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The local turn and the Global South in critical peacebuilding studies

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ABSTRACT

The local turn in peacebuilding studies represents an explicit and important attempt to transform both the research on and the practice of international peacebuilding. The aim, generally speaking, is to incorporate views, experiences and practices from the Global South and, thereby, overcome the predominance of Northwestern concepts and templates in the practice and scholarship of international peace operations. This PRIF Working Paper empirically assesses this attempt by systematically analyzing the existing scholarship that represents the local turn in peacebuilding. It specifically addresses the three questions (1) whether and how scholars that aim at giving agency and ownership to “the locals” rethink their own concepts and normative premises; (2) to what extent they do so by incorporating views and approaches from the Global South; and (3) to what extent and in what ways scholars from the Global South are an active and relevant part of this scholarly debate.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der „local turn“ in der Peacebuilding-Forschung zielt explizit darauf, sowohl die Forschung zu als auch die Praxis der internationalen Friedenskonsolidierung zu transformieren. Allgemein gesprochen geht es darum, Perspektiven, Erfahrungen und Praktiken aus dem Globalen Süden in den Prozess der Friedensförderung mit einzubeziehen und damit die Vorherrschaft nordwestlicher Konzepte und Blaupausen in Peacebuilding-Praxis und -Forschung zu überwinden. Das vorliegende PRIF Working Paper untersucht die Umsetzung dieser Zielsetzung durch eine systematische Analyse einschlägiger wissenschaftlicher Publikationen zum „local turn“ in der Friedenskonsolidierung. Dabei stehen drei Fragen im Zentrum: (1) Inwieweit überdenken Wissenschaftlerinnen und Wissenschaftler, die darauf abzielen, dass „lokalen“ Akteuren Handlungsfähigkeit und Ownership übertragen wird, ihre eigenen Konzepte und normativen Prämissen? (2) Inwieweit beziehen sie hierbei Perspektiven und Ansätze aus dem Globalen Süden ein? (3) Inwieweit und auf welche Weise sind Wissenschaftler*innen aus dem Globalen Süden an dieser akademischen Debatte beteiligt?

INTRODUCTION

The “local turn” in peacebuilding studies, as it is commonly dubbed in the literature,¹ has set out to transform both the research on and the practice of international peacebuilding. As a collective endeavor pushed by a diverse set of peacebuilding scholars, it has been guided by the overall aim to incorporate views, experiences and practices from the Global South and, thereby, overcome the predominance of Northwestern ideas, concepts and

1 In this paper, I focus on the local turn scholarship that has emerged from the critique of liberal peacebuilding. There is another strand of literature, which also emphasizes the role of “the local” in different ways (e.g., in terms of “local ownership”) but is rather policy-oriented and generally aims at making (liberal) peacebuilding more effective (see Leonardsson and Rudd 2015; Paffenholz 2015).

templates in the practice and scholarship of international peacebuilding.² This decidedly normative agenda encompasses three main “tasks”. First, and most explicitly, the local turn is about challenging, deconstructing and/or rethinking the conceptual templates and the normative premises that inform the (mainstream, liberal) practice and study of peacebuilding. This is what a whole generation of contributions on the critique of liberal peacebuilding (studies) was mainly about.³ Second, and directly related, this process of rethinking and revising concepts, normative premises and related practices should be informed by the views and perspectives that are prevalent in the very countries and contexts in which peace is (to be) built. This is, in a nutshell, what the very term “local turn” is meant to suggest.⁴ Third, and finally, the call to more seriously consider “local voices”, “local agency” or “local ownership” does not merely apply to the international practice of peacebuilding but just as well to the scholarly debate. Hence the call to more seriously include not only “perspectives” but actual scholarly voices from the Global South in the academic debate.⁵ The logic of what Andrés Guerrero (1994) has called “ventriloquist representation”⁶ is certainly incompatible with the normative enterprise guiding the local turn in peacebuilding studies.

When taking the harshest (self-)criticisms of the local turn literature for granted, one could conclude that the critical peacebuilding scholarship has broadly failed to comply with this threefold agenda. With a view to the conceptual and normative premises, Meera Sabaratnam (2013) has forcefully argued that Eurocentrist assumptions continue to underpin the critique of the liberal peace. As regards the incorporation of views and approaches from the Global South, Elisa Randazzo has emphasized that the “normative, emancipatory drive of the local turn” has meant that local forms of agency, knowledge and expertise are, in effect, “identified, delineated and then judged on the basis of pre-established normative ideas regarding the social order” (2016, 1362). Finally, when it comes to the actual inclusion of scholars from the Global South, Richmond and Mac Ginty themselves have identified the fact “that much of the debate on the liberal peace has been restricted to academics, policymakers and students within the global North” as “[p]erhaps the single greatest failing” of the critical peacebuilding scholarship (2015, 183). Yet, these (self-)critical assessments are certainly contested – and, what is more, the critical scholarship has also already responded to them in different ways and to varying extents.

Against this background, this paper discusses how the scholarship on the local turn in peacebuilding, viewed collectively, has been doing with a view to the three “tasks” and the corresponding criticisms. In what follows, I will therefore investigate (1) whether and how

2 In the following, for the sake of simplicity, I use the singular version “Global South”, which – in any case – refers rather loosely, if not metaphorically (Dirlik 1996, 31), to a socio-geographically and politico-economically defined space that is both internally diverse and outwardly porous. As Bradley (2008) emphasizes in a piece on a related topic, “while the terms ‘North’ and ‘South’ usefully underscore how geography and colonial history have structured development and research opportunities, they are clearly not discrete terms, since many actors elude easy categorization as ‘Northern’ or ‘Southern’” (2008, 674). For the broader conceptual debate, see, for instance, Haug et al. (2021), López (2007), McEwan (2009, 12–13), and Schneider (2017).

3 See, amongst many others, Lidén et al. (2009); Mac Ginty (2011); Millar et al. (2013); Richmond (2011); Tadjbakhsh (2011).

4 See, by way of an overview, Hughes et al. (2015); Leonardsson and Rudd (2015); Mac Ginty and Richmond (2013).

5 See, for instance, Dzuverovic (2018); McLeod and O’Reilly (2019); Scholey (2006).

6 Guerrero’s notion of “ventriloquist representation” refers to the indirect ways in which the indigenous population has traditionally participated in Ecuadorian politics, namely through “a social intermediary who knows the semantics to be put in the mouths of the indigenous, who knows the content, the range and the tone that the liberal state wants and can grasp” (Guerrero 1994, 242). This indirect representation of the indigenous people through ventriloquists, which simultaneously implied their absence as social and political actors, was fundamentally disrupted by the indigenous uprising of 1990, during which Ecuador’s indigenous movement forced its entry into the political arena.

scholars that aim at giving agency and ownership to “the locals” have been rethinking (or not) their own concepts and normative premises, (2) to what extent they have done so by incorporating views and approaches from the Global South, and (3) to what extent and in what ways scholars from the Global South have become an active and relevant part of this scholarly debate. Theoretically, I am particularly interested in the normative tensions, blind spots and biases that characterize (part of) the critical peacebuilding literature and that shape the ways in which it has been dealing with the “tasks” at hand, in particular the first and the second.

Before I discuss the three questions in the main sections of this paper, I will give a very brief overview of the scholarship I am engaging with. In the concluding section, I will briefly summarize my main findings and also reflect upon my own positionality in this endeavor. To be sure, while this paper adopts an empirical meta perspective on the local turn in peacebuilding studies, I cannot possibly claim to be a neutral observer who simply evaluates the given academic debate from an uninterested and ideologically unbiased position of exteriority.

THE LOCAL TURN IN PEACEBUILDING: A VERY BRIEF OVERVIEW

Given the extensive debate on the local turn in peacebuilding studies, there is no need for yet another overview.⁷ In a nutshell, the local turn emerged from a critique of what scholars dubbed liberal peacebuilding – a “foundational critique”, as Michael Pugh puts it, that engaged in “questioning the assumptions that lie behind the practice of peacebuilding and the framework of ideas and implementations that make up the paradigm within which people think and act” (Pugh 2013, 11). The starting point of this critique was the observation that international peacebuilding missions, as they had spread and taken shape during the 1990s, were guided by a particular set of liberal ideas about how societies should be ordered, that is, by liberal conceptions of peace, democracy, human rights, and justice. According to the critics, this specifically liberal template systematically fails to bring peace, first because it is imposed from the outside without meaningful local ownership. Second, being applied as a one-size-fits-all package it does not respond to the particularities of the different local contexts and, therefore, fails to take root. Third, because the liberal peace template reflects the specific historical trajectory of Northwestern societies and/or because it is not attuned to the needs of societies that emerge from violent conflict and/or because it is deeply entangled with a global strategy of Western domination, it is also seen as generally inappropriate for the task, no matter in which specific context liberal peacebuilding takes place.

Whatever the precise shape and combination of these critical arguments, the local turn scholarship – diverse as it is – has converged around one fundamental point: A rethinking of the basic assumptions and norms guiding peacebuilding is needed – and, in order to do so, both scholars and practitioners have to turn to “the local”, to take seriously local actors, local dynamics of interaction, negotiation and contestation, and locally prevalent conceptions of peace, democracy, human rights and justice. Hence the emphasis on the need to recognize and facilitate “local agency”, including local resistance, as well as the important discussions about “localized”, “hybrid” and “post-liberal” forms of peacebuilding and of peace.⁸ Quickly, these different alternative

⁷ Instead, see the comprehensive overviews in Gnoth (2019), Leonardsson and Rudd (2015), Mac Ginty and Richmond (2013), and Randazzo (2017) as well as, for a very recent, brief summary, Džuverović (2021, 23–25).

⁸ Instead of many, see Hughes et al. (2015), Mac Ginty (2011), Richmond (2011), and Tadjbakhsh (2011).

approaches that have emerged from the critique of the liberal peace became the targets of intense criticism themselves.⁹ It is this criticism of the local turn scholarship that is the topic of this paper – with a focus on the three key “tasks” identified in the introduction.

CONCEPTUAL AND NORMATIVE PREMISES: THE OPENNESS TO ALTERNATIVE VIEWS

As emphasized in the introduction, the very starting point of the local turn scholarship was the critical analysis of the universalist, conceptual and normative templates underlying liberal peacebuilding. As Birgit Bräuchler has argued from an anthropological perspective, with the local turn comes the need “to deconstruct normative notions of conflict, peace, reconciliation, justice or truth and open up towards local conceptualizations” (2018, 37). As a consequence, critical peacebuilding scholars have refrained from proposing clear-cut alternatives to the liberal agenda, emphasizing the need to remain conceptually and normatively open to varying ideas, conceptions and norms that may exist in, or emerge from, specific local peacebuilding arenas (see Aggestam et al. 2015; Van Leeuwen et al. 2012; Richmond and Mac Ginty 2015). Yet, on closer look, it is controversial whether – empirically speaking – critical scholars have actually complied with this aim. What is more, it is also theoretically contested whether or how such a normatively agnostic, anti-foundationalist position is compatible with the broader emancipatory agenda pursued by critical scholars (Randazzo 2017).¹⁰

Regarding the first, empirical question, Meera Sabaratnam (2013) has forcefully argued that the critical peacebuilding literaturship is characterized by Eurocentrist assumptions. With a view to the question at hand, one observation is of particular relevance: that the critique of liberal peacebuilding is “based on a particular conception of state-led social democracy akin to that practiced in postwar Western Europe” (Sabaratnam 2013, 269). Behind the declared openness to local ideas and views, Sabaratnam observes an “implicit nostalgia for the social contract, the liberal subject and the welfare state, which are understood to provide the substance of alternatives to the present liberal peace” (2013, 268).¹¹ A few years earlier, Kristoffer Lidén had already observed that Oliver Richmond’s notion of an “emancipatory peace” does, in fact, include a prescriptive alternative to the liberal peace model, which Lidén dubbed “social peacebuilding” (2009, 621–622). In a similar vein, Nadarajah and Rampton noted that the key concept of hybridity, while introduced as a means to grasp “the agency of the local and the everyday”, is at the same time advanced, in a prescriptive way, “as a way for generating a meaningful ‘social contract’ and inclusive citizenship frameworks deemed lacking in post-conflict spaces” (2014, 50, 60). As a consequence, “concepts such as democracy, human rights, and rule of law that are core to liberal peace” are reinserted “as yardsticks for peace”, as is a type of “‘local liberalism’ or forms of tolerance and pluralism” (Nadarajah and Rampton 2014, 50, 61).¹²

9 See, for instance, Bräuchler (2018), Chandler (2010), Collins and Watson (2018), Kappler and Lemay-Hébert (2019), McLeod and O’Reilly (2019), Millar (2018), Nadarajah and Rampton (2014), Paffenholz (2015), Paris (2010), Randazzo (2017, 2019), and Sabaratnam (2013). See also the response to this critique of the critique of the liberal peace by Richmond and Mac Ginty (2015).

10 See Wolff and Zimmermann (2016) for a similar empirical and theoretical argument made with a view to the debate about international norm contestation.

11 Sabaratnam goes on to argue that “the critiques of the liberal peace often remain tied to alternatives that reflect political imaginaries grounded in the vision of a ‘better’ European past, in terms of ideas either about the social contract or welfare state, or about the autonomous liberal political subject.” (2013, 269)

12 Similarly focusing on the concept of hybridity, Gearoid Millar (2014) has also argued that the local turn scholarship, at least in part, has come to adopt a prescriptive use of hybridity. This explicitly includes the work of Oliver Richmond, who has adopted “a more prescriptive notion of hybridity as it works towards a ‘post-liberal’ or an ‘emancipator’ [sic] peace” (Millar 2014, 504).

In their response to this critique of the critique of the liberal peace, Oliver Richmond and Roger Mac Ginty have emphasized that the critical scholarship, while developing “ideas of locally-driven politics” and looking at “models developed beyond the Westphalian template”, “has been careful not to be prescriptive as consent has to be locally developed for peace to hold” (2015, 177):

“To recommend emancipatory forms of peace yet not provide details of what this might look like may seem like an abrogation of responsibility. [...] To enumerate a list of prescriptions and hard policies would negate the principle of envisaging peace as formed primarily through bottom-up rather than top-down dynamics. Even such a loose prescription is fraught with danger given the possibility of bottom-up dynamics being exclusionary or violent. The authors of this article may wish to see emancipatory forms of peace that are open to alternatives and anti-hegemonic, bottom-up, freed from the constraints of statehood and imposed norms, and balancing needs with rights, rather than a homage to a hierarchical order. The prescriptive biases of the liberal peace, and some in the secondary critique, are based on a misplaced confidence that we have the legitimacy to recommend a type of peace for anyone else.” (Richmond and Mac Ginty 2015, 184–185)

However, as Elisa Randazzo responds, Richmond and Mac Ginty, by rejecting “the need to qualify or specify the nature of emancipation or to engage with the possible contradiction that arises between emancipatory claims and their anti-foundationalist theoretical framework”, “do not explore the crucial normative implications of the local turn’s project, engaging with emancipation at a rhetorical and nominal level only” (Randazzo 2016, 1358). This “denial of the normativity” of the very notion of emancipation implies that the selectivity of what counts as an ‘authentic’ and ‘emancipatory’ expression of ‘the local’ is effectively obscured rather than acknowledged and justified (if not critically discussed) (Randazzo 2016, 1358; see also Randazzo 2017).

Empirically, therefore, much of the critical scholarship is characterized by an unresolved tension between its anti-foundationalist claims and largely implicit normative assumptions. This can be seen even in Roger Mac Ginty’s writings on hybrid peace, which have been described as “theoretically agnostic” (Paffenholz 2015, 861) and as “largely avoiding the prescriptive approach” (Millar 2014, 504). Mac Ginty’s book *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance*, for instance, contains a rich conceptual discussion of hybridity and the processes of hybridization that give rise to hybrid order. Mac Ginty, here, explicitly emphasizes that “there are hybrid peaces”, that is, very different types of peaceful order (2011, 11). Yet, the closest Mac Ginty gets to explaining what distinguishes “hybridity” without peace from “hybrid peace” is the proposition that the latter refers to “forms of hybridity that encourage inclusion, tolerance, and sustainable approaches” and includes “hybrid forms of sharing and tolerance”, as opposed to “hybrid forms of war and injustice” (Mac Ginty 2011, 210). As a consequence, if largely implicitly, a decidedly normative and prescriptive conception of “hybrid peace” emerges, which raises the question of how one is to define inclusion, tolerance, sustainability, and justice.¹³

As the above-quoted response by Richmond and Mac Ginty makes clear, this is not only an empirical problem, but rather points to a deeper, theoretical tension. The general aim

13 In their plea for “agonistic peacebuilding”, Karin Aggestam and colleagues (2015) similarly aim to refrain from being prescriptive in normative terms, but still suggest the need to exclude “non-democratic and violent elements” in order to enable a “radical, political and democratic dialogue” (2015, 1740, 1748). As Randazzo has emphasized, even the “binary between violence/non-violence [...] remains problematic” from the very perspective of the critical scholarship, “as it is built upon generalisations concerning what violence looks like and what forms conflict might take” (2017, 161).

of critical peacebuilding scholars to contribute to the empowerment or emancipation of “the locals” is torn between a moral pluralism and a moral universalism (Lidén 2009, 625). On the one hand, the notion of local empowerment or emancipation demands a pluralist approach that does not define beforehand how empowerment/emancipation should look like; on the other hand, both empowerment and emancipation are normative concepts that come with non-trivial assumptions about what distinguishes them from a reproduction or even deepening of structures of domination (see also Randazzo 2017, 145–171). As a consequence, as Nadarajah and Rampton emphasize, the “claim to descriptive neutrality, a veritable ‘view from nowhere’, is impossible to maintain” (2014, 60).

In the end, the critical peacebuilding scholarship confronts a fundamental normative tension that mirrors the tension that Luc Boltanski has identified between the sociology of critique and critical sociology. In underlining the importance of “the local” and “local agency”, the perspective adopted by critical peacebuilding scholars bears important similarities to what has been called a “sociology of critique”. The sociology of critique, according to Boltanski, takes as its point of departure the descriptive analysis of the actual critique articulated by “ordinary people” (Boltanski 2011, chap. 2). In this sense, the critical study of peacebuilding cannot but be based on the very ideas and practices that happen to be prevalent in whatever kind of local setting. Yet, such an approach encounters the problem that “critical” peacebuilding studies are also critical in terms of the tradition of critical theory. Such a critical approach, as Robert Cox has famously put it, “is critical in the sense that it stands apart from the prevailing order of the world and asks how that order came about” with the aim to call existing “institutions and social and power relations [...] into question” (Cox 1981, 129). In contrast to such a focus on structural transformation, Boltanski accentuates, “ordinary people” tend to be realistic: they “rarely call into question, at least in the normal course of social life, the general framework in which the situations that provoke their indignation and protest are inscribed” (2011, 32). That is, they tend to be guided by what Robert Cox calls the problem-solving approach – which is the opposite of a critical theory approach. Obviously, the problem increases further if we acknowledge that also local elites belong to “the local” (Paffenholz 2015) – and elites, almost by definition, tend to be interested in maintaining the status quo.

Most probably, there is no clear-cut solution to the fundamental tension between the critical agency of “the locals” (which is stressed by the sociology of critique) and the critical perspective of the scholar (which characterizes critical sociology). But, at the very least, it requires reflexivity on the part of the researchers (Millar 2018, 8–9), an explicit engagement of scholars with their own normativity (Randazzo 2017). In contrast, as emphasized, many writings on the local turn are characterized by rather implicit normative premises which are not even made transparent, not to mention (self-)critically reflected upon.

INCORPORATION: THE ROLE OF VIEWS AND APPROACHES FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Generally speaking, the key alternative to the liberal peacebuilding approach offered by the local turn scholarship “rests in identifying those forms of agency, knowledge and expertise that are said to have been alienated and marginalized” (Randazzo 2016, 1354). The challenge, therefore, is not merely to get rid of pre-established, externally defined and supposedly universal templates that are applied and implemented in a top-down manner but also to replace them with bottom-up approaches that are inclusive and locally grounded. In this section, I discuss to what extent and in what ways views and approaches from the Global South have actually found their way into the critical

peacebuilding literature. The “extent” refers to the actual substance of ideas, conceptions and practices that are taken up by the local turn scholarship in order to inform or reconceptualize peacebuilding. The “ways”, in contrast, underline the processing of such local knowledge by critical scholars.

As regards the actual incorporation of views and approaches from the Global South (the “extent”), it is hard to deny that the local turn within peacebuilding scholarship, including the increasing usage of ethnographic methods (see Millar 2018), has pushed investigators towards searching for and reporting on local knowledge and experiences. As Thania Paffenholz has observed, while the corresponding literature, in an initial phase, “was centered around conceptual reflections”, this was later “followed by an empirical turn in critical peacebuilding research, producing a wealth of case studies”, including those on “hybrid forms of peace and governance structures mixing local and international norms and procedures” as well as on “local infrastructures for peace” (2015, 859).

An important step in this direction is the turn to “everyday peace indicators” (Mac Ginty 2013). In contrast to the dominant practice of measuring peace and conflict by means of indicators that are externally defined and normally externally assessed as well, a 2013 special issue on the topic of the *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* emphasized the need to actually incorporate “the communities experiencing conflict and war-to-peace transitions” in the design and implementation of peace and conflict measurement, including when it comes to the very concepts (such as peace) that are to be measured (Mac Ginty 2013, 428). As a practical consequence, in the actual Everyday Peace Indicators (EPI) project, local communities establish their own conceptions and indicators of peace and other peace-related concepts through participatory methods (Levy and Firchow 2021, 558).¹⁴ Another strategy, which is focused more on expert knowledge from conflict-affected countries than on everyday type of expertise, concerns the method of “ethnographic biography”, as applied by Oliver Richmond (2018) in an explicit attempt to include the ideas and views of “local’ conflict scholars” into the debate.¹⁵ In terms of more conventional qualitative case studies, scholars have analyzed the emergence and operation of a whole range of different kinds of local initiatives and experiences with bottom-up peacebuilding. Examples include the scholarship on local peace communities or “zones of peace”, a (loose) model of territorial, community-based sanctuary that has emerged in and spread to quite a few conflict and post-conflict contexts (see Hancock 2013, 2017), or Séverine Autesserre’s latest book *The Frontlines of Peace* (2021).¹⁶

Yet, as enriching as these examples and experiences may be for the broader debate on peacebuilding, taken together they also suggest a couple of limitations that seem to characterize the process of incorporating ideas from the Global South (the “ways”). First, what has been incorporated into the (critical) peacebuilding debate mostly concerns specific actors, practices and experiences from conflict-affected countries rather than broader ideas, views or approaches that concern overarching concepts such as democracy, emancipation, justice, or peace. Second, there is a clear-cut bias in the selection of such local experiences and approaches. In this regard, Elisa Randazzo has emphasized that the “normative, emancipatory drive of the local turn” discussed above has meant that local forms of agency, knowledge and expertise are, in effect, “identified, delineated and then judged on the basis of pre-established normative ideas regarding the

14 For more information on the EPI project, see <https://www.everydaypeaceindicators.org>.

15 For methodologically more conventional attempts at incorporating theoretical, conceptual and empirical views from Latin America into the overall debate on (critical) peacebuilding, see Hauge (2009) and Wolff (2015).

16 See also Tusso and Flaherty (2016) for an overview of experiences with, and debates on, “indigenous processes of peacemaking”.

social order” (2016, 1362). This becomes clear when deliberately turning to unusual suspects, as Džuverović has done in a recent contribution (2021). In analyzing local peacebuilding practices prevalent in the Balkan countries, Džuverović includes, for instance, the forceful displacement as a practice that builds peace between adversarial groups by physically separating them (2021, 29). This and other examples he gives are markedly different from the type of local peacebuilding initiatives usually discussed in the local turn scholarship (see also Randazzo 2016, 1357; 2017, 105).

To be sure, as Džuverović reminds us, warnings that one should not “romanticize” the local abound in the local turn literature.¹⁷ Yet, in line with the above-mentioned tension between the sociology of critique and critical sociology, this leads to a “paradox” within the local turn scholarship, namely that “the principal agent of change is considered also potentially dangerous and detrimental for the change itself” (Džuverović 2021, 24). On the one hand, according to the local turn scholarship, peacebuilding has to be essentially a local affair, shaped by local actors, views and conceptions (of peace etc.); on the other, however, it is clear that “the local” is a contested arena of struggle, characterized by asymmetric power relations as well as by preferences, views and conceptions that are not necessarily peaceful, egalitarian and inclusive. The de facto bias in favor of relatively benign or progressive instances of local peacebuilding that Elias Randazzo (2016, 2017) observes can be understood as an implicit and probably unintended way of dealing with this paradox.

A similar tension emerges from Autesserre’s *The Frontlines of Peace* – and, in this case, is explicitly acknowledged and discussed by the author. Autesserre analyzes experiences of successful local peacebuilding from around the world, and understands success in terms of peaceful conflict resolution, or peace defined in negative terms as the (relative) absence of organized violence. Local, community-based peace as it emerges in Autesserre’s cases is hardly emancipatory or progressive, it mostly doesn’t involve any attempt at structural change to begin with, but is usually conservative, aimed at enabling and/or maintaining relatively peaceful local life in a broader context of organized violence. As a consequence, local, grassroots- and community-driven peace frequently perpetuates “illiberal customs and traditional authority structures”, including structures and cultures of outright “oppression and exploitation” (Autesserre 2021, 163).¹⁸ Autesserre’s first answer to the moral dilemmas that such peacebuilding experiences may imply for foreign supporters is well in line with the local turn scholarship: It is the “intended beneficiaries” that should decide, “even if the result is unpopular, unfashionable, and uncomfortable” (163). Yet, this formula hardly solves the problem, given that local communities are frequently divided on the issues at hand, while the above-mentioned (illiberal, traditional, discriminatory, and/or oppressive) structures tend

17 Roger Mac Ginty and Oliver Richmond, for instance, have stated that “local actors and contexts can be partisan, discriminatory, exclusive and violent (as can international actors). Local contexts also contain power relations and hierarchies that favour some above others (as do international frameworks).” (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013, 770; see also Boege et al. 2009, 612; Mac Ginty 2011, 2015; Richmond 2011). Still, as Hughes et al. argue, these same scholars, after making the corresponding caveats, still “tend to converge upon a view of the local as actually or potentially politically progressive” (Hughes et al. 2015, 820).

18 “Looking at peacebuilding from a local African justice perspective”, Goran Hyden has similarly argued that “these activities are embedded in pre-liberal rather than post-liberal norms and values. They are not rights-based and legally guaranteed as the liberal peace prescribes. Nor are they promoting the post-liberal sense of justice that privileges the underdog. Instead, peacebuilding from a local perspective in Africa is pursued on the basis of mutual advantage, regardless of the relative power position of the parties involved. It tends to confirm rather than transform existing structures.” (2015, 1013) And in their study on “Care as everyday peacebuilding”, Tiina Vaittinen et al. identify “care activities in Aceh [which are] carried out by men in patriarchal environments” (2019, 207). While these activities “could be read as a story of patriarchal practices of leadership, reproducing gendered power relations”, the authors suggest to read them “through a lens of care” in order to “better comprehend the work that *different kinds* of gendered care relations do for everyday peace, and how caring, while gendered, contributes to everyday peace in all its forms” (Vaittinen et al. 2019, 201; emphasis in the original).

to shape the very process of local decision-making. Her second answer therefore consists in the (certainly controversial) decision to define (negative) peace as the normative priority, which – once achieved – may enable further progress on other fronts as well, e.g., in terms of democracy or gender equality (Autesserre 2021, 163–164).

In sum, the local turn in peacebuilding studies has led to significant processes of incorporating different types of local knowledge and ideas, experiences and practices into the academic debate. It has, however, still to more seriously engage with the (normative) challenges this entails. One key challenge I have highlighted here concerns the inherent tension between the sociological (or ethnographic) interest in learning more about how peace is actually understood and built in varying local contests and the critical interest in understanding and furthering specific experiences of ‘emancipatory’ or ‘progressive’ peacebuilding.¹⁹ Again, it is not the failure to somehow dissolve the tension that is to be criticized, but the need of more transparency and (self-)critical reflection that is to be highlighted.

PARTICIPATION: SCHOLARLY VOICES FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH

As Pamela Scholey argued back in 2006, in order to tackle what she called “the North-South divide in peacebuilding research”, it is not enough to have “enlightened Northern professionals” becoming “more responsive to Southern perspectives and needs”. Rather, the challenge at hand is “to regard and involve Southern actors as generators of knowledge and analysis” (Scholey 2006, 190).²⁰ Specifying the problem at hand, Mac Ginty noted in the introduction to his volume on *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance* that

“it is worth questioning the extent to which scholars from the global north (including myself) have the antennae with which to analyse on-the-ground phenomena in societies emerging from civil war. This is more than a matter of translators and gatekeepers; it relates to the ways in which knowledge is collected, expressed, and legitimated.” (Mac Ginty 2011, 4)²¹

Yet, as Mac Ginty observed in this same introduction, “[r]esearch and publication on peace and conflict is dominated by the global north”, with both publications in leading peace and conflict studies and international academic conferences being characterized by a predominance of Global North-based scholars (Mac Ginty 2011, 4).²²

This diagnosis also applies to the local turn scholarship itself. As Richmond and Mac Ginty emphasize in their 2015 assessment of the achievements and failings of the critical peacebuilding scholarship:

“Perhaps the single greatest failing [...] is that much of the debate on the liberal peace has been restricted to academics, policymakers and students within the global North. While many scholars and practitioners from the global South share the perspective of the critique, their voices have only rarely made it into the

19 For a broader discussion on the complicated question of how critical peacebuilding scholarship should (not) engage with indigenous knowledge, see Randazzo (2019).

20 On gaps in internationally available knowledge about local peacebuilding initiatives, see Neufeldt et al. (2020).

21 As Nemanja Džuverović adds: “Local researchers’ knowledge of the context, language and history provides a means to discover the ‘hidden transcript’ of post-conflict societies” (Džuverović 2021, 24).

22 To be sure, as Pamela Scholey has emphasized (as have many others), it is problematic to distinguish between “Northern” or “Northern-situated” researchers versus “Southern” or “Southern-situated” researchers. Yet, “[d]espite its obvious limitations and problems”, such “a broad and purposefully dichotomized schema” is still useful “in order to highlight some of the North-South structural parameters of doing research in or on Southern war-torn contexts” (Scholey 2006, 181–182). See also Bradley (2008, 674–675).

mainstream academic debate (the practitioner-orientated *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development* is an exception). There are multiple explanations for this partial ghettoization of the debate, many of them related to the political economies of publishing and research.” (Richmond and Mac Ginty 2015, 183; see also Gnoth 2019, 82–85)

Also, in their introduction to a special issue on the local turn, Caroline Hughes and colleagues lament that “[l]ike many such collections in Anglophone academia, almost all of contributors represent academics from the global North”, reflecting

“the political economy of a project that was funded by a northwest European government, and proceeded via workshops held in two northwest European countries and publication in a northwest European journal, with all that that implies in terms of barriers to participation from Southern academics: visas, funding, travel time and Western academic conventions.” (Hughes et al. 2015, 822; see also Richmond and Mac Ginty 2015, 184)

In a similar vein, Elisa Randazzo, in her book on the local turn, notes “that the scholarship engaged with in this study is predominantly western-based, if not western-born” (2017, 6).

In a contribution that explicitly deals with the issue at hand, Nemanja Dzuverovic (2018) has highlighted the relative absence of local researchers from post-conflict or conflict-affected societies, which also characterizes those critical peacebuilding debates that precisely emphasize the role of local knowledge and agency. “[E]ven in the critical paradigm”, Dzuverovic suggested, “locals are understood more as objects of analysis than as subjects of systemic change” (2018, 112).²³ As Gearoid Millar notes in the introduction to an edited volume on *Ethnographic Peace Research*, “to date even ‘critical’ scholars [...] have failed to address in any consistent way the nature of power and unequal empowerment within research and scholarship itself” (2018, 10).²⁴ In a similar vein, Laura McLeod and Maria O’Reilly, in the introduction to a special issue on feminist perspectives on critical peace and conflict studies (PCS), pointed to “an urgent need to decolonise PCS research by challenging neo-colonial modes of knowledge production” (2019, 141–142). A particular focus of such an agenda lies with the need to consider “the ways that scholarship and research practices continue to perpetuate the colonial and Eurocentric nature of academia itself” (McLeod and O’Reilly 2019, 143). The turn to the local in critical peacebuilding studies, therefore, requires rethinking the very practice of doing research: As Collins and Watson have suggested, if “the local” is meant to be more than “a concept to employ when it is expedient, what is required is not an ethnographic turn, but a *collaborative* ethnographic turn that places the researcher at the service of those with whom they seek to engage.” (2018, 90; emphasis in the original)²⁵

23 Dzuverovic, in fact, sees this relative absence of local researchers from conflict-affected societies as “the real problem” that (critical) peacebuilding studies have to tackle – “not the question of values” that have been emphasized in the previous sections (2018, 114).

24 “As a result, peace research very often mirrors the power differentials peace researchers decry on a regular basis” (Millar 2018, 10).

25 “Doing this within the context of peace research means that the peace studies apparatus, and the multi-billion-dollar knowledge-producing industry of which it is a part, must open its gates and allow the agenda and research question-setting process to occur outside of spaces of privilege and give way to those who seek peace for reasons that extend beyond solely the production of knowledge” (Collins and Watson 2018, 91). For the field of educational research, see the study by Richard Maclure (2006). Comparing “two modalities of educational research, one that is characterized by the direct control of international financial and technical assistance agencies [...], and another that is conducted largely under the auspices of formally established research networks that promote a praxis approach whereby research is oriented toward fostering policy-related reflection and dialogue”, Maclure (2006, 83–84) finds that the latter modality has “greatly enhanced endogenous African educational research in terms of its overall visibility and its relevance to educational policy deliberations throughout much of the subcontinent” (98–99).

As an example of an alternative approach, informed by feminist theory, McLeod and O'Reilly point to a contribution to their special issue. The study on "Care as everyday peacebuilding", by Tiina Vaittinen and colleagues (2019), emerged from a meeting of the Feminist Peace Research Network that deliberately established the practice "to group participants with similar research interests from across the Global North and South to develop a co-authored paper" (McLeod and O'Reilly 2019, 143). While Pamela Scholey, back in 2006, observed that "very little peacebuilding research is generated out of partnerships between Northern and Southern researchers" (2006, 179), this example suggests that there might be gradual changes in this regard.²⁶ As Džuverovic emphasizes in a recent contribution, the local turn and the research it has stimulated has been accompanied by – and benefited from – "the inclusion of local researchers (from the Global South)" (Džuverović 2021, 23–24). Still, even if this is the case, the task at hand is certainly work in progress, which continues to confront the harsh realities of established research practices and deep-seated structural power asymmetries.

In sum, the local turn has offered a discursive opportunity structure that has led to a gradual, but significant process of making peacebuilding scholarship more diverse and inclusive. In any case it has led to an increasing awareness of the problem at hand – really forcing (Northwestern) scholars to reflect on their own positionality and to justify the lack of inclusivity when it comes, e.g., to editing special issues or handbooks, for that matter. Yet, as also seen, these changes still face important structural obstacles which are related to the very political economy of the academic field but also to persisting discursive hegemonies within critical peacebuilding studies itself.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

In this contribution, I have reviewed the existing scholarship that represents the local turn in peacebuilding studies in order to assess the openness to and actual incorporation of views and voices from the Global South prevalent in this literature. The overall finding can perhaps best be summarized in a picture of biased progress. The local turn has clearly opened up scholarly debates on peacebuilding – conceptually, theoretically and empirically. It has stimulated a vibrant debate on the very conceptual and (meta-)theoretical limitations and blind spots that characterize mainstream, but also critical peacebuilding studies. Over the years, the local turn has also been accompanied by an expansion of empirical studies that seriously "turn local" by investigating the practices and experiences of peacebuilding as well as the understandings of peace and other key concepts prevalent in (specific local settings in) the Global South. Finally, "local" scholars, which are from and/or based in the Global South, are playing an increasingly visible role in the academic debate.

At the same time, this contribution has identified serious intrinsic limitations and persistent structural barriers. Probably the most important limitation within the critical peacebuilding literature concerns the operation of implicit normative biases – as part of broader discursive hegemonies – that have yet to be fully acknowledged and reflected upon. The structural barriers concern the specific political economy of the academic field but also the postcolonial legacies and power asymmetries that continue to characterize North-South relations in general. As a consequence, not only the key protagonists, journals and conferences, but also the main theoretical approaches and (normative) concepts that predominate the debate are still very much shaped by Northwestern institutions and scholars. Perspectives and contributions from the Global South, by

²⁶ Without having conducted a systematic review of the most recent literature in this regard, I can only point to a few selected examples of collaborative North-South research such as Neufeldt et al. (2020), Van Leeuwen et al. (2020) or Tusso and Flaherty (2016).

contrast, are all-too often focused on rather specific local actors, experiences and practices, and all-too rarely include more general ideas and theories about what it means to build peace – ideas and theories that might, then, also help rethink the overarching concepts of peace, democracy, emancipation, human rights or justice that are debated in critical peacebuilding studies.²⁷ Still, across the three dimensions, or “tasks”, that have been analyzed in this paper, the local turn has at least contributed to shifting the burden of justification. Increasingly, it is established scholars from the global Northwest who have to justify their (unreflected) use of supposedly universalist concepts and who have to justify why the journals, books and special issues they are editing as well as the events they are organizing continue to lack diversity.

This observation brings me to the final issue, my own positionality.²⁸ Throughout this paper, I have adopted a putative bird’s-eye perspective that empirically studies, “from above”, the academic debate on the local turn in peacebuilding studies. This meta perspective comes with two problems that, at least, should be acknowledged before closing this paper. First, I am certainly no more (or less) of a bird than any other participant in the academic debate on peacebuilding. Yet, given that peacebuilding has never been my main research topic, I am probably more of an outsider than an insider, with only marginal contributions that explicitly deal with the topic at hand (see, e.g., Wolff 2015). This in-between position might bring a certain advantage when it comes to assessing debates within peacebuilding studies; but it also implies that my knowledge and understanding of the academic debate at hand is somewhat limited. Second, the reading of the literature presented in this paper has inevitably been shaped by this author’s own position, predispositions and experiences, in the academic field and beyond. Yet, instead of trying to specify the implications of this personal bias for the present analysis (probably an impossible task anyway), I would rather suggest to read this contribution as representing one among the many and diverse perspectives that characterize the literature on the local turn in peacebuilding. This said, any errors, misrepresentations and biased conclusions presented in this paper remain my own fault.

27 I owe this observation to Franziska Bujara.

28 I thank Solveig Richter and Siddharth Tripathi for pushing me on this question.

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