

Peacebuilding – Creating space for critical voices and practitioners

By Oliver P. Richmond, Roger Mac Ginty, Birte Vogel, Ioannis Tellidis and Stefanie Kappler

Enormous resources and energies are invested in the name of peacebuilding, yet the term and practice remain contested. Debate rages on the extent to which peacebuilding is an efficient, well-coordinated, and viable project, to criticism of being a cover for neo-colonial pacification projects. It includes the question to which extent international institutions and those who want to support peace are open to local voices. We are aware that this represents a fairly current and narrow framework, but forms part of a much broader historical and intellectual project. Our international journal *Peacebuilding*, peer-reviewed and published by Taylor & Francis, provides a space for debate, disagreement, critique and the advancement of theoretical and empirical knowledge on peace and conflict in general, and peacebuilding in particular. We see the need to investigate how peace may be ‘built’ at different levels, though we may have some concerns with the ontological and epistemological constraints of placing such ambitions within a specifically western modernisation and state framework. Thus, we are open to a much broader conceptualisations and approaches to the formation, creation, and maintenance, of peace, its conceptualisations, methodologies, history, sociology, anthropology, politics, and economics. We are interested in its uses and abuses, its power relations and (pluralist) ethics – a project often associated with critical peace studies or ‘the local turn’.

Conflict research as an academic field is now half a century old, but Peacebuilding just celebrated its second anniversary. Therefore, we should not review our own history, but instead, use the opportunity to remember those who have been pioneers of peace studies and coined our perspective on the field. Many of them, like David Mitrany, Kenneth and Elise Boulding, Johan Galtung, John Burton, and others, broke new ground and were ready to step beyond disciplinary boundaries. A.J. Groom’s piece ‘Conflict research avant la lettre’ (published in our first volume) gives insightful reflections and an analysis of the early years and contrasts between what seemed important then and the contemporary agenda. He mentions many of those we are grateful to and inspired by, who have often stood against intellectual orthodoxy. *Peacebuilding* attempts to keep open this intellectual space for critical voices and therefore we are pleased that some of these innovative and significant contributors to contemporary controversial debates have published in our first issues such as Vivienne Jabri, David Chandler, Michael Pugh or John Darby, to name just a few.

We further hope to engage practitioners and scholars with one another on traditional and emerging quandaries such as the tensions between universal goals and particularistic views of the best approaches to peacebuilding. We have done so in our first issue with an article on how local peace committees can make a difference (Paul van Tongeren), followed by a series of comments by academics and practitioners allowing debate within the issue and beyond. We plan to have similar formats again in the future, that is, formats which allow for an engagement beyond the top-down practices of academic publishing, which we often strive to criticize with respect to peacebuilding practice. By opening the space beyond the academic circle, we particularly want to include perspectives that are those closest to the conflict as well as often left out of academic debates: practitioners and those living in conflict-affected zones. Have esoteric econometric debates on the democratic peace or equally impenetrable post-colonial discourses much relevance to the people who are living through conflicts and attempts to make peace, or those trying to construct policy to address these problems? We think not. Many analyses seem wrapped up in a self-indulgent conceit of narrow debates that only make sense to a privileged few who are party to a particular methodology or discourse

and have a vested interest in the continuation of current power relations. Many academic analyses seem unaware of their own positionality and ideological stance. They do not consider the impacts of their subjects, or that their subjects have agency. If we talk about peacebuilding, how can we do so without taking those into account we expect to live this peace? The ambition to go beyond the ‘usual suspects’ in publishing on peace and conflict is certainly a challenge in an environment, which is increasingly tuned towards frameworks of evaluation and the compartmentalisation of disciplines. In that respect, we want to contest the often exclusionary nature of academic publishing and give voice to a broader spectrum of authors and readers.

That does not imply that we do not want the articles in *Peacebuilding* to be intellectually and methodologically rigorous, but we are also mindful of the need to broaden debates, make them more inclusive and pluralist. We would like to see more work on the methodological ethics of peace work. Indeed, education and awareness lie at the heart of conflict transformation as opposed to conflict resolution and conflict management and any ‘emancipatory’ project of peace. The subjects of peace need to be able to speak about it. It is also reasonable to think that we have a better chance of supporting the transformation of conflicts if we attempt to gain a clearer understanding of ourselves, our groups, and others. We hope that *Peacebuilding* can contribute to this process of self-learning and of reaching out, whereby academics and practitioners can be mature enough to reflect on the factors that construct their own identities and stances, and the subject of peace and speak through and above this process.

We recognise that ‘peace’ is an essentially contested concept, which implies that the analyses that are generated and the policies that are implemented rely heavily on the researchers’ underlying understanding(s) of not only ‘peace’, but also ‘war’, ‘power’ and ‘justice’, among others. Peace studies has time and again been criticised for its lack of ‘criticality’ and ‘self-reflexivity’, and for giving in to the demands and structures of the policy world. Re-defining the study and science of ‘peace’ and reclaiming it from International Relations and Strategic Studies should involve more than just the re-emergence of the ‘realist vs. idealist’ dichotomy, and should look beyond meta-theoretical epistemologies like constructivism and post-modernism. Along with other recently-launched journals that examine peace and conflict critically, *Peacebuilding* envisages to contribute to the de-institutionalisation and de-centralisation of peace research and to foment its critical and reflexive growth. This can be done by identifying and theoretically developing new issues which will emerge via innovative and alternative approaches found in neighbouring disciplines. Therefore, the journal is consciously inter-disciplinary and recognises that a range of disciplines have interesting things to say about conflict and how it is to be addressed. It is noticeable that many academic debates on peace and conflict are ghettoised, stuck in disciplinary trenches, and north-south power relations, and are unable to reach out to other debates. They are occasionally cauterised by their dependent relationship with power and policy demands. Nonetheless, there have been many encouraging signs through the course of these debates and, of late, international relations scholars have recognised the insights to be gleaned from critical debates pertaining to sociological, anthropological, geographical, and post-colonial approaches. We are confident that *Peacebuilding* has started to provide a space for inter-disciplinary exchanges and the growing lending and borrowing between different methodological approaches – for example by combining peace research with human geography, sociology, anthropology and so forth. We are trying to reflect this in our review section. *Peacebuilding* features both reviews of individual books as well as larger review essays on recently published books that address the complexities and multidimensional nature of peace. We are specifically interested in books that go beyond superficial knowledge and instead address more subtle manifestations of peacebuilding agency. The latter can be found

not only in the narrow field of conflict resolution and peacebuilding, but also in related approaches to development, security, justice and beyond. While our individual book reviews situate texts in their wider academic context and assess their contribution to the literature within, our review essays filter out shared and often controversial themes as addressed by authors in fields related to Peace and Conflict Studies. Beyond book reviews, *Peacebuilding* also aims to open up its review section towards other, related forms of media, including films and documentaries, to be able to accommodate a broad spectrum of approaches to peace and peacebuilding.

Our intention is that *Peacebuilding* becomes an interactive and inclusive space that goes far beyond a traditional academic publication. We have linked the journal with the International Association for Peace and Conflict Studies (IAPCS) and encourage everyone to play a role in the journal and the Association. The Association runs an annual conference and various workshops through the year. We see *Peacebuilding* as a community endeavour rather than just a publication and encourage you to be a member of that community. Last, we want to take this opportunity to thank all our authors, reviewers and supporters without this project would be impossible. If you would like to engage with us, we are open to suggestions, criticism and encouragement: Peacebuilding@manchester.ac.uk

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