The Dialectical Premise of Critical Peacebuilding: Public Diplomacy and Local Agency

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There is ample evidence that the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP) has come to a deadlock. The causes of this failure are rooted in several factors underlying the general premises of liberal peacebuilding. In particular, the focus on institutional agents of conflict resolution has proved to be ineffective in addressing the structural causes of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: identity, historical grievances and power asymmetry (Richmond, 2005).

Recent turns within peace research towards critical approaches to peacebuilding, as opposed to the liberal peace paradigm, acknowledge the failure of state-oriented practices and propose to theorise and problematize the local dimension of peacebuilding practices. Critical peacebuilding, rooted in critical social theory, focuses on the vaguely defined emancipatory capacity of local agents: public leadership, social groups and NGOs (Roberts, 2011).

The post-Oslo phase marked an unprecedented mushrooming of NGOs framing their goals in terms of peacebuilding¹ (Çuhadar & Hanafi, 2010). Yet, the actual stagnation and apparent powerlessness of these locally owned groups and organisations suggest that local peacebuilding is more complex than what mainstream critical peacebuilding theorists suggest. Empirical evidence from the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) and Israel

¹ According to the Directory of Israeli and Palestinian NGOs (cfr. Çuhadar & Hanafi, 2010), the 68% of existing Palestinian NGOs and the 38% of Israeli ones were founded after Oslo (1993).
shows the existence of multiple relations of power within civil society (cfr. Kuriansky, 2007) and, thus call for the need to incorporate dialectical and political considerations of peacebuilding within peace research.

Furthermore, debates related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict seem to be almost vanished from the mainstream public sphere, at least from a European and Western perspective (Chomsky, 2010). This warns particularly on the actual effectiveness of those Palestinian, Israeli and transnational actors, at different societal levels, engaged in raising global awareness and advocate for peace.

The apparent communicative powerlessness of these organizations corresponds to a theoretical vacuum within the discipline with regards to the actual ways these local actors are embedded in power mechanisms, both as public and as agents of influence. In particular, in the context of a weak or absent state, the degree of local and external actors' agency, legitimacy and credibility in the practice of soft power- i.e. public diplomacy - assumes substantial relevance.

This discussion paper aims to shed light and contribute to critical peace studies by looking at the theoretical and conceptual interplay between soft power and peacebuilding.

Redefining Peacebuilding: the Dialectical Premise

The conceptualization of peacebuilding as a dialectical phenomenon suggests a redefinition of the overall concept and challenge the liberal peace paradigm on both ontological and epistemological grounds.

The liberal peace project encompasses a rationalistic and universal construction that, rather than characterising itself as an actual process of peace, detects it as a hegemonic process (Jabri, 2010). Its ontological premise relies on two rigid dichotomies: the one between subject and object, and one between fact and value. In other words, a liberal model of peacebuilding
builds on the assumption that the real world is clearly separated and distinct from its theoretical construction and can be objectively observed (Marsh and Furlong, 2002).

According to Horkheimer (1937:199), this perspective looks for scientific laws as empirically observable constant conjunctions and aims at the (more or less voluntary) manipulation of nature/society that proves to be favorable for the preservation and maintenance of a specific and contextual status quo. Under its false pretenses of universality, the liberal peace paradigm is reflective of a deterministic way of being, that is inherently at odds with the various and context-specific worldviews. Thus, the subject-object dichotomy results in “trans-historical theorizations based upon a priori categories such as the innately self-centered nature of mankind, the anarchy of the international systems and the centrality of sovereign states as actors of international affairs” (Gill, 1993:22). Therefore, the liberal peace project embodies features of dominance, deterministic modernization as it aims at the depoliticisation of the spatial and temporal selfhood (Jabri, 2010).

As such, peacebuilding became to be commonly understood as an apolitical locus. Rather, in its liberal sense, peacebuilding embraces a policy-oriented and problem-solving nature (cfr. Wallensteen, 2010) that –by means of state building, democracy building and security building- reinforce the hegemonic and univocal agenda of liberal peace. Conceptualizing peacebuilding as a policy-process implies an argumentative assumption that recognizes these practices as non-conflictual. In these terms, the ways power affect the peace outcomes are excluded from the analytical perspective and relegated at the level of policy implementation (Richmond, 2005).

More precisely, liberal peacebuilding has proved to ignore the “malleability” of peacebuilding as a practice that, through adjusting itself to changing situational realities, allows for its emancipatory potential. Or, to use Lederach’s (2005) analogy, liberal peacebuilding ignores the potentiality of
peace to ferment locally as yeast, to take unexpected directions and to open up surprising scenarios.

Looking at the current peacebuilding dynamics in the OPT and Israel, the liberal paradigm - focused on state building, and encompassing a two-states solution (Morris, 2009) - seems to encounter at times opposition and at times favour by those agents working at peacebuilding on the ground. These actors frame their peacebuilding strategies – one state solution, two states solution and final status issues- in different ways and shape them over time and according to mutated contextual events and power shifts. Thus, the actual inhomogeneity brought by the dialectical dimension of peacebuilding manifests itself clearly when looking at the ways local actors frame their strategies and perpetrate them in dialectical confrontations with other local agents and the elites (Aggestam, 2012).

A legitimate critique to the recognition of the power of local dialectics as constitutive of the peacebuilding process would most likely assert that dialectical processes are keen to reinforce polarization, rather than contributing to the emancipatory potential of peacebuilding. This critique implies an understanding of these antagonistic mechanisms as being constitutive of the overall conflict (cfr. Rasmbotham, 2010). As such, they would contribute to its maintenance and preservation. In other words, and using a Galtungian lexicon, expecting dialectical processes to bring about peace would correspond to expect a virus to be the cause and, at the same time, the treatment for a disease.

The Aristotelian distinction between dialectical problems and dialectical premises, as two separated parts of disputation, offers a good argument to reject this critique. A dialectical disputation is defined as the process of confrontation over a specific issue between two or more contenders. While in destructive dialectics the questioner - holding usually a more powerful position- would tend to reject the answerer’s thesis, in
constructive dialectics the questioner would tend to establish a variety of “necessary premises” that would allow conveners to reach a synthesis (Spranzi, 2011:17). Therefore, a dialectical problem refers to one actor’s denial of a specific endoxon – a highly shared opinion - and the actual withdrawal from a constructive dialectical interaction. On the other hand, a dialectical premise assumes actors to share a series of foundational arguments.

While a dialectical problem might be seen as corresponding to the insurmountable sources of the overall conflict, its dialectical premise accounts for the constructive engagement, yet dialectical, founded on the premises of the practice of peace. To this extent, the distinction between problem and premise within dialectics encompasses a discriminatory function towards those (local) agents that do not share the premises of peace.

Of course, the problematique related to the identification of these agents of destructive dialectics remains. Marchetti & Tocci (2011) argue for a categorical, yet normative, differentiation amongst civil and uncivil actors within the context of conflict society. Conflict society is understood as comprising the totality of local – as well as those of third parties, international and transnational- civic organizations involved in a specific conflict context.

The distinction between civil and uncivil agents is based on two identity-related variables that characterise these agents: the degree of inclusiveness – to what extent they are open to all members of their specific population- and their egalitarian identity, i.e. to what extent they are open to members across the conflict divide. Combining these two variables, Marchetti

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2 Of course, it also pertains a more general discussion- ontological in its nature- on what actually “peace” is.

3 Drawing on Diamond & McDonald’s (1996) multi-track diplomacy model, they elaborate a provisional list of national and international actors that take active part in the conflict society: conflict specialists, business, private citizens, research and education, activism, religion-based groups, foundations and the media.
& Tocci (2011:207) defines four ideal-types of conflict society organizations: civic or post-national (inclusive and egalitarian), multi-culturalist (exclusive and egalitarian), assimilationist (inclusive and non-egalitarian) and ethnicist or racist (exclusive and non-egalitarian). Roughly speaking, groups or organizations entailing assimilationist or racist identities are to be considered as contributing to destructive dialectics and, as such, counterproductive for the constructive dialectical mechanism of peacebuilding⁴.

Reclaiming the centrality of the local in peacebuilding suggests embarking on analysing the ways civil actors experience and practice power in the context of peacebuilding. In particular, it concerns the ways in which institutionalized actors- the elites- use communication as a mean to reach and influence the general public and, in particular, those actors embarked in the dialectical practice of peace.

**The legacy of Soft Power in Liberal Peacebuilding**

Bringing politics back into the analysis of local peacebuilding implies to engage with understanding how power structures influence actors’ behaviours “on the ground”. To this extent, the dichotomy state vs. local, at the core of current debates within peacebuilding studies, ought to be addressed by looking at how different actors, embedded in the dialectical mechanisms of peacebuilding, are able to attract, influence and co-opt local agents and the public. More specifically, this section deals with the liberal rationale underlying states’ –in the Weberian sense- implementation of soft power practices in the context of peacebuilding.

A central and underlooked aspect of the state-local interaction in peacebuilding pertains the pervasive influence of *soft power*. The term, first

⁴ Nevertheless, a critique to this strict categorization between civil and uncivil actors pertains universalistic and liberal features associated to the values of inclusion and egalitarism.
coined by Nye in 1990, refers to one specific dimension of power. Nye (1990:17) defines power as “the ability to influence the behaviour of others to get the outcomes one wants”. In particular, this occurs in three primary ways: coercion through treats, induction of behavioural change with payments, or attraction and co-optation (cfr. Snow, 2009). The latter is the domain of soft power. Of course, this formulation has not to be understood as a foretelling theory of political effects. Rather, it’s the recognition that traditional metrics of power in international politics include ideational factors and implies that what people believe might shape or influence the degree of agency of a specific political actor (Hayden, 2012).

In practical terms, soft power refers to the process of bringing different forms of communication to the core of international affairs. Accordingly, it holds an ontological dissimilarity from the traditional conceptualization of power within mainstream international politics and international relations scholarship. While realist and liberal approaches look at power as the employment of material resources (bombs) “to compel another state to do something it does not want to do” (Barnett & Duvall, 2005:40), soft power refers to the impact of culture, norms and ideas on the capacity to effect change (cfr. Hayden, 2012).

In these terms, and as acknowledged by Nye (2004), the influential dimension of power owes a conceptual debt to Gramsci’s theory of hegemony. Nevertheless, Nye’s conceptualization of soft power underemphasizes its tendency to rely on the coercive dimension of hegemony. To this extent, while Nye’s soft power assumes features of coercion and co-option to be separated, the basic Gramscian notion of hegemony recognizes coercion and co-option as two sides of the same coin.

Gramsci (1929) developed the concept of hegemony as the process by which a social group combines its double supremacy, both in terms of intellectual and moral domination over other societal groups. This is a
political process that features power themes. Thus, societies construct their ways of thinking through dynamic processes of social formation and, in this sense, they are constituted of groups in conflict. This statement implies that “the social” is constructed through an agonistic phase in which “a single combination of germinated ideologies tend to prevail, to gain the upper hand, to propagate itself over the whole social area, bringing about not only a union of economic and political aims, but also intellectual and moral unity” (Ib., p.181).

In this analysis, hegemony is both the process and the state resulted by the predominance of a particular social group in a specific space and time that, through the reproduction of hegemonic social norms, constitutes “historical blocs” (Filc, 2009). Therefore, hegemony becomes the process of stabilization of a specific situational reality, its sedimentation in all societal structures: it’s not only the process that leads to a specific group to impose its dominance, but also the actual sedimentation of dominant practices in normative terms. In other words, the hegemonic project penetrates the society in all its dimensions – practices, meanings and values- to the extent that its process of reproduction brings it to be perceived as a natural order (McNally & Schwarzmantel, 2009). In these terms, and citing Hayden (2012:38), “soft power is a translation of Gramsci’s hegemony thesis into a relatively value-neutral concept for policy-makers”.

Yet, Nye’s contribution assumes relevance as it emphasizes how the practices of influence and co-option – beyond their coercive nature- are actually implemented through communication. These communicative tools, aimed at attracting and co-opt, are commonly defined as public diplomacy, i.e. “the conduct of international relations by governments through public communications media and through dealings with a wide range of nongovernmental entities (political parties, corporations, trade associations,
labour unions, educational institutions, religious organizations, ethnic groups, and so on, including influential individuals)” (Henrikson, 2005).

Public diplomacy comprises a variety of actions undertaken by governments to foster their interests through the employment of practices aimed at portraying and propagating their images overseas (Scott-Smith, 2009). It entails a wide and various range of strategies: media campaigns, nation branding, lobbying, cultural exchanges and public forums (Melissen, 2005). Of course, the conceptual fuzziness of public diplomacy- not deeply discussed here- makes it difficult to delimitate its domains and grasp what specific activity falls under the category of public diplomacy as practice of soft power (Rhoads, 2009). Nevertheless, explicit public diplomacy practices seem to gain the upper hand within peacebuilding contexts as a relatively new practice, and account for what has been described above as those dialectical processes that feature hegemonic characters.

This seems to be the case when looking at the Israeli-Palestinian dynamics of peacebuilding. In particular, Israeli government has been devoting increasing resources to campaigns aimed at influencing overseas publics with regards to the conflict (cfr. Ravid, 2010). These are part of the broader, and thirty-year old, Hasbara, literally meaning “explanation” and described as the governmental efforts to explain its policies and promote Israeli image to foreign publics (Goodman, 2011). More specifically, it’s in the domain of cultural exchanges and education that Israeli public diplomacy seems to focus its efforts. The Hasbara Fellowship (HF), the largest and most comprehensive Israeli educational and activist program, mainly designed for North American university students, represents an elucidative example (Mein, 2011). Founded in 2001, and financed by the Israeli government and pro-Israel lobbies, HF brings hundreds of international students to Israel and gives them “the information and tools to return to their campuses as educators about Israel” (Hasbara Fellowship, 2011). Amongst the other thematic
events, HF organizes yearly the Israel Peace Week (IPW), “a grassroots initiative to counter anti-Israeli propaganda with a simple, positive message: Israel wants peace and has demonstrated its willingness to make painful sacrifice for peace” (Ib.).

In pursuit of the same ends, albeit with limited resources, Palestinians recently embarked in a nation-branding campaign. The recently founded Palestinian Institute for Public Diplomacy (PIPD), financed by private Palestinian actors, aims at creating and promoting a Palestinian national brand as to foster Palestinian image around the world and support its statehood ambitions (Buck, 2011). Moreover, other governments daily, with more or less resources and in more or less subtle ways, engage in public diplomacy activities related to the domain of Israeli-Palestinian peacebuilding. Amongst the others, the United States traditional public diplomacy in Middle East has a decennial tradition and encompasses a wide range of activities (cfr. Leonard, 2003).

The theoretical discussion on the coercive nature of public diplomacy- as organic to the liberal peacebuilding paradigm- informs an understanding of these practices as hegemonic. Accordingly, its rhetoric functions as an instrument- often employed through uncivil actors (Marchetti and Tocci, 2010)- to promote particular peacebuilding views owned by the powerful.

Further, a Gramscian rediscussion of soft power –i.e. the impossibility to detach it from hard power- would seemingly bring an empirical challenge to the dichotomy state-local within critical peacebuilding studies: in particular, it challenges these categories on their stagnant and clearly separated domain. This raises epistemological interrogatives on researching the effects of when “the state becomes local” and the opportunity to look at the ways the local aims to influence the elites. Both questions interrogate the concept of hybridity (Bhabha, 1994; Richmond 2011) and emphasize the
dialietical and conflictual nature of peacebuilding raising concerns over whether soft power is associated with a monopoly over legitimacy or not.

**Concluding discussion: Public Diplomacy as a prospect for Local Agency?**

At the same time, recognizing the emancipatory power of local agents of peacebuilding implies to look at the ways these actors are themselves couriers of power and at how they use their agency to socialize and propagate their image, goals and strategies in dialectical confrontation with the elites.

In particular, public diplomacy represents an alternative measure of political potency for those local and civil agents- in particular NGOs- engaged in building peace on the ground. It’s principally in the function of advocacy (cfr. Paffenholz, 2010) that non-state actors have experienced successful outcomes, particularly in the domain of environmental politics. (Betsill & Corell, 2008).

This is due to the global communication infrastructures that increasingly helped non-state actors to connect, organize and influence through soft power (Hayden, 2012). What soft power offers is its being agent-focused: actors design their own practices, meaning and values and they use those to influence subjects and “to influence the agendas and preferences that would alter the attractiveness of soft power resources” (ib., p. 36). In these terms, public diplomacy entails an anti-hegemonic potential that allows a re-discussion of the very categories associated to the “liberal” dichotomy state-local and to the “critical” hybridity. Of course, the main argumentative discussion remains: does public diplomacy require a monopoly over legitimacy within the dialectical domain of peacebuilding?
References


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