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Beyond Relationalism in Peacebuilding

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Abstract

This conclusion notes the rise of relationalism in theorising peacebuilding and the advantages of this approach as evident in the contributions to this special issue. Nevertheless, it cautions against such a move and in particular, some of the ontological and epistemological consequences of the relational turn as evident in recent poststructuralism, postcolonial approaches and practice theory. It contrasts this with the critical realist approach – whose relationalism has been ignored by the current turn – allowing both relationalism and a belief in objectivity and preference for certain knowledge claims.

Key words: Peacebuilding, relationalism, difference, Bourdieu, critical realism

Introduction

The argument set out in the introduction and pursued through this special issue is that international peacebuilding is embroiled in the ‘problem’ of difference. While recent scholarship, as well as recent practice, now attempts to account for the problem of difference, rather than denying or suppressing it, these attempts to engage with it are deeply problematic. As the editors Pol Bargués-Pedreny and Xavier Mathieu note, the three errors are to either silence, problematise or stigmatise difference with recent attempts failing to engage with the conditions of its emergence. In particular, peacebuilders have assumed that countries would, with the right international support, transition to liberal democracy. In reaction to this,

scholars started to emphasise the role of culture, a greater concern with political contestation and the role of psychosocial factors.

Hence the first error silences difference through the imposition of universalist frameworks that neglect the different roles and identities of the actors involved. In response, peacebuilding approaches sought to draw attention to difference and investigate local history and understandings. The context for intervention was broadened to include social and cultural processes (Lederach 1997). However the second error is to treat difference as a problem to be solved, effectively essentialising difference as belonging to distinct and homogenous groups. The danger then is to contribute to the legitimisation of ethno-nationalist perspectives (Campbell 1998). The role of the peacebuilder is to manage and regulate these perceived differences through top down interventions mainly focused on liberal institution building as a means of ameliorating the effects of certain socio-cultural pathologies (Fukuyama 2005; Ghani and Lockhart 2008; Paris and Sisk 2009).

The third approach is to see difference not as a problem to be solved but as having a potentially positive role to play in building peace. Rather than seeing differences as an obstacle to be managed through better peacebuilding, scholars adopting this approach seek a more genuine engagement with difference (Mac Ginty, 2015, Mac Ginty and Richmond, 2016). This approach is critical of the imposition of liberal norms, seeking instead more local or hybrid forms of peace based on bottom-up dynamics (Donais, 2009, Richmond, 2009, Mac Ginty and Richmond, 2016). The error identified with this third approach is that in order to respect difference, it is necessary to decide what this difference is, thus maintaining some form of stigmatization of difference as somehow deviant from the normal. Local culture and traditions are understood through a Western frame of reference from which these diverge. As the authors say in the introduction ‘emphasising difference (even as something to be celebrated or as a space to cultivate bottom-up peace initiatives) does not remove the stigma attached to it insofar as what passes for “normal” is not questioned nor made explicit’.

In short, all these approaches are seen as ending up essentialising difference either through silencing, problematising or stigmatizing it. The arguments of this special issue are therefore refreshing in bringing in an understanding of difference that is non-essentialist and relational.

I have summarized the main points here in order to show my agreement. The various contributions emphasise the role of cultural difference and reject the imposition of universalism and fixed identities. Peacebuilding is to be seen as a process which constantly evades any conclusive settlement. Differences are performed realities that arise in specific social and historical contexts. Moreover, differences are intrinsically linked to power relations. Such arguments are uncontestedly a good thing. They are all consistent with the critical realist framework that I support.

However, I want to take issue with the radical relationality of this position which flows from the excesses of poststructuralism and postcolonialism. In the rest of this piece I will discuss some of the ontological and epistemological assumptions behind some of the main arguments for a relational approach to difference. This is not to reject relationality, but to ask what type of relationality? Using critical realism I will investigate the philosophical foundations of some of the main arguments on this. In particular I will use Bhaskar and Bourdieu to argue that social structure also needs to be brought in alongside the focus on practice and performance.

Difference as a Relation of Power

To summarise from the introduction to this issue, the contributors draw on a combination of philosophy, anthropology and feminist / queer theory in order to make three arguments for relationality. They argue that it is non-essentialist, link it to power relations and suggest that it is performative, taking place in multiple contexts. A later section will look at the issue of performativity, while this section looks at difference understood as a power relation. It agrees with the need to see difference as relational, but sees some limitations in the reliance on particular forms of philosophy, anthropology and feminist / queer theory, arguing for a more realist approach to power based on arguments from Bhaskar (1979, 1993) and Isaac (1987). I take up here the editors' call to explore the ways in which difference can be understood in its political context of emergence and suggest that this is best understood through the critical realist lens of social stratification and embeddedness in social structure.

Such arguments are built on the realist assumption that there exists a social reality that is

structured and relatively enduring over time and is, for this reason, open to scientific investigation. The social world is complexly stratified, with different emergent processes that arise in specific historical contexts. Emergence, in a critical realist sense means that processes have both underlying and necessary conditions of possibility, and emergent and irreducible outcomes. What produces social phenomena are underlying structures and causes which are irreducible to the conceptions that social agents might have of them (Dean, Joseph, Roberts and Wight 2006: 8-9). This is quite distinct from a positivist approach which reduces the world to our empirical observation of supposedly predictable events. Yet the 'problem of difference' presented in this special issue assumes the positivist understanding of science in making its case for rejecting the idea that difference is empirically discoverable, identifiable and thus 'out there'. In response to the contributors, I would ask whether there must surely be some element of difference that is 'out there' and identifiable for this whole discussion to be meaningful in the first place? It might be correct to suggest that the three strands of peacebuilding understand difference in an essentialist way as an attribute of different people while ignoring that difference presupposes relations of power. However, are these relations of power not 'out there' and in some way identifiable? If not, how can we have a meaningful discussion about them? Even if we follow current trends and say that our job is not to analyse but to let these relations 'speak to us', this is still an 'object oriented ontology'. The issue is not to abandon either the ontological claim of a reality 'out there' or the epistemological aim of meaningful identification, but to ask what sort of reality (difference) is 'out there' and what are the problems and limitations in our understanding of this reality (difference)? Contra positivism, the social world is indeed relational in the sense that it is made up of social relations rather than 'things'. However, this is different from the relational views presented here which tend to focus on relations between people (anthropological fieldwork), elements of discourse (poststructuralism / postmarxism) or between ideas and world views (phenomenology).

There are two problematic responses to this challenge present in this volume that I think realist work on power and social structure can help clarify. One is to argue for the importance of power relations in the vaguest poststructuralist sense of power being everywhere. The other is to reduce power to relations between people, or to take an intersubjective view of these relations that reduce them to world views. This is the result of the philosophical assumptions behind the largely poststructuralist or phenomenological arguments that inform the

contributions to this Special Issue.

The first problem is one of vagueness. By following poststructuralism, the danger is that power becomes the primary social relation that explains all others. But if power is everywhere, and behind everything, we lose sight of anything outside of the play of power. This does not really help in the identification of the dynamics behind power. Considering anything outside of power relations themselves is said to be essentialist - discussion of things like capitalism or colonialism will themselves be considered a return to essentialism.

The other issue with relationality as articulated in the special issue is the tendency to see social relations in terms of something between people. This is well illustrated in the references to Minow's work where she sees difference lying in the relations *between* people rather than *within* them (Minow 1990: 79). This is certainly preferable to the essentialist positions being critiqued where difference is located in some people's essential and discrete characteristics. But this is only one aspect of the picture since power and difference are also positional in the sense that people's characters, dispositions, powers, capacities, understandings and so on derive from their social positioning, or their relation to social relations. This social positioning, as Bhaskar (1993: 160) argues, is more than just relations between people, but is 'four planar', consisting of material transactions with nature, inter-intra subjective personal relations, the plane of social relations and the plane of the subjectivity of the agent. There are a multiplicity of potentially disjoint rhythmicity conceived of as a tense socio-spatialising process where elements of each plane are subject to multiple and conflicting determinations.

Jeffrey Isaac's well known intervention on power also helps clarify the question of social positioning and context. It makes the argument that social power refers to the capacities to act possessed by agents. This is by virtue of their participation within enduring social relations which distribute the power to act in certain ways to different people. Hence it is these social relations rather than the behavior – or interaction – which they shape, which are the conditions of possibility for interaction (Isaac 1987: 22-23).

In contrast, some of the contributors are keen to promote an overly-intersubjective view of social relations that downplays or ignores these other social aspects. Brigg, in particular, argues

for power being seen in relation to worldview that powerful actors promote and their particular conceptions of truth and reality (Brigg 2008: 11). World views are said to be what constitute difference because these promote notions of normal and deviant.

This view, while undeniable, is also only partial because it neglects other areas identified in the four planar model. Power here is rooted in the relation between subjects and their worldview, rather than being rooted in their four planar social situation. In particular, there is a danger here of turning the question of power into an epistemological question, effectively turning the complexity of our social situation into the socially constructed understandings we have of it. While this goes some way in identifying the social production of difference, it does not tell us the whole story of its social-structural conditions of possibility. Instead these are turned into subjective, discursive or phenomenological concerns. The editors' introduction makes the useful corrective that linking difference to worldviews transforms the issue from questions such as what difference is and where it resides to ones of how it is constructed. However, even to address the question of its construction requires a wider social ontology than the one provided by a focus on worldviews or the intersubjective dimension of the exercise of power.

Recent approaches to relationality

Much of the discussion of relationality in IR today is monopolized by poststructuralist and now new materialist thinking with a few notable dissenting voices such as Behr (2018, this issue) who draws on older phenomenological traditions. Certainly, older, materialist or philosophically realist accounts of relationality are ignored. This section will therefore address some of the new developments in relationality by taking a more established, if currently less fashionable, point of view.

Most of the relevant recent issues are expertly raised (although not always satisfactorily addressed) by the arguments of Morgan Brigg – here, and in previous work. In this forum he tries to steer a middle ground by presenting a relational approach, but also criticizing some of the philosophy underlying recent versions of this. While the earlier approaches to difference in peacebuilding presented an *identitarian* logic that foregrounds fixed, coherent entities, the relational approach of recent years takes a non-essentialist approach that

conceptualizes difference as contestable, fluid and ephemeral. Brigg (2018, this issue) rightly highlights some concerns with these approaches.

While ignoring the large body of relational work present in Marxism, dialectical thinking, 'Eastern' philosophy, philosophical realism, existentialism and phenomenology, recent International Relations has followed the trend of portraying the dominant system of thought as a form of Newtonian physics based on 'things' and discrete entities rather than processes and relations. The new trend – which can certainly be found in the recent interest in such things as resilience – is to argue for complexity, emergence, non-linearity, multiple states, adaptive systems and so on. As Brigg says, these new arguments seek to render everything a little more unstable than previously thought, a little more uncertain and unpredictable, with outcomes that are more contingent and accidental.

Brigg (2018, this issue) agrees with de-essentialising approaches insofar as they see differences as fluid, contested and contestable. But he also sees that anti-essentialist arguments tend to embrace a flat ontology which is so pluralistic that difference can lose its meaningful purchase [p.6 of online version](#). As he says, the consequence of this is to undermine 'the grounds upon which people may claim difference and resist dominance, including the framing and control of their lives' [p.6 of online version](#). This is absolutely correct and is a criticism that postcolonial theorists often raise against new materialists and others who suggest, following Latour (2005: 16), that we render social relations as ontologically flat. Nevertheless, Brigg remains committed to an interactional ontology which in my view makes it difficult to see where dominance or hierarchy comes from. He writes that this approach challenges us to stop thinking over and above the world (another example of setting up 'modernist' science) and to place knowing the world inside the world of interaction, making knowledge dependent upon people's ways of being [p.10 of online version](#).

Epistemologically this runs the danger of what Bhaskar calls the epistemic fallacy, reducing the way that the world is, to the knowledge we have of it (Bhaskar 1989). In this sense, despite its concerns, it stands alongside other 'insider' approaches including constructivism, phenomenology and recent practice theory. It still relates difference to interaction itself rather than what might provide the conditions of possibility for this interaction to take place and

what might thus be responsible for the unequal positions that the actors occupy. How else might we address why hierarchies exist and are evident in this interaction? Interaction and performance sustains them, but what produces them in the first place?

In his earlier work, Brigg sees difference in terms of systems of signification which again raises the ontological question of why signification occurs in the way it does, with unequal positions of power? He draws on Laclau's work on the 'empty signifier' to demonstrate the incompleteness of representation and difference. The empty signifier refers to the 'structural impossibility in signification' (Brigg and Muller 2009: 406), yet this impossibility remains 'an integral part of a system of signification' (Brigg and Muller 2009: 405). It is something that is real yet unable to be represented. The emphasis, therefore, falls upon the impossibility of representation. This should be embraced since, contrary to the earlier 'essentialist' conceptions of peacebuilding, these are not problems to be solved, but real and positive impossibilities (Brigg and Muller 2009: 408). Accepting this helps us to better respect cultural difference. However, embracing Laclau's approach also involves clear attempts to avoid the idea that social relations and hierarchies might somehow preexist the process of articulation. Let us be clear what this position entails. As Laclau says, 'In my perspective, there is no beyond the play of differences, no ground which would a priori privilege some elements of the whole over the others. Whatever centrality an element acquires, it has to be explained by the play of differences as such' (Laclau 2002: 69). The criticisms Brigg raises in his contribution to this special issue and in particular, his warning not to embrace pluralism to the point where difference can lose its meaningful purchase, should therefore be applied more widely to Laclau and others who deny that anything meaningful exists outside the play of difference and moment of articulation.

In a different approach, Hirblinger and Landau (2018, this issue) wish to stress the fluid, multi-layered and context-dependent nature of ethnic identity through a turn to recent IR practice theory. They argue that ethnicity is more a political category than a scientific one and that it can be known through its tangible effects. To this end, they draw on Adler and Pouliot's understanding of practices as socially meaningful action which acts out background knowledge and discourse and forms the 'dynamic material and ideational processes that enable structures to be stable or to evolve, and agents to reproduce or to transform structures' (Adler and

Pouliot 2011, 4). The problem with this argument is that Adler and Pouliot invoke the notion of social structures but never spell out what this means (see Joseph and Kurki 2017). The terminology here is close to critical realism, but it is clear, looking at the rest of their arguments that it is on the notion of practice that most of the explanatory power falls. By contrast, a critical realist notion of ‘positioned practices’ that locates the day to day actions of people within the context of deeper social structures that these practices reproduce and occasionally transform – for example how work practices reproduce deeper capitalist social relations or how development practices reproduce deep inequalities in the international system – offers more promise of capturing the notion of hierarchical relations and inequalities of power.

Performativity and practice

An important part of the ‘practice turn’ is a new emphasis on performativity. As noted in the introduction, this position emphasizes how actors perform their identities through various discourses and practices. It avoids ‘essentialism’ by suggesting that subjects come into being through (self) enactment. This is good insofar as it rejects the idea of actors having some essential identity but it also has the effect of wiping out such notions as history, modernity, traditions, as well as science, thus reducing or limiting our ability to discuss the importance of social relations. Instead, everything is the product of discourses and practices. There is nothing meaningful outside of these. We are back to the problems which are evident in Laclau’s philosophy.

There are important arguments in this special issue which usefully engage with performativity approaches, but which would benefit from setting this in the context of a deeper social ontology in order to avoid the pitfalls of radical relationalism. Róisín Read’s article in this issue (2018) highlights the struggle faced by female aid workers to perform ‘authenticity’ in the field of humanitarian intervention. Difference operates through juxtaposition of roles – the roles of the women are contrasted with the men around them and in particular, in relation to the more experienced, more ‘real’ aid workers. Noticeable again is the critique of objectivity present in Read’s argument about the practices of intervention where the accounts of the participants are not seen as ‘objective truth’ but examples of ‘flesh witnessing’.

María Martín de Almagro (2018, this issue) develops the concept of ‘hybrid clubs’ to emphasise the non-essential character of difference. This draws on performativity to show how actors can belong to different clubs and perform in a certain way while not being essentially attached to them. As she says:

I propose the concept of the “hybrid club” as a cluster of local and international actors that join forces to develop a series of peacebuilding and development initiatives. The club can be considered as a diagnostic site for studying complex processes of differentiation and identification in post-conflict settings. First, I argue that hybrid clubs constitute spaces where difference is crafted and performed through the sharing of knowledge and practices with and only with the members of the club. P.2 of version sent

This is an important argument that could be taken in a number of directions, much like Hirblinger and Landau’s discussion of how difference is ‘scaled’. However, it is a performative account rather than a structural one – difference is made through the complex performances of individual and collective bodies. A relational account, rather than being based on the four interactions discussed earlier, is taken to mean a focus on the ‘dynamic and ever-changing relationship amongst agents... [who] acquire meaning through and are constituted by their transactions, connections and relations with other actors’. P.3 of version sent

The editors rightly argue that drawing attention to the performativity of difference also means examining how differences are situated in particular social and historical contexts. This means that difference cannot be understood simply by looking at performance alone, as if identity is produced only at the moment of interaction between people. If Hirblinger and Landau are correct, then the ‘scaling’ of difference implies that people belong to a variety of different groups at different levels with, as Martín de Almagro suggests, actors being ‘local’ in some situations, and ‘international’ in others. This is also a part of the process of claiming legitimacy at that particular scale, while power operates to deny this, or to exercise strategic selectivity over agents and their strategies. If peacebuilding strategies operate to select particular types of identity and difference, then the realist implications of this need to be developed. The situation

is not simply the product of interaction, but is already ‘out there’ (in the sense of Bourdieu’s realist notion of field) if differences depend on time and context. Indeed, the choice might be between the flat ontology offered by Latour and many of the current trends in IR, and that offered by Bourdieu and his more realist interpreters who suggest that habitus cannot be determined solely in relation to other groups and their worldviews and that the field is indeed ‘out there’.

Latour believes that we need a flat ontology in order to render the social world more clearly visible (2005: 16). We should talk only of those things and processes that we observe in social interactions, avoiding talk of underlying structures. The latter would require us to engage in abstract explanations that impose themselves on what we are trying to observe (Latour 200, 2010). He believes that such approaches end up reproducing dominant relations of power because they appeal to some higher authority and some of these sentiments are evident in this special issue. By contrast, my argument would be that by refusing to put experience and difference in this wider context we fail to fully understand the practices we are trying to describe. As Bhaskar argues, this is an ontological question where

By secreting an ontology based on the category of experience, the domains of reality (the domains of the real, the actual, and the empirical) are collapsed into one. This prevents the crucial question of the conditions under which experience is, in fact, significant in science from being posed (Bhaskar 1989, 15).

Thus to talk of the experience or performance of difference in peacebuilding still requires us to talk of underlying social structures that, in a sense, make experience and performance possible as well as imposing constraints upon it. Despite recent practice theory claiming Bourdieu as an influence, he himself is clear that to account for practices and performances, we need to relate these to the ‘objective structure defining the social conditions for the production of the habitus’ (1977: 78). Colin Wight’s realist reading of Bourdieu suggests that habitus can be understood through the notion of positioned practices as a mediating link between agents and the socio-cultural world that they share (Wight 2006, 49). This is inspired by Bhaskar’s argument that we need to understand the ‘point of contact’ between human agency and social structures by examining a mediating system of positions –

places, functions, rules, tasks, duties, etc., and practices, activities etc., which are engaged in by virtue of agents' occupancy of social positions. Crucially, this position-practice system is to be understood relationally (Bhaskar 1989, 40–41). I thus offer this understanding of relationality in contrast with that outlined in the Special Issue.

As Milja Kurki and I have argued elsewhere (Joseph and Kurki 2018), some notion of structure is necessary in order to make sense of some of Bourdieu's key notions such as misrecognition, habitual reproduction and the largely unconscious nature of habitus. Social practices and performances act as the means of mediation between structures and agents and it is through the routines and everyday practices (highlighted in this special issue) that objective social structures are reproduced. Bourdieu sees these activities of the habitus as largely unconscious, unreflective or at least based on limited understanding of the wider context. Indeed, Bourdieu's key notion of misrecognition depends upon this understanding of structure, agency and practice whereby practical taxonomies are understood as 'a transformed, misrecognizable form of the real divisions of the social order... [that] contribute to the reproduction of that order by producing objectively orchestrated practices (Bourdieu 1977, 163). This makes the realist point that such practices produce misrecognition of a real situation. By rendering the world as ontologically flat and eschewing discussion of anything other than practices, it is Latour and those who follow his example who, in fact, contribute to the reproduction of existing social orders by refusing to examine its conditions of possibility and the hierarchies that lie behind it.

Conclusion

Firstly, the strengths of the contributions present in this special issue were outlined. In particular, they identify and seek to rectify the errors of previous approaches to peacebuilding where difference is either discarded, identified as a problem to be overcome, or stigmatized as a reality at odds with our normal frames of reference. The arguments present in this special issue problematize, deconstruct and interrogate the ways that difference comes into being in order to provide a better understanding of the peacebuilding process. In doing so, I believe the contributions collected here offer important insights.

However, I also argue that there are some limitations to such approaches due to their distance from realism, their skepticism about objectivity, their critique of knowledge claims and, in particular, the absence of a strong notion of social structure. In my view, this limits some of the important insights contained here. These are not problems specific to this volume, but are characteristic more generally of the current ‘practice turn’ and arguments for poststructuralism, new materialism and current arguments for non-essentialist relationality.

With the practice turn as well as other recent developments, the focus falls upon that which is observable, the everyday, the common place, the ‘ontic’, what goes on at the surface level (Kustermans 2016, 191). The effect of this, I have argued, is the neglect of the structural. The significance of this, I suggest, is that we are then denied the opportunity to adequately explain the context within which difference occurs, the hierarchies that underpin difference and the means for enacting the sort of social change that might overcome some of the more problematic elements of difference.

In its place, I suggested that rather than trying to avoid the structure–agency relationship, we should adopt an approach to practices and difference that seeks to ‘position’ practices (Bhaskar 1993) in their appropriate context, recognizing not only intersubjective relations, but the inter-intra, material and social character of these relations. These exist in a complex multiplicity of tense socio-spatialising processes. Yet, despite this complexity, analytical attention can be paid to the capacities possessed by agents by virtue of the positions they occupy, their capacities to act and their relation to enduring social structures that enable and constrain (Isaac 1987).

In short, a relational approach to difference is more important than ever, but not without an analysis of the social and material relations that contribute to the production of difference.

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