governance which are wholly illiberal. However, as Sabaratnam argues, maintaining a strict dichotomy between liberal and local, if only for purposes of charting hybridity, is to limit the questions of what kind of political forms emerge and what politically is at stake in post-conflict contexts which are often also post-colonial. This is not to say that it is impossible to tell international peacekeepers from local militia but that the boundaries between these things are not sacrosanct. Mac Ginty shows in parts of his empirical analysis (but not his theoretical framework) that international interventions generate their own forms of localism. In short, ‘indigenous peacebuilding’ is partially produced by what internationals find, initiate or are willing to fund. But this is true in a much broader sense as power suffuses and links all levels of governance from the local to the global. Richmond (p.229) explicitly opposes ‘new binaries’ but in maintaining that the liberal-international and local are in contestation he maintains the myth that they are naturally oppositional. Very often they are not in opposition at all. Therefore, to theorise liberal-local hybridity is to maintain the conceit that the ‘liberal’ and ‘local’ are in a competitive rather than co-constitutive relationship. Such categories, and their implied spatio-hierarchical levels, are not a matter of binary choice (local ownership versus international governance) but of co-constitutive relations where political authority is reconstituted across multiple geographical scales. International transitional administrations are always accompanied by forms of ‘local ownership’. Certainly there are tensions but they are not best theorised in terms of international versus local. In Kosovo, for example, it is not just the international account of this local ownership which was illusory but the idea that the internationals have security, political and administrative control over a territory which remains divided between Kosovar and Serbian political-economic networks. Yet a certain ‘equilibrium’ has been achieved and physical violence remains at a minimum. In this sense, the more interesting question to ask is not the degree of internationalisation (cf. ecologies of authority) but how it combines with certain forms of localisation, licit or illicit, to produce more or less stable outcomes.

Thirdly, and consequentially, we might address processes of formalisation-informalisation. As Cheng et al demonstrate, in peacebuilding one cannot have corruption without norms of good governance (anti-corruption), and vice-versa. Goodhand notes that empirical work suggests that ‘illegality grows as state capacity improves during the early phases of statebuilding’ (p.156). This symbiotic relationship extends beyond the link between liberal institution-building and shadow economies to the whole relationship between formal and informal institutions. This is visible in all sectors: economic, social, political, security. Reno notes that ‘the advent of electoral politics in Liberia provided new opportunities for corruption’ (p.128) in the form of vote-buying and mobilising. The use of private security companies in Afghanistan to support the formal processes of building a national army and police has led to a variety of informal deals and even the use of insurgents as security providers. Whilst peacebuilding processes often involve the adoption of an array of new informal institutions with little formal precedent, it is of little surprise that long-standing informal institutions of patronage and clientelism adapt themselves to the new environment. There is a wider social reality to this interplay of formalisation and informalisation where, in Scott’s terms,
formal institutions are always parasitic on metis (local knowledge, habit and practice). Equally, informal institutions (such as organised corruption) are built on formal arrangements to subvert and their resources to redirect. But is informalisation merely a ‘doubled-edged sword’ which can work for or against peacebuilding, depending on context. Surely, we might find some useful generalisations herein?

One could, in a similar manner, identify other dimensions of analysis where supposed antagonists are in fact bedfellows. One cannot have formal decentralisation without concomitant processes of informal centralisation. One cannot have denationalising assemblages of power without the ostensibly national sovereign states for them to redirect. One cannot have the de-territorialisations of livelihoods found in transnational economies of migration within re-territorialisations founded on resource capture, ‘land reform’ and faulty privatisations. In each case, the reverse is also true. The important point remains that two processes which at first glance appear to be diametrically opposed are in fact constantly shaping and reshaping one another. Moreover, their apparent tensions cannot be resolved or overcome but are always inherent to the process, generating outcomes which are always only ever provisional and, in a post-conflict context, precarious. Such conclusions may be seen as anti-political and uncritical in that they seem to offer little place for emancipatory strategies for peacebuilding if corruption, informal economies, political oppression and neo-colonialism are indeed always part of the process. This criticism may be normatively telling but it is arguably made redundant by the fact that all empirical evidence from both the ostensible objects and subjects of peacebuilding suggests that purer forms of positive peace are far from attainable. Moreover, it is simply not possible to make incremental moves towards greater stability or greater justice without understanding the co-constitutive relationships between those things which are thought to be working at cross-purposes.

A theory of peacebuilding does not seek to explain why a period of political violence comes to an end – this is for theorists of civil war and armed conflict – or how a just society is created from beginning to end. Our aim is not a general theory of peace but mid-level theories of the partially internationalised rule of a society which has suffered significant armed conflict. Such theories must shed light on how post-conflict environments emerge, what kind of environments they are, and why these may be stable or unstable. We are very much at the beginning of the process of writing theory for this genus of political life. Better theories of peacebuilding might chart the relationships between ongoing processes and provisional outcomes with respect to the core themes such as sovereignty, authority and livelihoods amongst others. They may even – against post-positivist expectations – be ‘predictive’ in some modest way. In particular, the transnationalisation of post-conflict contexts is still only barely understood and has contradictory effects on ‘outcomes’.

This is particularly true in the highly ‘denationalised’ states of Central Asia. In Tajikistan, migration has reached world-leading levels and the post-conflict economy and society have become truly transnational. Yet it remains precariously stable not despite but partly because of a very weak and personalised state which limits real economic opportunity to a few hundred families and negotiates access to overseas labour markets for everyone else. International actors barely whimper about family rule and corruption as they seek to sustain not undermine state sovereignty. Across the border in Afghanistan meanwhile, national governance is not all that dissimilar but migration opportunities beyond the conflict zone are fewer and livelihoods remain local, informal and dependent on warring factions. Attempts to ‘transfer responsibility’ cannot overcome the evident
dependency of national government on international interveners – a relationship which remains conflictual. A return to civil war is likely, notwithstanding unconvincing attempts to redefine success by all parties. This basic comparison within Central Asia suggests that migration which sustains basic livelihoods may have a positive effect on peacebuilding where other processes are also at play: where political authority is dispersed transnationally and translocally whilst statehood is constructed via concomitant local and global performances of sovereignty. Nevertheless much more work would need to be done to explore these propositions in diverse cases from other regions.

In sum, it matters little to speak of the ‘liberal peace’, ‘post-liberal peace’ or ‘hybrid peace’ if one fails to theorise the relationship between the whole nature of the building and the specific outcome for peace. By essentialising the nature of the state or the international intervention, or by drawing a binary between internal and external actors, the analyst is blind to how the formal is intertwined with the informal, the international with the local, and the liberal reform with the security imperative. It is time for European critical theorists to develop better explanations of why, for example, violent political conflict has been suppressed in the Balkans and in Tajikistan but not in Afghanistan. We may then begin to challenge the schematic explanations of peacebuilding provided by our North American counterparts. The three books under review offer the prospect for progress in that direction but, for the field as a whole, a great deal remains to be done.

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ENDNOTES


5 John Heathershaw, Post-Conflict Tajikistan: the politics of peacebuilding and the emergence of legitimate order. (London: Routledge, 2009)