


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Peacebuilding without peace? On how pragmatism complicates the practice of international intervention

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Abstract

The International Relations (IR) literature has strongly criticised the invasive and top-down nature of liberal peace, facilitating a reinterpretation of the practice of international intervention in conflict-affected societies. Today, sustaining peace policy approaches advance longer-term missions, give a secondary role to external practitioners, and increasingly accept risks and failures. What is striking is that even when these policy discourses hold out the promise of liberating peacebuilding from dominant and top-down models of liberal intervention, the mood in the field is one of despair. By drawing on John Dewey's work on pragmatism and interviewing practitioners in Bosnia and Kosovo, the article reflects on the morass practitioners find themselves, diagnoses the source of the frustrations, and anticipates the direction of sustaining peace. Pragmatism adumbrates the idea of 'peacebuilding without peace', encouraging practitioners to experiment, give primacy to their doings and explore this world without hope of success and dreams of otherworldliness.

Keywords: Pragmatism; Dewey; Liberal Peacebuilding; Kosovo; Bosnia; Sustaining Peace; Practice

Introduction

After a period of multiple crises and critical readings,¹ the theory and practice of international peacebuilding appear to be moving away from liberal forms of intervention, giving policy frameworks a positive and renovated impetus. Similar to today's multilateral agendas of sustaining development and security,² strengthening resilience to climate change,³ or facilitating disaster risk reduction,⁴ international involvements in conflict-affected countries seem to require a prolonged and continued engagement.⁵ In 2016, the twin resolutions of the General Assembly (70/262) and Security Council (2282) emphasised the need to 'work together to sustain peace

¹Suthakaran Nadarajah and David Rampton, 'The limits of hybridity and the crisis of liberal peace', *Review of International Studies*, 41:1 (2015), pp. 49–72.

²United Nations (UN), 'Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' (United Nations General Assembly, 2015).

³Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 'Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report: Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change' (Geneva: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2015).

⁴United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR), 'The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030' (Sendai: United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2015).

⁵UN, 'The Challenge of Sustaining Peace: Report of the Advisory Group of Experts for the 2015 Review of the United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture' (New York: United Nations, 2015), pp. 7, 8, 18.

at all stages of conflict and in all its dimensions', 'not only once conflict had broken out but also long beforehand, through the prevention of conflict and addressing its root causes'.⁶

Longer-term engagements also imply a redefinition of the role of external agencies. Sustaining peace demands a 'sustained international political accompaniment', in which a coordinated group of international organisations cooperate with local agents and facilitate (rather than lead) adaptation and crisis management responses.⁷ From states involved in humanitarian support to international agencies like the United Nations (UN) and its partners and programmes, nearly every one singles out the need to reorient policy approaches, restricting external influence and relying on the existing capacities, community resilience, and resources of war-affected societies for advancing stability and peaceful relations.⁸ Another clue to the evolving nature of peacebuilding discourse and practice is the widespread acknowledgment that some external actions have done more harm than good. Rather than assuming a linear progress and workability from one culture to the other, from one case to the next, there is awareness that some policies may generate side effects or have negative consequences that were not intended.⁹ Today, all sorts of impending risks seem to menace donor initiatives: 'the risks of increasing tensions and causing damage', 'the risk of failure, the risk of inefficiency, the risk of diversion of funds' and many more.¹⁰ While these risks cannot be prevented, donors are expected to learn from experience, be modest and reflective, and develop flexible programmes for disaster preparedness and resilience.¹¹

What is striking is that even if these evolving policy discourses hold out the promise of liberating peacebuilding from the dominant top-down models of liberal intervention that brought so much cost and controversy,¹² from 'the field' the mood is one of despair. The article builds on a series of observations and semi-structured interviews led by the author with international practitioners in Kosovo (December 2016) and in Bosnia and Herzegovina (hereafter Bosnia) (August 2017) to reflect on the often-neglected everyday experiences and concerns with the practice of

⁶UN, 'Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace: Report of the Secretary-General' (General Assembly and Security Council, 2018), p. 1.

⁷UN, 'The Challenge of Sustaining Peace', p. 9; UNSG, 'Peacebuilding in the Immediate Aftermath of Conflict' (New York: United Nations, 2014), p. 2.

⁸Department for International Development (DFID), 'Saving Lives, Preventing Suffering and Building Resilience: The UK Government's Humanitarian Policy' (London: Department for International Development, 2011); Interpeace, 'Fostering Resilience for Peace' (Geneva: Interpeace, 2015); UN, 'United Nations Conflict Prevention and Preventive Diplomacy in Action: An Overview of the Role, Approach and Tools of the United Nations and its Partners in Preventing Violent Conflict' (United Nations Department of Political Affairs, 2018); United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 'Local Knowledge, Global Goals' (Paris: UNESCO, 2017); UNISDR, 'Progress and Challenges in Disaster Risk Reduction: A Contribution towards the Development of Policy Indicators for the Post-2015 Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction' (Geneva: The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2014).

⁹Chiyuki Aoi, Cedric De Coning, and Ramesh Chandra Thakur, *Unintended Consequences of Peacekeeping Operations* (Tokyo and New York: United Nations University Press, 2007).

¹⁰Institute of Chartered Accountants of India (ICAI), 'Assessing the Impact of the Scale-up of DFID's Support to Fragile States' (Independent Commission for Aid Impact, 2015), p. 20; see also Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 'Good Development in Fragile, at-Risk and Crisis Affected Contexts: OECD Development Policy Papers' (2016); World Bank, 'Machine Learning for Disaster Risk Management: A Guidance Note on How Machine Learning Can be Used for Disaster Risk Management' (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2018).

¹¹The idea of resilience epitomises this risk-sensitive approach that resists working out principles in the abstract and instead proceeds with practice-driven responses; rather than exporting tools, builds on systems' self-organising capacities; and rather than imposing solutions onto reality, adapts to it as it unfolds. Reinette Biggs, Maja Schlüter, and Michael Schoon (eds), *Principles for Building Resilience: Sustaining Ecosystem Services in Social-Ecological Systems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Stockholm Resilience Centre, 'Applying Resilience Thinking: Seven Principles for Building Resilience in Social-Ecological Systems' (Stockholm: Stockholm Resilience Centre and Stockholm University, 2015); For a critique, see Jonathan Joseph, *Varieties of Resilience: Studies in Governmentality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

¹²Susanna Campbell, David Chandler, and Meera Sabaratnam, *A Liberal Peace? The Problems and Practices of Peacebuilding* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2011).

sustaining peace.¹³ Twelve interviews were conducted in the field (and four more in Brussels), although the text only includes direct references to the nine that are most relevant. All of them are anonymised and feminine pronouns are used throughout, avoiding that those interviewed could be identified.

These encounters reveal a profound disillusionment with the possibilities of effecting change or of making any substantial progress in the Balkans. In Kosovo, international officials are openly critical about externally driven recipes and blueprints, yet they also express disillusionment with the capacity of local agents for governing themselves (Interviews 1 and 2) (see Appendix for all interview details). ‘No matter how many inclusive programmes one attempts’, attests an official of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in Pristina, ‘Kosovars are still trapped in ethnic disputes’ (Interview 2). An employee of the German Development Agency (GIZ) points at the anti-Serbian graffiti on the walls and the Cyrillic street signs that are damaged, to argue that coexistence is an open-ended challenge in the country (Interview 3). In Bosnia, an official of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) argues that her role is to support and reward organic and bottom-up initiatives that help consolidate an inclusive peace, but admits that these initiatives are rare (Interview 4). Officials of USAID and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) similarly note the complexity of the operations and of implementing initiatives, acknowledging that foreign assistance policies often have unwanted consequences that make the situation worse (Interviews 5 and 6). In the university classrooms of Bosnia, students regard resilience and bottom-up peace initiatives with suspicion, much as they do for top-down interventions (Interview 7). Why is it that the optimism of current policy frameworks contrasts with the narratives of a permanent drama in the field?¹⁴

While practitioners find themselves in a morass, critical scholars in International Relations (IR) have tended to add mud to this. As it will be shown, they identify well the gap between normative foundations and the record of implementation, or between theory and practice, but they see this gap as the key to the many failures of international peacebuilding. For example, some studies argue that policies like local ownership have not been duly implemented in past operations, despite noble intentions to do so.¹⁵ Other critical scholars see the shift towards emancipatory forms of peace from below as only taking place rhetorically; it is deemed a ‘fallacy’, empty words that are not translated into practice, where external agencies still set the agenda and govern from above.¹⁶ Similar to practitioners, who are self-critical of the implementation results of their policies, critical scholars demand greater sensitivity, longer engagements, more local attentiveness and ownership, to be able to meet the requirements for an emancipatory peace.¹⁷ While their

¹³Rebecca Adler-Nissen, ‘Towards a practice turn in EU studies: The everyday of European integration’, *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 54:1 (2016), pp. 87–103.

¹⁴The anxiety in the field contrasts with confidence in policy reports as well as in the perspectives of EU diplomats in Brussels (both at the European External Action Service and at the European Commission), who accept that post-conflict transitions and Enlargement processes are lengthy (Interviews 8 and 9). As an EC official put it: ‘All strategies for peace in the Balkans are directed toward Enlargement ... It is a long-term process. It is an incentive, it maintains hope’ (Interview 8).

¹⁵S  verine Autesserre, *Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Vesna Bojicic-Dzelilovic and Mary Martin, ‘Wholly local? Ownership as philosophy and practice in peacebuilding interventions’, *Peacebuilding*, 6:3 (2018), pp. 218–32; Cedric de Coning, ‘Adaptive peacebuilding’, *International Affairs*, 94:2 (2018), pp. 301–17.

¹⁶Nicolas Lemay-H  bert and Stefanie Kappler, ‘What attachment to peace? Exploring the normative and material dimensions of local ownership in peacebuilding’, *Review of International Studies*, 42:5 (2016), pp. 895–914; Roger Mac Ginty and Oliver P. Richmond, ‘The fallacy of constructing hybrid political orders: A reappraisal of the hybrid turn in peacebuilding’, *International Peacekeeping*, 23:2 (2016), pp. 219–39; Joanne Wallis, Renee Jeffery, and Lia Kent, ‘Political reconciliation in Timor Leste, Solomon Islands and Bougainville: The dark side of hybridity’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 70:2 (2016), pp. 159–78.

¹⁷Annika Bj  rkdahl and Kristine H  glund, ‘Precarious peacebuilding: Friction in global–local encounters’, *Peacebuilding*, 1:3 (2013), pp. 289–99; Elisa Randazzo, ‘The paradoxes of the “everyday”: Scrutinising the local turn in peace building’, *Third World Quarterly*, 37:8 (2016), pp. 1351–70; Meera Sabaratnam, ‘Avatars of Eurocentrism in the critique of the liberal peace’,

observations are often accurate, that practitioners hold liberal assumptions, this article problematises their conclusion: that more efforts are needed to ‘close the gap’ between rhetoric and implementation. It underlines that policy-oriented and more critical perspectives can only look in a depreciatory way at practical affairs while upholding peacebuilding as good in theory.

This article seeks to grapple with the unprecedented situation of policy advocates seeking to get rid of the ‘old’ faults of liberal frameworks of peacebuilding, while experimenting with ‘new’ approaches for sustaining peace. In so doing, it reflects on the pessimism regarding the possibility of conducting successful interventions and considers the implications of wiping out such a negative mood. Thus, the article has two aims, developed over the course of three sections. First, drawing on philosophical pragmatism, the article attempts to shed light on the current transformation of peacebuilding understandings and practices, as noted in Sections One and Two. Pragmatism has its origins in the work of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American philosophers such as Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. Although pragmatism was never a coherent school of thought, these philosophers shared a critique of the belief in abstract objective truths separated from practice that dominated modern Western philosophy; and proposed an anti-Cartesian methodology, which starts with concrete situations and is concerned with practical consequences.¹⁸ A full discussion of pragmatism falls beyond the bounds of this article, which will concentrate on John Dewey’s classic manuscript *The Public and its Problems*, published in 1929, and his *Quest for Certainty*, based on the Gifford Lectures of the same year. Both provide a useful corrective to theories that search for immutable and abstract knowledge and depreciate practical affairs. The former took issue with political theory approaches that searched for causal factors to explain and predict the nature of the state, claiming instead the need for a continued inquiry into the effects of the associations of the public. The later challenged philosophies elevating knowledge over making and doing, and instead valorised doing as key for knowing, despite the admitted lack of assurance of the success of any practical activity. By reading these two pieces together, the argument is that frameworks of international peacebuilding have evolved from abstract theories concerned with addressing the causes of war in order to build peace, towards practice-driven engagements that attend to the consequences and deviations of sustaining peace processes, gradually operating without a liberal compass.

The second aim is to reflect upon the frustration that looms over the practice of sustaining peace, as developed in the third section. Based on insights from practitioners in Bosnia and Kosovo, together with an analysis of recent policy reports on progress in the Balkans, it will be argued that peacebuilders appear overwhelmed and operations stagnate, as they recognise the unpredictability and fuzziness of the process while still desiring to control it. From the field, peacebuilders realise and lament that the more they open to the complexity of postconflict zones, engaging with the consequences of their practices, the more they drift away from the original objectives. Reading current peacebuilding practices through a pragmatist lens is thus useful to fathom both the sense of despair that haunts most contemporary peacebuilding practices and at the same time think of the unforeseen trajectory these practices are taking.

In the conclusion, the article reflects upon the possibility of sustaining peace without an original principle and an end point in order to stimulate discussion. Pragmatism forces IR to think ‘after’ the end of liberal forms of intervention. By acknowledging that it is already too late to build liberal institutions and avoid failure, pragmatism emboldens practitioners to be radically open to discoveries in the field of action and revise the principles and values as they go along. This

Security Dialogue, 44:3 (2013), pp. 259–78; Jonas Wolff and Lisbeth Zimmermann, ‘Between Banyans and battle scenes: Liberal norms, contestation, and the limits of critique’, *Review of International Studies*, 42:3 (2016), pp. 513–34.

¹⁸John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems* (Athens: Shallow Press Books, Ohio University Press, 1954); William James, *Pragmatism* (Lexington: Renaissance Classics, 2012); Charles S. Peirce, William James, Clarence Irving Lewis, John Dewey, and George Herbert Mead, *Pragmatism: The Classic Writings*, ed. H. S. Thayer (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1982).

represents a courageous step, leading practitioners to accept and confront negative consequences, dwell with and adapt to a permanent insecurity, and constantly revise their objectives. Yet, pragmatism also pushes for an even more radical step in peacebuilding, as contributions in other disciplines have explored.¹⁹ This implies practicing peacebuilding without peace – without hope that a successful conduct of peace operations is still possible. Practitioners would be forced to accept their limitations and incapacities and be in an impossible position of having to assist, perform, and act without a liberal telos.

Philosophical pragmatism and the critique of liberal peace

Since the late 1970s, pragmatism has been revived in different disciplines through the work of Jürgen Habermas, Richard Rorty, and Hilary Putnam, among others,²⁰ and more recently via the writings of Bruno Latour²¹ and other French theorists.²² In the IR literature, pragmatism has only recently moved to the fore and it is mainly used in two interrelated ways.²³ First, it is seen as an eclectic method that mediates intra-disciplinary battles – for example, between structuralist and poststructuralist theories. This is possible because pragmatism is open to use any theory that works for a particular problem and, at the same time, it accepts constant revisionism, discarding epistemological purity.²⁴ Second, it has gained traction as an approach in itself that seeks to account for social reality ('a new ism' – although pragmatism rejects relying on firm grounds). Rather than approaching social reality by applying principles established a priori, pragmatism draws on a continued process of inquiry: a process that relies on previous experience, but copes creatively with new problems as they emerge; a process that accounts for continuity and change at the same time.²⁵ In this sense, most scholars concur on the primacy of 'practice', proposing to study IR through investigating the doings and sayings of diverse actors.²⁶ By engaging with practices, pragmatist approaches account for social reality without either resorting to absolute foundations as positivist theories do, or falling into the relativist 'anything goes' approach of some post-positive thinkers.²⁷ This second understanding of pragmatism is particularly useful for this article, as peacebuilding is currently being reinterpreted as a sustained process of inquiry.

¹⁹Tom Cohen, Claire Colebrook, and Hilis J. Miller, *Twilight of the Anthropocene Idols* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2016); Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (London and New York: Verso, 2017); Anna L. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015).

²⁰Susan Haack, 'Pragmatism, old and new', *Contemporary Pragmatism*, 1:1 (2004), pp. 3–41.

²¹Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018).

²²Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, *On Justification: Economies of Worth* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006).

²³Ulrich Franke and Ralph Weber, 'At the Papini hotel: On pragmatism in the study of International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations*, 18:4 (2011), pp. 669–91; John Kaag and Sarah Kreps, 'Pragmatism's contributions to International Relations', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 25:2 (2012), pp. 191–208.

²⁴Harry Bauer and Elisabetta Brighi, *Pragmatism in International Relations* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009); Rudra Sil and Peter J. Katzenstein, 'Analytic eclecticism in the study of world politics: Reconfiguring problems and mechanisms across research traditions', *Perspectives on Politics*, 8:2 (2010), pp. 411–31.

²⁵Franke and Weber, 'At the Papini hotel'; Friedrich Kratochwil, 'Of false promises and good bets: A plea for a pragmatic approach to theory building (the Tartu lecture)', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 10:1 (2007), pp. 1–15.

²⁶Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot (eds), *International Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Tobias Berger and Alejandro Esguerra (eds), *World Politics in Translation: Power, Relationality and Difference in Global Cooperation* (London: Routledge, 2018); Christian Bueger and Frank Gadinger, *International Practice Theory: New Perspectives* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

²⁷Jörg Friedrichs and Friedrich Kratochwil, 'On acting and knowing: How pragmatism can advance International Relations research and methodology', *International Organization*, 63:4 (2009), pp. 701–31; Gunther Hellmann, 'Pragmatism and International Relations', *International Studies Review*, 11:3 (2009), pp. 638–62.

Pragmatist approaches have been utilised, for example, in debates on ethics and security,²⁸ humanitarian intervention and responsibility,²⁹ or international climate politics.³⁰ However, pragmatism has rarely been thought of in relation to international peacebuilding. A notable exception is the recent ‘Peacebuilding in an Era of Pragmatism’ Special Issue in *International Affairs*. The diverse authors use pragmatism heuristically to reflect on the move away from the liberal model and think through current concerns with stability and fostering societal resilience and organic forms of peace. That is, as a ‘lens that brings into dialogue perspectives on the real-politik of stabilisation, the apparent retreat of liberal idealism, and the bottom-up focus on contextualizing efforts to sustain peace’.³¹ Comparably, other authors have also noted that the inclusion of the idea of resilience in contemporary forms of governance has accommodated a new pragmatist rationale, with emphasis on ownership and tailor-made practices, as well as a predisposition to consider the practical consequences of interventions and the likelihood of failure.³² This article furthers these contributions theoretically, by using Dewey’s pragmatism as a lens to think the transition from liberal statebuilding to hybrid forms of sustaining peace that acknowledge the effects of intervening practices. In the final section, it also adds to them a fresh and pragmatist look into ‘the field’,³³ to understand the source of the discontent expressed by practitioners.

In the 1920s, Dewey wrote about pragmatism in a context of crisis and pessimism about democracy driven by a perceived lack of representation between ‘the officials’ and ‘the public’ – the government and the individuals, which are gathered around the indirect consequences of their interactions.³⁴ Contrary to core assumptions in democratic theory, Dewey argued that practices, technology, and bureaucracies, that emerged as indirect effects of the First World War, led the public to evolve and diverge from the direct relation with its officials and representative bodies.³⁵ Similarly, current practices of peacebuilding are spurred by the disillusionment with liberal peace, liberal democracy, and the purpose of humanitarianism.³⁶

For much of the decade of the 2000s, frameworks of international peacebuilding sought to address conflicts through hands-on processes of reforming and strengthening state institutions to promote liberal democracy. Although the reasons for war and state failure were considered to differ across countries – from predatory war-prone leaders to Islamic conservatism, to ethno-nationalist divisions and confrontations – ‘statebuilding’ seemed to be the answer. As Ghani and Lockhart stated:

Solutions to our current problems of insecurity, poverty, and lack of growth all converge on the need for a state-building project. ... Only the state can organize power so as to harness

²⁸Jonna Nyman, ‘What is the value of security? Contextualising the negative/positive debate’, *Review of International Studies*, 42:5 (2016), pp. 821–39.

²⁹Alex Bellamy, ‘Pragmatic solidarism and the dilemmas of humanitarian intervention’, *Millennium*, 31:3 (2002), pp. 473–98; Joe Hoover, ‘Developing a situationist global justice theory: From an architectonic to a consummatory approach’, *Global Society*, 33:1 (2019), pp. 100–20.

³⁰Markus Lederer, ‘The practice of carbon markets’, *Environmental Politics*, 21:4 (2012), pp. 640–56.

³¹Louise Wiuff Moe and Finn Stepputat, ‘Introduction: Peacebuilding in an era of pragmatism’, *International Affairs*, 94:2 (2018), p. 295.

³²David Chandler, ‘Resilience and the “everyday”: Beyond the paradox of “liberal peace”’, *Review of International Studies*, 41:1 (2015), pp. 27–48; Jonathan Joseph, ‘Governing through failure and denial: The new resilience agenda’, *Millennium*, 44:3 (2016), pp. 370–90; Ana E. Juncos, ‘Resilience in peacebuilding: Contesting uncertainty, ambiguity, and complexity’, *Contemporary Security Policy*, 39:4 (2018), pp. 559–74.

³³Oliver P. Richmond, Stefanie Kappler, and Annika Björkdahl, ‘The “field” in the age of intervention: Power, legitimacy, and authority versus the “local”’, *Millennium*, 44:1 (2015), pp. 23–44.

³⁴Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, pp. 64–9.

³⁵See also Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1993).

³⁶Mark Duffield, *Post-Humanitarianism: Governing Precarity in the Digital World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019); Beate Jahn, ‘Liberal internationalism: Historical trajectory and current prospects’, *International Affairs*, 94:1 (2018), pp. 43–61.

flows of information, people, money, force, and decisions necessary to regulate human behaviour.³⁷

Statebuilding ‘to regulate human behaviour’ was introduced to improve the results of interventions in the 1990s, which had relied on humanitarian aid and the promotion of democratisation and liberalisation processes without creating the necessary societal conditions and institutions for stabilising them.³⁸ However, the optimism about statebuilding policies declined significantly, as societies intervened in made little forward progress. The consolidation of warlords and the fragility of the security sector in Afghanistan, the renewal of large-scale violence in the DRC or the political and economic stagnation of Balkan societies, to name some paradigmatic cases, questioned the efficiency and legitimacy of internationally driven processes of peace- and statebuilding.

Numerous critiques have emerged over the years in response to the continuous difficulties encountered by international engagements. In the decade of the 2000s, some studies criticised the emasculation of the sovereign state in internationalised processes of statebuilding,³⁹ while others highlighted that interventions reinforced neoliberal logics, harmful to postwar countries, while neglecting global capitalist structures as key causes of conflict.⁴⁰ The focus here is on another group of scholars, who have been influential in the recalibration of peacebuilding practice, through pointing to the ‘effects’ of top-down practices of statebuilding, denouncing a constant neglect of the culture, needs, and everyday experiences of indigenous societies.⁴¹ For example, some have explained the lack of success of liberal interventions by examining how the infra-political areas and economies of local societies resist international norms and institutions articulated from the top-down.⁴² Similarly, others have emphasised the non-linearity and complexity of statebuilding processes, denouncing the too abstract, simplistic, and reductive categories used by practitioners.⁴³

While these critiques are well known to the readers of the journal, here they are reappraised in the light of pragmatism. In essence, these scholars explain the failure of liberal approaches to peacebuilding by noticing that these have sought to address *the causes* of war by means of building institutions and creating strong functioning states according to Western models. This critique was similarly articulated by Dewey when examining theories of government that had been built

³⁷ Ashraf Ghani and Clare Lockhart, *Fixing Failed States: A Framework for Rebuilding a Fractured World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 4.

³⁸ Simon Chesterman, Michael Ignatieff, and Ramesh Thakur, *Making States Work: State Failure and the Crisis of Governance* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2005); Roland Paris, *At War's End: Building Peace after Civil Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

³⁹ David Chandler, *Empire in Denial: The Politics of State-Building* (London: Pluto Press, 2006); Aidan Hehir and Neil Robinson (eds), *State-Building. Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2007); Vanessa Pupavac, ‘The politics of emergency and the demise of the developing state: Problems for humanitarian advocacy’, *Development in Practice*, 16:3–4 (2006), pp. 255–69.

⁴⁰ Neil Cooper, Michael Pugh, and Mandy Turner, *Whose Peace? Critical Perspectives on the Political Economy of Peacebuilding* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008).

⁴¹ Berit Bliesemann de Guevara, ‘Introduction: The limits of statebuilding and the analysis of state-formation’, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 4 (2010), pp. 114–15.

⁴² Philippe Bourbeau and Caitlin Ryan, ‘Resilience, resistance, infrapolitics and enmeshment’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 24:1 (2018), pp. 221–39; Werner Distler, Elena B. Stavrevska, and Birte Vogel, ‘Economies of peace: Economy formation processes and outcomes in conflict-affected societies’, *Civil Wars*, 20:2 (2018), pp. 139–50; Roger Mac Ginty, ‘A material turn in International Relations: The 4x4, intervention and resistance’, *Review of International Studies*, 43:5 (2017), pp. 855–74.

⁴³ Emery Brusset, Cedric de Coning, and Bryn Hughes (eds), *Complexity Thinking for Peacebuilding Practice and Evaluation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Louise W. Moe, ‘The strange wars of liberal peace: Hybridity, complexity and the governing rationalities of counterinsurgency in Somalia’, *Peacebuilding*, 4:1 (2016), pp. 99–117; Ignasi Torrent, ‘Problematising UN-local civil society engagement in peacebuilding: Towards non-modern epistemes through relationality’, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 13:5 (2019), pp. 618–37.

upon ‘the taking of causal agency instead of consequences as the heart of the problem’.⁴⁴ Searching for causal forces that explain phenomena is problematic, we learn from Dewey, because these will remain shadowy and can never fully account for the facts and outcomes they are supposed to produce. In his words:

The only thing which imports obscurity and mystery into the influence of association upon what individual persons want and act for is the effort to discover alleged, special, original, society-making causal forces, whether instincts, fiats of will, personal, or an immanent, universal, practical reason, or an indwelling, metaphysical, social essence and nature. These things do not explain, for they are more mysterious than are the facts they are evoked to account for.⁴⁵

According to critical scholars, liberal peace identified all too easily the causes of problems (such as the lack of liberal democracy or the fragility of rule-of-law institutions) and believed that solutions could be found hastily – without the need for a cautious investigation that could dig deeply into the complex settings and sociocultural milieus of conflict-affected societies.⁴⁶ International engagements have not only been under an illusion as to the causes of conflicts, they have also been deluded in expecting ‘extraordinary change to follow from a mere change in political agency and methods’.⁴⁷

By engaging with the realities and everyday life of postconflict societies, these scholars have come to terms with the ‘disparity’ between the principles and assumptions of liberal peace and the distorted results carried out by the practices implementing the principles.⁴⁸ Peacebuilding almost never consists of a linear and calculated process that results in liberal outcomes; instead, it is a non-linear, unpredictable process in which local agents resist, modify, ignore, co-opt, adapt, and contest international perspectives.⁴⁹ Even in cases that are apparently successful, processes have been re-appropriated and changed, readjusted according to local forms of order.⁵⁰ As Dewey suggests, *all* political processes carry invisible and ‘indirect consequences’ and thus encourage unplanned ‘responsive adjustments’; in the end, results are ‘a skew’, a ‘deflection’, a ‘distortion’, different from the principles and ideas purposed in advance.⁵¹

Rather than seeing the deflections and deviations of original principles as problematic, critics are open to appraising them as valuable resources for peace.⁵² Berit Blieseman de Guevara writes: ‘in order to achieve a deeper understanding of the complex and often unintentional effects sparked off by contemporary attempts of statebuilding, it is necessary to turn attention to the political and social processes that accompany them’⁵³ Thus, the alternative to the liberal peace does not consist in developing another set of principles that could work in practice or political institutions that could tackle the causes of war. Rather than imposing external plans that originate in abstract thinking, emancipatory forms of peacebuilding – like ‘hybrid peace’ – are real and

⁴⁴Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, p. 20.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁴⁶Moe, ‘The strange wars of liberal peace’; Oliver P. Richmond, ‘A pedagogy of peacebuilding: Infrapolitics, resistance, and liberation’, *International Political Sociology*, 6:2 (2012), pp. 115–31.

⁴⁷Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, p. 68.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁴⁹Gearoid Millar, ‘Disaggregating hybridity: Why hybrid institutions do not produce predictable experiences of peace’, *Journal of Peace Research*, 51:4 (2014), pp. 501–14.

⁵⁰John Heathershaw, ‘Seeing like the international community: How peacebuilding failed (and survived) in Tajikistan’, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 2:3 (2008), pp. 329–51.

⁵¹Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, pp. 30, 84, 95; see also Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, trans. Alan Sheridan and John Law (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

⁵²Morgan Brigg, ‘Relational and essential: Theorizing difference for peacebuilding’, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 12:3 (2018), pp. 352–66.

⁵³Blieseman de Guevara, ‘Introduction’, p. 15.

existing possibilities that emanate from within contemporary war-affected zones.⁵⁴ Although hybridisation may sometimes generate negative effects,⁵⁵ when the process is reflexive, inclusive of diverse perspectives and rooted in the everyday life of indigenous groups critical scholars predict hopeful outcomes.⁵⁶ In sum, in abandoning abstract and universal principles and instead engaging with concrete and contexts-specific situations, emancipatory forms of peacebuilding shift focus from *addressing the causes of war* (liberal peace) to concerns with *the consequences of peacebuilding processes* (hybrid peace).

Inasmuch as this critique annuls top-down peace operations, it feeds a new orientation in policy frameworks: strategies become more open to local contexts and build upon a processual understanding of intervention mechanisms, which must be flexible and adapt to crises and complex settings. Three brief examples from critical work that is being translated into policy recommendations help making the point. First, the EU-funded research project EU-CIVCAP (2016–18) is meant to provide the EU with recommendations for conflict prevention and sustaining peace. After determining that the decisive challenge is to narrow ‘the gap between the rhetorical commitment to local ownership by international actors, and its implementation in practice’, the policy recommendations are blatant: the knowledge and expertise of local interlocutors is key; ‘donor programmes should be tailored to the resources available to support them’; more comprehensive analysis of the consequences, of ‘the winners and losers in any process reform’, is required; as well as ‘extending the duration of deployment’.⁵⁷

Similarly, another EU-funded project (WOSCAP, 2015–17) puts forward ‘a whole-of-society approach to peacebuilding and conflict prevention’ that is indicative of attempts to think the implementation of peacebuilding in pragmatist terms. ‘Whole of society’ is ‘a practice-based approach which seeks to enhance the effectiveness of externally led peacebuilding and conflict preventions through recourse to the social contexts within which they are implemented’ and ‘a systematic involvement with the breadth and diversity of actors which operate at multiple levels’.⁵⁸ This critique redirects interventions away from a problem-solving and ideologically driven exercise. Rather than being imagined or constructed in the abstract, and applied and implemented accordingly thereafter, policies emerge out of an exploratory and creative process where multiple actors cooperate, partner, and contest evolving perspectives, experiences, and interests.⁵⁹

A third example can be found in Séverine Autesserre’s influential work in policy spheres, which brings forward an idea of peace that does not precede practice. Drawing on fieldwork research in Timor-Leste and the DRC, she calls attention to the effects of dominant modes of operation of international peacebuilders. She explains that, although well intended and committed to local ownership, practitioners reproduce detrimental dynamics and generate negative results, as they often receive vague instructions from superiors, use information that is misrepresented or lost through intermediaries, do not speak local languages or lack cultural knowledge.⁶⁰ Autesserre compellingly traces how peacebuilding processes relentlessly deviate from the well-intended aspirations of practitioners or from the principles professed before practice.⁶¹ She observes how in situations of adventure and risk, when deviations and complications occur,

⁵⁴Maria Martin de Almagro, ‘Hybrid clubs: A feminist approach to peacebuilding in the Democratic Republic of Congo’, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 12:3 (2018), pp. 319–34; Laura McLeod, ‘A feminist approach to hybridity: Understanding local and international interactions in producing post-conflict gender security’, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 9:1 (2015), pp. 48–69.

⁵⁵Wallis, Jeffery, and Kent, ‘Political reconciliation in Timor Leste, Solomon Islands and Bougainville’.

⁵⁶Miranda Forsyth, Lia Kent, Sinclair Dinnen, Joanne Wallis, and Srinjoy Bose, ‘Hybridity in peacebuilding and development: A critical approach’, *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal*, 2:4 (2017), pp. 407–21.

⁵⁷EU-CIVCAP, ‘Improving the EU’s Local Capacity Building Efforts in Post-Conflict Environments’ (2017), p. 2.

⁵⁸Mary Martin, Vesna Bojicic-Dzelilovic, and Linda Benraïs, ‘Introductory article: Mind the gaps. A whole-of-society approach to peacebuilding and conflict prevention’, *Peacebuilding*, 6:3 (2018), p. 172.

⁵⁹Bojicic-Dzelilovic and Martin, ‘Wholly local?’.

⁶⁰Autesserre, *Peaceland*, pp. 25–45, 115–30.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, p. 25.

practitioners tend to rely on foreign expertise and seek security on a fixed moral compass – as Dewey warned repetitively not to do.⁶² Instead, she suggests an enduring and erratic peace process that involves a diverse array of local and international actors in a dynamic exchange of ideas, experiences, and resources.⁶³ In other words, to paraphrase Dewey, rather than directed towards eternal truths and principles, peacebuilding should be concerned with a world that is both unfinished and unclear.⁶⁴

Practicing a pragmatist approach? The eclipse of liberal peace

The pragmatist critique of liberal peacebuilding, which highlights the complexity of everyday experiences that resist organisational plans, guidelines, and structures, is opening up alternative ways of undertaking peace missions. In the past years, peacebuilding policy practice has experienced a shift away from the previous concerns with addressing the causal factors of the conflict. Even when sometimes reports make explicit reference to addressing the ‘root causes’ of conflict, actions on the ground tend to focus on ‘the management of local volatilities’, gradually forsaking statebuilding projects and structural readjustments.⁶⁵ In a Security Council Meeting of March 2018, deliberating on how to improve the UN peacekeeping operations, the Secretary-General of the United Nations (UNSG) António Guterres counselled refraining from ‘creating unrealistic expectations’: ‘I urge the Security Council members to sharpen and streamline mandates and put an end to mandates that look like Christmas trees. Christmas is over ... By attempting too much, we dilute our efforts and weaken our impact.’⁶⁶

In order to tone expectations down, the time horizon of peace missions must necessarily expand. As Ban Ki Moon claimed: ‘political processes and institution-building require sustained and long-term international political, financial and technical support’.⁶⁷ In the last few years, field operations tend to last an average of three times longer than before, and the trend is continuing, as ‘hurried’ processes and ‘impracticable timelines’ are seen to produce unstable outcomes, reaffirming war tensions and excluding ‘dialogue at the grassroots, on the ground, in the provinces’.⁶⁸ Building on the benefits of ethnographic field research, the assumption is that short-term interventions do not work and that time offers the opportunity for always more contacts, meetings, and observations; more accuracy, context, and depth in the analyses; more likelihood of serendipitous discoveries and witnessing the evolution of events.⁶⁹ Whereas the UN bears the transition to a ‘sustaining peace’ where conflict prevention mingles with peacekeeping and peace consolidation, the EU proposes an ‘integrated approach to conflict and crisis’, to intervene uninterruptedly and for indefinite periods of time: ‘The EU will act at all stages of the conflict cycle, acting promptly on prevention, responding responsibly and decisively to crises, investing in stabilisation, and avoiding premature disengagement when a new crisis erupts.’⁷⁰ The prolongation of external support – intervening long before the conflict has broken out and deferring the final end point –

⁶²John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty: A Study of the Relation of Knowledge and Action* (Wokin: Unwin Brothers, 1930), pp. 12, 50, 81, 242.

⁶³Autesserre, *Peaceland*, pp. 247–74.

⁶⁴Alan Beauclair, ‘John Dewey’s quest to make experience intelligible’, *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 93:1/2 (2010), pp. 63–82.

⁶⁵Soren Haldrup and Frederik Rosén, ‘Developing resilience: A retreat from grand planning’, *Resilience: International Policies, Practices and Discourses*, 1:2 (2013), p. 130.

⁶⁶United Nations Security Council (UNSC), ‘United Nations Peacekeeping Operations’ (New York, NY: United Nations Security Council, 2018), p. 3.

⁶⁷UNSG, ‘Peacebuilding in the Immediate Aftermath of Conflict’, p. 10.

⁶⁸UN, ‘The Challenge of Sustaining Peace’, pp. 18–19.

⁶⁹Gearoid Millar, ‘Ethnographic peace research: The underappreciated benefits of long-term fieldwork AU’, *International Peacekeeping*, 25:5 (2018), pp. 653–76.

⁷⁰European External Action Service (EEAS), ‘Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe: A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign And Security Policy’ (European Union Global Strategy, 2016), pp. 9–10.

brings proximity, leeway, and openness to opportunities along the way, while averting the anguish of tight deadlines.⁷¹

The idea of long-term engagement often pops up intertwined with the idea of the need for engaging at the community level to gain knowledge devoid of stereotypes and facilitate truly locally owned processes.⁷² The truism is that, rather than exporting Western-based policy prescriptions that incapacitate bottom-up responses, one must rely on indigenous knowledge, their dynamic learnings, interpretations, and experiences, and strengthen context-sensitive strategies that are led predominantly by a variety of local agents.⁷³ As one UN report sums up: ‘peace cannot be imposed from the outside’ but ‘needs to emerge organically from within society’.⁷⁴ International agencies, or so their reports state, redouble efforts to further local engagement, beyond the mere rhetoric of national and local ownership.⁷⁵ Although it seems that there are always more places to access and new voices to listen to, policies constantly restrict external influence and dominance, while attempting to empower diverse local communities – from indigenous minorities to women and youth.⁷⁶

By downgrading expectations and giving up models, by lengthening operations and transferring responsibilities to local actors, peacebuilders have finally ‘landed’ at a place where a new pragmatist orientation may begin.⁷⁷ Instead of applying what is known already or setting goals before hand, as if ideals could still be held up to the sky and spread universally, interventions increasingly insist on actors sharing knowledge in situ and in emphasising the importance of learning by doing, taking up the consequences of on-the-ground practices. Dewey explains it this way:

the outcome of the directed activity is the construction of a new empirical situation in which objects are differently related to one another, and such that the *consequences* of directed operations form the objects that have the property of being *known*.⁷⁸

The lack of certainty in postconflict contexts obliges practitioners to guess and experiment to generate provisional insights that are worth considering, despite oversights and errors.⁷⁹ The idea of ‘doing no harm’ is a recurring one in policy documents and it demands cautiousness in order to minimise the risks and adverse consequences that policies may generate.⁸⁰ Sometimes errors and failures become assets, rather than drawbacks.⁸¹ Practitioners facilitate multiple grassroots initiatives and adapt to the results and consequences these may bring; rectify, improvise, invent, and try anew, watching for coming blessings or difficulties.⁸²

⁷¹Gisela Hirschmann, ‘Organizational learning in United Nations’ peacekeeping exit strategies’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 47:3 (2012), pp. 368–85.

⁷²Werner Distler, ‘Intervention as a social practice: Knowledge formation and transfer in the everyday of police missions’, *International Peacekeeping*, 23:2 (2016), pp. 326–49.

⁷³UNESCO, ‘Local Knowledge, Global Goals’.

⁷⁴UN, ‘The Challenge of Sustaining Peace’, p. 21.

⁷⁵Thania Paffenholz, ‘International peacebuilding goes local: Analysing Lederach’s Conflict Transformation theory and its ambivalent encounter with 20 years of practice’, *Peacebuilding*, 2:1 (2014), pp. 11–27.

⁷⁶Interpeace, ‘Fostering Resilience for Peace’; United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), ‘Empowered Youth, Sustainable Future: UNDP Youth Strategy, 2014–2017’ (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2014).

⁷⁷Latour, *Down to Earth*.

⁷⁸Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, p. 85, emphasis in original.

⁷⁹Hellmann, ‘Pragmatism and International Relations’; Jan Pospisil, *Peace in Political Unsettledness: Beyond Solving Conflict* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

⁸⁰CDA, ‘Do No Harm Workshop Trainer’s Manual’ (Cambridge, MA: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, 2016).

⁸¹Matus Halas, ‘In error we trust: An apology of abductive inference’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 28:4 (2015), pp. 701–20; Joseph, ‘Governing through failure and denial’.

⁸²Pol Bargaúes-Pedreny and Jessica Schmidt, ‘Learning to be postmodern in an all too modern world: “Whatever action” in international climate change imaginaries’, *Global Society* (2019), pp. 45–65.

David Chandler's work on resilience is useful to comprehend how approaches to international intervention draw on pragmatism to redefine policy strategies away from the liberal peace. In a world understood to be complex, resilience approaches avert the risk that either external agencies or local actors control peacebuilding processes by the means of operating their ideas and programmes hierarchically.⁸³ Instead, these approaches focus on the everyday practices and the already existing resources and capabilities that exist in postconflict zones: 'Pragmatist approaches of resilience seek to overcome this problematic and hierarchical binary by removing the "external" nature of international policy actors, as the focus upon the practices of the "everyday" is understood to generate the policy goals of intervention through community development itself.'⁸⁴

It is often the case that practitioners pay lip service to pragmatist forms of peacebuilding, as critical scholars remind.⁸⁵ In difficult situations of having to 'fumble in the dark', as Autesserre argues, peacebuilders are inclined to rely on expert knowledge, simple narratives and international sources, and to design short-term and top-down strategies.⁸⁶ Two critiques of current operations in the Balkans serve as examples. Selver Sahin has observed how foreign agencies in Kosovo have favoured 'stability first' policies and kept executive powers in security matters, despite commitment to local ownership, thereby postponing the government's aspiration to create a regular army;⁸⁷ in Bosnia, donors find it difficult to give up on their presumed ideas of ethnicity (assuming the existence of mono-ethnic groups), disregarding 'the ambiguous ethnicness' of local actors, which might be conducive to peace.⁸⁸ Thus, differences can be easily detected between theoretically informed hybrid peace aspirations and current programmes and policies that are generally conditioned by everyday constraints, geostrategic pressures, and implemented in response to specific problems. In consequence, the literature tends to dismiss policy approaches that deny evolving narratives and practices, for donors seem to relentlessly carry a baggage of 'liberal' ideas and are determined to impose an agenda for peace.⁸⁹ Contradicting Latour's famous remark, critics assert that 'practitioners have never ceased to be modern'. While this is often true, the contribution made in this article is different.

In sum, so far the article has claimed that dominant understandings of peacebuilding are beginning to undertake a 'pragmatist turn', where a liberal normative agenda that could drive the intervention process is purposely abandoned. The original idea of liberal statebuilding – like democracy and the public for Dewey – appears increasingly 'lost', 'uncertain', and 'eclipsed'.⁹⁰ In consequence, peacebuilding processes must necessarily become 'much more' than 'the product of an idea, of a single and consistent intent'.⁹¹ Today, a pragmatist ethos permeates peacebuilding when hybridised norms, networks, institutions, and actors cooperate and partner, exploring ways of crafting stability and change from below. Or, to use Dewey's words again, when actors take the 'indirect, extensive, enduring and serious consequences of conjoint and interacting behaviour', finding 'a common interest in controlling these consequences'.⁹²

⁸³Chandler, 'Resilience and the "everyday"'.
⁸⁴Ibid., p. 30.

⁸⁵Séverine Autesserre, 'The responsibility to protect in Congo: The failure of grassroots prevention', *International Peacekeeping*, 23:1 (2016), pp. 29–51; Filip Ejdus, 'Local ownership as international governmentality: Evidence from the EU mission in the Horn of Africa', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 39:1 (2018), pp. 28–50; Mac Ginty and Richmond, 'The fallacy of constructing hybrid political orders'.

⁸⁶Autesserre, *Peaceland*, pp. 115–58.

⁸⁷Selver B. Sahin, 'The rhetoric and practice of the "ownership" of security sector reform processes in fragile countries: The case of Kosovo', *International Peacekeeping*, 24:3 (2017), pp. 461–88.

⁸⁸Randall Puljek-Shank and Willemijn Verkoren, 'Civil society in a divided society: Linking legitimacy and ethnicness of civil society organizations in Bosnia-Herzegovina', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 52:2 (2016), pp. 184–202.

⁸⁹David Rampton and Suthakaran Nadarajah, 'A long view of liberal peace and its crisis', *European Journal of International Relations*, 23:2 (2017), pp. 441–65; Randazzo, 'The paradoxes of the "everyday"'.
⁹⁰Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, pp. 116–17.

⁹¹Ibid., p. 110.

⁹²Ibid., p. 126.

Reading current peacebuilding practices through a pragmatist lens is useful in order to expound two considerations, explored in the remaining parts of the article: first, to comprehend the sense of despair and scepticism that haunts most contemporary peacebuilding practices and second, to begin to grapple with the unforeseen consequences that current operations may bring. In other words, it responds to why is it that frustration looms over peacebuilders that support bottom-up initiatives? And where is a practice-based understanding of sustaining peace heading? Current engagements in the Western Balkans are key to thinking through these questions, as recent evaluations highlight the need for a more processual, long-term, and practice-driven cooperation, while at the same time anticipate fatigue and a slow progress in the coming years.⁹³ Although the interviews with practitioners cannot be used for a complete assessment of the perceptions on sustaining peace, they are valuable to investigate the apparent stasis and frustrations that accompany current practices in Bosnia and Kosovo and reflect on how these can be managed.

Following the consequences: The frustrating quest for peace in the Balkans

Postwar interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo have dominated policy and academic debates in the last two decades. After the wars in the 1990s, the UN led two ambitious and highly interventionist projects of postwar recovery and statebuilding. In Bosnia, this invasive approach caused a culture of dependency and proved detrimental to local reconciliation,⁹⁴ motivating the gradual introduction of light footprint mechanisms that emphasised local ownership and societal development. For example, in Bosnia, the Bonn powers, which authorised almost unlimited control to the UN Secretariat in 1997, were nuanced throughout the 2000s by stressing the growth of civil society, while preparing the country for the EU accession⁹⁵

In Kosovo, similarly, the strong interventionist strategy adopted by the UN after the conflict (1998–9) has been tempered over the years to underscore the need for a bottom-up inclusive peace.⁹⁶ In 2008, the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX) supplanted the UN Mission, proposing a much more technical and less intrusive approach based on monitoring, mentoring, and advising, promoting inclusivity while de-emphasising ethnicity, gradually yielding the driving seat to local actors.⁹⁷ In both countries, the shifts towards greater local autonomy of the peace process have not led to external withdrawal and the UN and EU have continuously prolonged their mandates and peacebuilding support activities. Even today, according to policy reports, there are many socioeconomic and political challenges lying ahead – from improving inter-ethnic coexistence or protection of minority rights to developing efficient financial institutions – and the role provided by foreign agencies is still considered vital.⁹⁸ In May 2019, opining about Bosnia's application for EU membership, the Commission stated that Bosnia

⁹³Isabelle Ioannides, 'Peace and Security in 2018: An Evaluation of EU Peacebuilding in the Western Balkans' (Brussels: European Parliament, 2018).

⁹⁴Roberto Belloni, 'Civil society and peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina', *Journal of Peace Research*, 38:2 (2001), pp. 163–80; Gerald Knaus and Felix Martin, 'Lessons from Bosnia and Herzegovina: Travails of the European Raj', *Journal of Democracy*, 14:3 (2003), pp. 60–74.

⁹⁵Marc Weller and Stefan Wolff, 'Bosnia and Herzegovina ten years after Dayton: Lessons for internationalized state building', *Ethnopolitics*, 5:1 (2006), pp. 1–13.

⁹⁶Annika Björkdahl and Ivan Gusic, "'Global" norms and "local" agency: Frictional peacebuilding in Kosovo', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 18:3 (2015), pp. 265–87.

⁹⁷Pol Bargaues-Pedreny, 'From promoting to de-emphasizing "ethnicity": Rethinking the endless supervision of Kosovo', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 10:2 (2016), pp. 222–40.

⁹⁸European Union Rule of Law Mission Kosovo (EULEX), 'Compact Progress Report: Assessing Progress between July 2017–June 2018' (2018); European Commission, 'Key Findings of the 2018 Report on Kosovo' (Brussels: European Commission, 2018); European Commission, 'Key Findings of the 2018 Report on Bosnia and Herzegovina' (European Commission, 2018).

‘does not yet sufficiently fulfil the criteria related to the stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities’.⁹⁹ In consequence, ‘the Commission will monitor Bosnia and Herzegovina’s progress within the institutional framework of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement and will continue financially supporting the country under the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance’.¹⁰⁰

Whereas EU officials in Brussels reduce all difficulties to a technical process that will be ‘fixed’ as soon as local partners cooperate (Interviews 8 and 9),¹⁰¹ when travelling to these two countries today, one senses a growing despair among international peacebuilders. They are convinced that they should intervene less but stay longer; that they should offer recommendations and facilitate peace and, simultaneously, let local actors lead the way. For example, a chief diplomat of EULEX admitted without demur the errors committed in the early days of the UN-led international supervision in Kosovo: ‘We, Western institutions, thought we were right. We arrived with a clear package and wanted to impose peace’ (Interview 2). EULEX has learnt from this mistake, she continues, and has introduced local ownership in all institution-building mechanisms since the beginning of the mission in 2008. Yet she considers that EULEX has still too much authority, too much responsibility: ‘What is the added value of having an executive mandate?’ Too much power for EULEX, reasons the official, implies that local authorities blame the foreign mission for any setback and shy away from making courageous decisions.

However, while seeming to call for retreat, the policymaker bemoans the reduction of EULEX staffing from 1,600 to 800 in 2016. She foresees duties and chores for EULEX everywhere, as ‘Kosovars are not ripe to deal with the issues by themselves’ (Interview 2). As an example, she explains that some judges decline to be in charge of certain cases because it is too dangerous for them. Albeit there have been substantial advances in the creation of a judicial system, it is still immature. The current mandate of EULEX ends on 14 June 2020, but the diplomat intimates that the EU should continue advising, nurturing, and strengthening Kosovar institutions in the future.

The impetus to admit the negative impacts and pitfalls of international agencies and yet to opt to prolong the international engagement is not seen as contradictory. In June 2018, the Council of the EU decided to refocus the mandate of EULEX and ended the judicial executive part of the mission, while two months later it launched Justice 2020, an initiative to ‘maintain an extensive monitoring capability in both the Kosovo judicial and prosecutorial systems as well as in the correctional service’.¹⁰² The EULEX Head of Mission, Alexandra Papadopoulou, explains that the initiative is requested rather than forced: ‘Justice 2020 is a mechanism that was established proactively at the initiative of the Kosovo authorities. This is a very relevant aspect worth emphasising, because real change can only be achieved and sustained through local ownership.’ Yet, it is an ownership that is shared: ‘As long as it will remain in Kosovo – EULEX stands ready to provide its subject matter expert advice and its uniquely embedded perspective in many rule of law areas ... [EULEX will] continue advising Kosovo counterparts in overcoming their challenges, including any issues that Justice 2020 may identify over time.’¹⁰³

Most relevant policy frameworks in the Balkans today note that external presence is ‘invited’ to stay or ‘welcomed’ to assist and centred on giving more responsibilities to local contractors, institutions, and people, while at the same time emphasizing the need for a continued process of

⁹⁹European Commission, ‘Commission Opinion on Bosnia and Herzegovina’s Application for Membership of the European Union’ (Brussels: European Commission, 2019), p. 16.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁰¹As a EEAS official argued: ‘these countries are realising that they need to apply reforms with more determinacy [to join the EU]’ (Interview 9).

¹⁰²Council of the EU, ‘EULEX Kosovo: New Role for the EU Rule of Law Mission’ (Brussels: Council of the European Union, 2018); EULEX, ‘EULEX at the Launch of Justice 2020’ (2018).

¹⁰³EULEX, ‘EULEX at the Launch of Justice 2020’.

intervention.¹⁰⁴ These reports invariably conclude that ‘additional steps are needed regarding enforcement’ of human and fundamental rights;¹⁰⁵ or ‘much work remains before the judicial institutions in northern Kosovo become fully functional’.¹⁰⁶ Although local autonomy is a priority, external actors always find their niche: ‘the time has now come for them to demonstrate their capacities and capabilities as fully independent institutions. In the meantime, the EU remains available to continue its support through a number of available instruments.’¹⁰⁷ In Bosnia, according to the 2018 progress report, almost all areas – from public administration to the fight against corruption, from gender-based violence to migration management capacity – are yet to be improved.¹⁰⁸ And a degree of interference sustained across time is always implied: ‘Local actors are more exposed to dangers than Americans ... There are always exceptions to the principle of ownership. We need to choose well when to interfere’, argues an official from USAID (Interview 5). As there are unforeseen circumstances and policies and initiatives generate unexpected consequences, a yawning abyss between theory and practice, as deep as the Mariana Trench, always returns and keeps foreign practitioners occupied.

A director of the OSCE in Bosnia regrets the negative consequences generated by the policy of ‘two schools under one roof’ promoted in the aftermath of the war (Interview #4). Since violence had separated communities across ethnic and religious lines, the OSCE sought to implement a policy of bringing children together in the school (one roof), although they would be separated and learn in two languages, two histories, and have two curricula, two classrooms, two entrances, and different educators (two schools). This initial plan, the official argues, was legitimised to avoid an unsecure teaching environment; it was only a first step to later integrate the students under one curriculum, one school, meeting the broader aim of cultivating a tolerant, reconciled, and multi-ethnic society (Interview 4). But the policy did not carry the intended results and the division in the educational system has legitimised ethno-nationalist rhetoric, strengthened confrontation and entrenched ethnic division.¹⁰⁹ Two decades after the war, some schools have been integrated, while others remain segregated.¹¹⁰

The director explains that the OSCE cannot and does not want to alter the education system, overriding cantonal competencies. The responsibility of external agencies must be different: ‘We need to give attention to the right stories’, she expresses (Interview 4). Organic and grassroots initiatives for peace certainly exist, like the children protesting against segregation in the schooling system of Jajce, a town located a two-and-a-half-hour drive northwest from Sarajevo.¹¹¹ ‘These children deserve an empire’, she claims, and explains that they had to rebel against the authorities of the Central Bosnia Canton, their parents, the school director, and some of their teachers to fight for an inclusive education. ‘Our role is to recognise and support their courage to fight for a better society’ (Interview 4). In July 2018, the OSCE and the Dutch Foreign Ministry granted the Max van der Stoep Award to the children for their promotion of societal integration.¹¹² However, ‘stories like this are too few’, the official confesses. Her hope is that the children of Jajce will influence other children; that these stories become the norm, so that OSCE can nurture them.

¹⁰⁴Erlend G. Krogstad, ‘Local ownership as dependence management: Inviting the coloniser back’, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 8:2–3 (2014), pp. 105–25.

¹⁰⁵European Commission, ‘Key Findings of the 2018 Report on Bosnia and Herzegovina’, p. 1.

¹⁰⁶EULEX, ‘Compact Progress Report’, p. 4.

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁰⁸European Commission, ‘Key Findings of the 2018 Report on Bosnia and Herzegovina’.

¹⁰⁹Stefanie Kappler, *Local Agency and Peacebuilding: EU and International Engagement in Bosnia- Herzegovina, Cyprus and South Africa* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Stefanie Kappler and Oliver Richmond, ‘Peacebuilding and culture in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Resistance or emancipation?’, *Security Dialogue*, 42:3 (2011), pp. 261–78.

¹¹⁰OSCE, ‘A Vision of Unity: Jajce’s Student Movement for Inclusive Multi-ethnic Education’ (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2018).

¹¹¹*Ibid.*

¹¹²*Ibid.*

Similarly, the Post-Conflict Research Center (PCRC) has drawn on EU funds to develop the ‘ordinary heroes peacebuilding program’, running from 2011, which shows audiovisual material of local stories of reconciliation to youth participants across Bosnia. ‘We do not force anything’, explains a team member of PCRC, ‘we only encourage [communities] to reflect on perceptions or stereotypes of war by projecting their individual stories of cooperation and peace’ (Interview 7). Yet, she underscores, while young people are usually receptive to reconciliation stories, one can still perceive deep divisions in society. As in the interview with the OSCE official, the unspoken subtext here is that foreign practitioners are looking for needles in haystacks, for lighthouses in an ocean of obscurity.

Officials working for international organisations recognise that they can achieve little and should not impose their will, but lament that national actors do not always pursue the right objectives. Despite the acceptance in policy circles that sustaining peace requires that international and local agents are engaged relationally in everyday practices, in such ways that consequences, feedback loops, deflections, surprises, contingencies, and errors are taken into account,¹¹³ the perils of practical affairs deter them from doing so. In sum, a far cry from liberal peace, international agencies are conscious that their policies deviate from initial expectations and need to follow and support existing dynamics and actions, rather than try to change them. However, *not yet* like pragmatism, they often remain steadfast in their original objectives of bringing about an inclusive peace. Speaking about education and democracy, Dewey writes:

The aim as it first emerges is a mere tentative sketch. The act of striving to realize it tests its worth. If it suffices to direct activity successfully, nothing more is required, since its whole function is to set a mark in advance; and at times a mere hint may suffice. But usually – at least in complicated situations – acting upon it brings to light conditions which had been overlooked. This calls for revision of the original aim; it has to be added to and subtracted from. An aim must, then, be flexible; it must be capable of alteration to meet circumstances.¹¹⁴

According to Dewey, the ends must not be rigid, but flexible. Quite to the contrary, peacebuilders resist this openness with regard to their aims. Since neither they nor local actors can meet them, despair takes hold.

While liberal peace practitioners used to affirm their moral superiority, today’s boast about their humbleness. As a USAID official in Kosovo declares: ‘we take real pride in calling ourselves a learning institution’ (Interview 1). After two decades of thorough supervision, agencies like USAID no longer work with ‘specific templates’ fixed a priori. Instead, as the official explains: ‘Learning and adapting, are the two words that appear on every single page of our regulations and policies.’ Experience guides policies and these are constantly revised and ‘changed to meet the new circumstances’ (Interview 1). The interviewee describes a non-linear process of unpredictable turns in which they must be flexible and continuously learn: ‘we need to recognise failure, we need to embrace failure, because if you do not fail, you do not learn’ (Interview 1).

Yet the same official recounts that Kosovar institutions are still weak. ‘They lack capacity’, she argues, because some are too new, others suffer from corruption (Interview 1). She admits to feel ‘discouraged’ when the people do not seem to want to improve their lives: ‘I would love to see 10,000 people marching in central Pristina against corruption. But this does not happen’ (Interview #1). The USAID official has a clear vision, like the metaphysician philosophers despised by Dewey: she knows the problem – corruption – and the solution – committed and responsible people. She uses a metaphor to emphasise the lack of local will: ‘you can drive a horse to the water. But you cannot make him drink’ (Interview 1). How does she know whether

¹¹³Brusset, de Coning, and Hughes (eds), *Complexity Thinking for Peacebuilding Practice and Evaluation*.

¹¹⁴Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, p. 109.

the water is potable, whether the horse is thirsty? Deweyan questions could certainly undermine the USAID official's framing of external assistance. The USAID official is not contradicting herself when she seems to trust local counterparts and dismiss them at the same time. She is articulating the fundamental problem of trying to shun liberal peace, while still setting goals for peacebuilding and wanting to fix certain obstacles and direct the events: they wish to control 'the public', as if it was fixed and organised, rather than the 'indirect, extensive, enduring and serious consequences of conjoint and interacting behaviour'.¹¹⁵ That is, on the one hand, the USAID official knows that, in order to construct a stable and prospering state, international agents need to take a secondary role, assume responsibility for some of the faults, delve into everyday concerns and rely on locally driven projects. On the other hand, she appears discouraged, as local actors do not act as she wishes that they might. She feels disheartened, as reality contradicts her expectations.

The key source of practitioners' frustration lies in the aspiration to reconcile pragmatist and liberal stances: there is a loss of confidence in international and local peacebuilders and a commitment to working together through the concreteness of everyday practices; at the same time, however, practitioners still desire to progress and achieve peace. Norms like 'liberal peace' or European standards are still given a higher value, while complex everyday practices and experiences are depreciated. As Dewey explains: 'the happiness attending knowing is unalloyed; it is not entangled in the risks which overt action cannot escape ... Failure and frustration are attributed to the accidents of an alien, intractable and inferior realm of existence.'¹¹⁶ In the twilight of the liberal peace, pragmatism helps to visualise how peacebuilding enters into a difficult impasse. Everywhere there is a predisposition to prolong interventions and allow greater context-sensitivity, to transfer ownership and include diverse local practitioners, to be aware of the consequences of initiatives and avoid doing harm. Yet in holding certain normative aspirations – in aiming at building peace in a certain way, or privileging reconciliation, stability, and liberal democracy – the unpredictable, labyrinthine path of emerging deviations appears exasperating. As we have seen, the call within policy circles as much as in critical scholarship is to multiply the efforts, show greater reflexivity, stay longer, and be even more sensitive to alterity, to finally close the gap between theory and practice.

In the field, frustration fills the air because the gap will not be closed, because practitioners have not made 'a surrender'.¹¹⁷ Frustration was never an issue for the pragmatists, who accepted errors, mishaps, and deflections as part of a never-ending quest for certainties. Dewey did not want to simply 'turn things upside down' and embrace perils and accidents, but to acknowledge the value of practices in generating new ideas and horizons. Thus, for pragmatism the point is not only that engagements in everyday life are *necessarily* different to our theoretical norms and values, but to embolden practitioners to face up to the challenge of privileging their practice, while recognising that 'doing is always subject to peril, to the danger of frustration' and that practices can never bring 'absolute certitude'.¹¹⁸ In turn, this would imply to think sustaining peace without an original principle and an end point. This would be akin to reinterpretations in the humanities of how to live in the Anthropocene, that is, understanding 'life' open-endedly, 'without teleology, without purpose, without a final accomplishment'.¹¹⁹ Is it then perhaps time to drop peace and move forward without attachments and anxiety? The profusion of sustaining peace practices may be small steps towards this new pragmatist adventure, although our theories and critical perspectives of peacebuilding have not yet recognised it.

¹¹⁵Ibid., p. 126.

¹¹⁶Ibid., p. 12.

¹¹⁷Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, p. 38.

¹¹⁸Ibid., p. 35.

¹¹⁹Elisabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 4.

Conclusion

This article has looked into the shifting understandings of sustaining peace policy approaches, noticing that they increasingly adopt long-term and sustained interventions, value local leadership and ownership, and are aware of the risks and negative consequences of donor initiatives. While these policy approaches promise to advance towards a more inclusive and organic peace, thereby correcting the errors of more invasive models of liberal peacebuilding, it is not difficult to detect a certain sense of hopelessness in the field. Bosnia and Kosovo are certainly not cases whose lessons can be generalised, but they provide examples that enable reflection upon the despair that seems to haunt the implementation of sustaining peace. Drawing on pragmatism, this article has argued that frustrations follow from attempts to reduce the disparity between theory and practice. It has shown how the policy and critical literature criticise current practices and call for improved methods and approaches to try to close the gap between what is professed in theory and its implementation, thus overlooking that practice will always betray the limits of theory. As Dewey foretold: 'Perfect certainty is what man wants. It cannot be found by practical doing or making; these take effect in an uncertain future, and involve peril, the risk of misadventure, frustration and failure.'¹²⁰

Pragmatism may also be useful to anticipate the trajectory that international peacebuilding is taking after the discredit of liberal peace. Here, two paths are hinted (both are seen 'pragmatically', neither as positive nor as negative; as opportunities and risks at the same time). The first departs from one of the greatest philosophical lessons to be drawn from Dewey, which is to see that practices and processes are necessarily 'curved', rather than straight, and that feedback loops cannot be 'looped', as Latour understands well when talking about politics.¹²¹ Rather than dismissing these curves and deviations and depreciating practices and experiences to glorify theories and norms, as the IR literature tends to do, Dewey would encourage practitioners to be open to discoveries in the field of action and hence to modify the content of ends and values. He reinterpreted 'doing as the heart of knowing' to take humanity forward: 'An idealism of action that is devoted to creation of a future, instead of to staking itself upon propositions about the past, is invincible.'¹²² From Dewey, therefore, IR inherits an invitation to think of knowing through doing, to experiment in the open and explore this world, while abandoning abstract truths and dreams of otherworldliness. Although peacebuilding would surely become an elusive and capricious process, practices would generate new opportunities; other horizons would soon be glimpsed.

However, the search for new 'horizons' could be seen as another liberal mantra: although continuously revised, horizons would become a new direction or ideal to follow. Quite the contrary, pragmatism also adumbrates the idea of literally practicing peacebuilding without principles and end points. What Dewey called a 'Copernican revolution' could then be read as a radical reappraisal of peacebuilding: humans would embrace the failure of international peace operations and downgrade the capacity of peacebuilders to understand and transform reality. This extreme pragmatist interpretation might bring far-reaching consequences for IR. Bereft of a clear vision of peace, IR might lose its backbone, peacebuilding its purpose, and yet international organisations would become accustomed to operate in this impossible (some would call it absurd) position. By glorifying practices and experiences, practitioners would end up celebrating a crisis of certainty and dispatching their principles and normative expectations. After losing their moorings, practitioners would support, help, or advise local agents while accepting their inability to do their job right. They would no longer feel frustrated because they would have no hope of success. They would be compelled to practice peacebuilding without peace in an unintelligible and hopeless world.

¹²⁰Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, p. 24.

¹²¹Bruno Latour, 'What if we talked politics a little?', *Contemporary Political Theory*, 2:2 (2003), pp. 153–4.

¹²²Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, pp. 38, 289.

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Appendix

All interviews were carried out by the author. Per order of appearance:

- Interview 1: United States Agency for International Development (USAID) official. Pristina, Kosovo, 8 December 2016.
- Interview 2: European Union Rule of Law Mission Kosovo (EULEX) official. Pristina, Kosovo, 30 November 2016.
- Interview 3: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (English: German Development Agency (GIZ) official. Pristina, Kosovo, 3 December 2016.
- Interview 4: Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) official. Sarajevo, 21 August 2017.
- Interview 5: USAID official. Sarajevo, 17 August 2017.
- Interview 6: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) official. Sarajevo, 15 August 2017.
- Interview 7: Post-Conflict Research Center (PCRC) official. Sarajevo, 22 August 2017.
- Interview 8: European Commission (EC) Official. Brussels, 14 May 2019.
- Interview 9: European External Action Service (EEAS) Official. Brussels, 16 May 2019.