

RESEARCH

Peacebuilding in the Anthropocene: Negotiating the Problems of Acting in an Entangled World

Maximilian Lakitsch

The performance of international peacebuilding has been far below the high expectations set after the end of the Cold War. Criticism of the modernist conviction that it is possible to build peace along the lines of universal and linear blueprints has accompanied peacebuilding ever since its inception. This critique has gained depth and significance within the broader context of the Anthropocene. This 'intervention' article focuses upon two important publications in this field: Ignasi Torrent's *Entangled Peace: UN Peacebuilding and the Limits of a Relational World* (2021) and Jan Pospisil's *Peace in Political Unsettlement: Beyond Solving Conflict* (2019). Both monographs highlight that a reconsideration of peacebuilding in the Anthropocene is necessary and search for ways to engage with peacebuilding more effectively and more realistically. However, they also indicate a fundamental problem of how to work in this field without assumptions of linear causal impacts. Based on a thorough analysis of Torrent's and Pospisil's understandings of peacebuilding practice, this article introduces and scrutinizes the dilemma that arises from the need to reject narrow and instrumentalist approaches in the entangled world of the Anthropocene while maintaining that it is nevertheless necessary to navigate peace and still to act in this world.

Keywords: peace; war; conflict transformation; posthumanism; new materialism; complexity

More than three decades after the end of the Cold War, the international community's optimism regarding its capabilities to foster international peace has dramatically declined. Its attempts to prevent societies from lapsing or relapsing into armed violence in the context of peacebuilding (United Nations 2008: 18) have been thrown into deep crisis (Chandler 2017). From Rwanda, Bosnia, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo to Mali, Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan or East Timor, international expertise and dedication could not match the high expectations. The results seem to be superficial at best and the impact of international policy interventions detrimental and disintegrating at worst. However, criticism of the modernist conviction of the possibility of liberal peacebuilding through universal and linear blueprints has accompanied the endeavour of peacebuilding from the beginning (Mac Ginty & Richmond 2013; Mac Ginty 2006). These critical voices have become more and more recognized and have even been translated into the peacebuilding policies of the United Nations (2016), the European Union (2016) and the World Bank (2011). They have gained more ontological as well as epistemological depth and significance within the broader context of the Anthropocene.

Recognizing its ability to affect the Earth's life processes makes humanity an environmental force and introduces the geological era of the Anthropocene. These human-induced alterations have been fostering biospheric destabilisations that have led to a rise in the frequency and intensity of climate and weather extremes on land and water such as heavy rainfalls, droughts or fires. Taking into account the crucial relevance of non-human phenomena for human everyday-life strongly questions modernity's constitutive distinction between nature and culture. Rather, humankind is inextricably interrelated with the world and its myriads of living and non-living inhabitants and processes (Crutzen 2002; Crutzen & Stoermer 2000; Latour 2014). Therefore, embracing the Anthropocene does not celebrate humanity's sovereignty, but rather indicates the dissolution of human agency within the complex interrelationships between the human and the non-human world.

Accordingly, the failure of peacebuilding to meet its high expectations is not only shaped and informed by discussions of the 'liberal peace' but also by critiques of modernist thinking in general. After all, affirming the condition of the Anthropocene implies a rejection of modernist convictions about the possibility of controlling or influencing the world for human ends, including aspirations of how to govern communities and to maintain or to rebuild peace. In other words, climate change debates on the limits of governance have indirectly brought into

question the conditions of possibility for peacebuilding (Pospisil 2019, 1–2; Torrent 2021: xi–xix). However, while the embrace of the unpredictability, complexity, and non-linearity of the Anthropocene implies the rejection of modernist understandings of agency, it enables the rethinking of agency under more realistic assumptions. Pragmatic understandings thereby open up ways to more effectively engage with the world for the purpose of peace. However, a paradox emerges: attempts to build peace pragmatically have to somehow find a balance between the rejection of instrumental understandings of direction and control in the entangled world of the Anthropocene, on the one hand, and the need for some kind of reference and fixity in order to navigate peace, on the other.

This article analyses and reflects upon this dilemma of pragmatic peacebuilding in the Anthropocene. In order to do so, it makes an intervention through the analysis of two important publications in this field: Ignasi Torrent's 'Entangled Peace: UN Peacebuilding and the Limits of a Relational World' (2021) and Jan Pospisil's 'Peace in Political Unsettledness: Beyond Solving Conflict' (2019). While these works represent a broader trend to adapt peacebuilding to complex and non-linear understanding of the world and its dynamics (see e.g., Paffenholz 2021; de Coning 2018), they both embrace such an understanding at a deeper ontological and epistemological level that also characterizes the Anthropocene. Nevertheless, the two approaches find themselves on opposing sides within the above introduced dilemma: while Pospisil follows through on the significant implications of developing a non-instrumental attempt to rearticulate peacebuilding at the cost of any kind fixed reference point, Torrent proposes a conceptually guided and eventually too instrumentalised approach.

This intervention article will be set out as follows. First, there is a brief clarification of the link between understandings of the Anthropocene and policy discussions of peacebuilding, the first section elaborates on the analytical value of this relationship: it opens up an infinitely complex and messy, but eventually more comprehensive and more realistic view of (post-) conflict contexts beyond reductionist and delusional modernist approaches. The second section elaborates on Torrent's and Pospisil's understandings of peacebuilding practice and scrutinizes the arising dilemma of bridging the necessity for non-instrumental approaches and the need to navigate peace. Taking into account the strengths and flaws of both approaches, the final section summarizes the main arguments and seeks to bridge the positions of Pospisil and Torrent that appear to be mutually exclusive.

A more complex but more realistic understanding of (post-) conflict context

Both Torrent's 'Entangled Peace' and Pospisil's 'Peace in Political Unsettledness' build their argumentation on ontological and epistemological assumptions that concern recent theoretical developments such as new materialism, critical posthumanism or relational ontologies, all of which also relate to the overarching geohistorical era of the Anthropocene. After all, even if their accentuations

might differ, they do relate to a posthumanist reading of the Anthropocene. Accordingly, regardless of the exact time or place in human history, be it in the global north or south, whether it first happened in a significant way through deforestation, urbanization, overfishing, the mass extinction of life or the emission of carbon dioxide, humans have undeniably inscribed themselves into earth's life processes (Crutzen & Stoermer 2000). Ironically, the human assertion of autonomy that emerged from European humanism and modernity, which was paved by the extensive use of fossil fuel, led to the erosion of its very preconditions. Rather than affirming humanity's claim as a sovereign actor, these alterations threaten its very survival and therefore reveal that nature has never been an empty stage for any species to act at will: while humans move earth, earth is also moving humans.

Therefore, embracing the Anthropocene reveals human exceptionalism as a presumptuous modernist delusion that conceals that humans have always been constitutively entwined with an infinitely complex web of human and non-human materialities. In other words, affirming the condition of the Anthropocene acknowledges that humankind shares agency with the non-human world in doing and thinking. A relational ontology rejects any clear separation of a human from a non-human realm, which makes classic human domains such as politics infinitely more complex. Finally, embedding and dissolving human agency within the complex web of the Earth's myriads of dwellers and inhabitants has crucial epistemological implications as it denies the possibility of independent and universal human reasoning. Rather, human thinking is fundamentally positional and context-bound (Latour 2014; Haraway 2016; Braidotti 2013: 55–104; Chandler 2018).

The ontological implications of the Anthropocene relate to a depiction of space not as an absolute category against the background of an abstract nature, but as consisting of non-linear processes between humans and non-humans – it is the open and unpredictable outcome of interactions between actors and processes (Torrent 2021: 19–20). Without the abstract and independent category of space – to locate separated and sequential entities, objects and processes within – describing entities as bearing essentialist characteristics becomes impossible. This is of great relevance for Pospisil (2019: 38–44) as it makes it impossible to adequately analyse conflict dynamics and, on this foundation, to engage in effective responses. Torrent (2021: 22–36) highlights the ontological constraints that arise from this entangled understanding of space for international actors such as the United Nations (UN) in its attempts to foster operational coherence, which is even more complicated due to the involvement of external positionalities from the perspective of international headquarters – they are all embedded in fundamentally different entanglements.

The positionality of human thinking, the infinity of possible positions and the incommensurability of the related entanglements reveal the epistemological impossibility of engaging with the world through abstract and generalized theoretical and operational conceptions.

Accordingly, the conceptual framing of instrumental goal-oriented change, premised upon liberal principles, could not be implemented after the end of the Cold War; as can be seen by looking at the international community's engagement in Somalia, Rwanda, Iraq or Afghanistan. The failure is so substantial that it even raises doubts about the actual intentions, as Pospisil (2019: 20–30) claims. Torrent more closely investigates the epistemological difficulties of peacebuilding that prevent the UN from adequately engaging with the locals in a certain mission. Pointing to the case of the UN's mission in Sierra Leone, where the local civil society was of fundamental operational importance, Torrent describes the incompatibility with the UN's conceptual bias towards formalised institutions and urban actors that meet its epistemic understanding and its technical requirements. As a result, the UN failed to understand crucial actors from the local or societal peripheries (Torrent 2021: 1–18).

Recognizing the flaws of instrumentalised conceptions to see and engage with a (post-) conflict reality, 'post-liberal peacebuilding' suggested a contextual shift towards the local (Pospisil 2019: 31–35). Accordingly, any kind of related engagement should be guided by local understandings of peace and led by local actors according to local approaches (Mac Ginty & Richmond 2013). However, even the 'local turn' hardly enabled any adequate grasp of local context. After all, its underlying concept of the hybrid peace established a dichotomy between the local and the international and thereby framed the local as another 'other'. This reduced complex social formations to a universal local, which rendered cultural differences irrelevant and reintroduced essentialism through the backdoor (Sabaratnam 2013). In the end, the instrumentalisation of 'the local' conceptually conceals the distinctness and irreducible complexity of a certain context and thereby does not encourage external peacebuilders to be open to it. Thereby, peacebuilding, following an essentialised concept of the local, ends up doing business as usual (Torrent 2021: 1–18).

Embracing the Anthropocene and its entangled ontology as well as its positional epistemology entails rejecting instrumentalising approaches of engaging with the world and thereby prevents any (unintended) delusions and misconceptions. Rather, it emphasises an ontological openness and calls for epistemological modesty in looking at a context that one is not familiar with (Torrent 2021: 37–56). This approach assumes that attention must be paid to a world beyond conceptual simplifications, external distortions and appropriations, one which is infinitely more complex and messier than modernist depictions, but more real and accurate. Highlighting the post-colonial dimension of international peacebuilding, Torrent emphasises that any clinging on to instrumental conceptual assumptions maintains delusive modernist narrations ('distories') that appropriate, exclude and silence people in (post-) conflict areas. Instead, peacebuilding endeavours should take into account the entangled nature of the involved actors and should be more cautious in order for local potentialities to unfold (Torrent 2001: 79–97). Pospisil calls for embracing

affirmation to enable reality to be grasped more adequately. He (2019: 38–44) understands affirmation as a non-instrumentalising approach to reality – it is what it is beyond any conceptual attempt to represent and to categorise and thereby, inevitably, to misconceive it.

Both Pospisil and Torrent describe the ontological and epistemological implications of the Anthropocene as crucial not only to seeing the world in its entangled complexity beyond modernist simplifications and delusions, but also in explaining why peacebuilding with instrumental goals is unlikely to meet policy expectations.

Rejecting peace for the sake of non-instrumental peacebuilding?

In essence, peacebuilding in the Anthropocene has to be non-instrumental to allow a less abstract engagement with the full complexity of reality. However, without a view of instrumental goals as a reference, there is no compass to navigate peace in a (post-) conflict scenario: peace practitioners do not know who to engage, for what purpose, to what ends and how to do so. After all, the world cannot be influenced in an intended way when human agency has been dissolved among its complex human and non-human entanglements. On this foundation, both Torrent and Pospisil propose to adapt agency to the reconsidered circumstances within the Anthropocene. In order to do so, each of them introduces a conceptual term that guides their respective approaches.

Torrent describes 'entangled peace' as an underlying concept for peacebuilding. It seems to comprise an analytical, a practical and a quasi-instrumental dimension. The analytical dimension emphasises the relational co-constitution of actors and processes and highlights the relational and thus non-essentialist and non-deterministic character of the world. This account ties into the practical dimension of entangled peace that acknowledges the limits of knowing and performing and understands agency as a co-constitutive process. The quasi-instrumental element indicates the purpose of engagement that seems to relate to processes of becoming and eventual restrictions that become obvious through episodes of resistance (Torrent 2021: 57–77).

Torrent's concept of entangled peace is related to the author's elaborations on complexity and the proposed need to adapt peacebuilding to it. Torrent introduces the United Nations' (2016) sustaining peace concept as an attempt to accommodate with non-linearity and further refers to the work of Cedric de Coning (2018). Accordingly, Torrent's 'Entangled Peace' could be read as a theoretical underpinning for de Coning's 'adaptive peacebuilding' (2018). De Coning characterizes peacebuilding as an adaptive endeavour that has to be refined continuously. Such an undertaking might pursue its objectives in various ways that are implemented at the same time. Each single intervention should be closely monitored and evaluated in relation to its declared objectives. Only the more successful interventions will be selected to be continued and expanded to larger areas. Still, monitoring must be continued even with the interventions that were selected as successful since they might turn out to be less effective

at a later stage. At the same time, continued monitoring is necessary because the world's contingency and non-linearity might, at one point, suggest a whole new strategy that did not seem to be related to the intervention in the beginning (de Coning 2018).

A corresponding attempt to accommodate peacebuilding to a growing concern with complexity and non-linearity is Thania Paffenholz's conception of 'perpetual peacebuilding' (2021). She emphasises the necessity of understanding peacebuilding as a non-linear activity without end points and therefore as 'perpetual'. It encompasses recurring negotiations and re-negotiations of the social contract with numerous setbacks in various places across many periods in time. There is no success or failure in peacebuilding as there is also no clear end point, rather there is an ongoing striving towards peace that can only ever reach an approximation of peace, which cannot be achieved as such. These perpetual and bumpy activities towards peace represent more of a non-linear transition than a linear process with an inner telos. They do not follow blueprints or distinct tracks due to the sheer complexity of involved actors and places. Finally, peacebuilders should refrain from the urge to provide and seek to implement 'solutions'. Instead, they should be 'critical friends' who support people and institutions on their pathways towards more peaceful societies (Paffenholz 2021).

While both de Coning and Paffenholz embrace complexity, non-linearity, and the need for situation-adapted peacebuilding, their approaches are still instrumental to a certain extent which might prevent them from actually translating into the flexible and adaptive endeavours that they are meant to be (Paffenholz 2021: 379). The instrumental residue in Paffenholz's work concerns her – still – utopian and abstract conception of peace as something that peace practice seeks to approximate to, to the best possible degree. A certain instrumentalism is also present in de Coning's temporary enshrinement of certain peacebuilding strategies that in the end might still not be fluid and flexible enough to prevent misperceptions, delusions and false appropriations.

Torrent's 'Entangled Peace' refrains from utopian conceptions of peace but appears too conceptual and vague to prevent eventual inflexibilities and essentialist repercussions of adaptive peacebuilding. This vagueness leaves too much space for arbitrary translations of entangled peace into practice and enshrines them through its conceptual character – it becomes instrumental after all. Thereby, the author's conceptual approach does not clearly prevent simplified, and thus essentialist, approaches from emerging. Pospisil, on the other hand, rejects any kind of conceptualisation and even the term 'peace', in order to get rid of instrumental residues – eventually, at the cost of any kind of reference points through which to navigate peace, thereby making peacebuilding an arbitrary undertaking.

Pospisil's term to assist in navigating engagement with armed conflict is the notion of formalised 'political unsettlement', that he developed together with Christine

Bell (Bell & Pospisil 2017). Avoiding the term 'peace', to prevent instrumental residues, Pospisil describes the process of engaging with armed conflicts as 'conflict transition'. The idea of conflict transition through formalised political unsettlement derives from embracing affirmation and thus having an unbiased and accepting approach to the everyday of dealing with armed conflict. It thereby allows various modes of engagement with conflicts that provide for a certain stabilisation through containment or eventually the prevention of armed violence. Its only criteria are doability and the potential to promote conflict transition. Maybe most importantly, unlike settlement, it does not seek to resolve the element of contestation at the heart of the conflict but enshrines it in its very foundation. The formalisation and thus the temporary institutionalization of a way to cope with chaos and an open struggle for political power makes sure that no party wins and thus makes it more likely for them to concede to a certain agreement – becoming inclusive even for actors that might lose out from any finalised state of peace. Unlike supposedly final accords, formalisation of unsettlement insinuates the permanent need to renegotiate the framework of agreement and adapt it to the respective temporary circumstances (Pospisil 2019: 57–90).

Jan Pospisil does not only provide a seemingly non-instrumentalist and pragmatic approach to the issue of peace, but also meticulously outlines actual ways to engage in conflict transition. An important tool to do so is inclusion into peacebuilding processes through what he describes as 'hooks'. They represent structures in a peace process to which actors are able to relate without being forced into institutionalised and formally agreed constellations. Those might refer to councils, arrangements or even peace accords that emerged as a local demand with strong local support, which have proven to be successful foundations for later peace agreements in Ghana or Kenya. Additionally, Pospisil mentions procedural 'hooks', representing quota systems as in consociational structures (such as in Bosnia and Lebanon) that might allow for more inclusion. Finally, ambiguity represents another inclusionary 'hook' since it allows parties to maintain their relations by avoiding precision regarding contested issues such as territorial sovereignty, as in Bosnia's Republika Srpska or Kosovo. The hook as a tool makes inclusion more likely through the non-formal character of creating a relationship without forcing actors into a bond through formal commitments to authorities or agreements (Pospisil 2019: 91–126).

Second, creative non-solution might serve as another tool for conflict transition. While bringing up certain issues might ignite dormant hostilities, avoiding them might maintain a certain acceptable status quo. Accordingly, a non-solution might contribute more to the livelihoods of human beings than the attempt to resolve them; examples might be the situation of unrecognised states, such as South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria as well as Northern Iraqi Kurdistan and the Bosnian Brčko district. Finally, maintaining, instead of trying to resolve, territorial vagueness might also allow for upholding and improving the quality of human lives,

examples here could be, among others, Sudan and South Sudan, Somalia and Kenya, Transnistria and Moldova or the case of Kashmir (Pospisil 2019: 127–164).

A third tool for conflict transition is the unlinking of sub-national polities from larger national contexts of conflict. This approach seeks to transform local discontent and disagreement with a state-wide polity into islands of relational peace. A prominent example for such an approach is the creation of safe zones in war-torn areas as in Syria's Idlib. Demilitarized zones, like Farclandia in Colombia, also represent manifestations of islands of relational peace. Active unlinking might also happen through local peace agreements between clans or communities as happened, for example, in South Sudan, Yemen, Pakistan or Kyrgyzstan (Pospisil 2019: 165–198).

Pospisil seems to be able to credibly follow through a non-instrumental approach to peacebuilding – he argues that 'formalised political unsettlement' is a lens rather than a concept – without the risks of essentialising, simplifying or misconceiving a certain context. However, this comes at a high cost: there is no reference points or set of metrics for assessing peacebuilding apart from the containment of armed violence, which might take arbitrary and eventually dubious forms (Lakitsch 2021: 9). After all, as Pospisil (2019: 75–79) describes, formalised political unsettlement is focused on the elite level insofar as the respective actors are involved in transitional processes. Accordingly, peacebuilding might end up ignoring the desires of those that suffer most in armed conflicts for the purpose of any kind of elite agreement with dubious and highly problematic warlords. Thereby, the leverage of international recognition for the purpose of peace might be wasted for the sake of pure pragmatism. In other words, aiming at preventing the worst might also prevent opportunities for the better and squander realistic opportunities for progress.

In essence, peacebuilding seems to be torn between two seemingly exclusive options: the need for thoroughly pragmatic, and non-instrumental approaches, in order to not simplify and distort a complex and entangled reality, on the one hand, and the necessity for a certain kind of reference point for goals and the generation of some form of metrics for engagement with the world in order to prevent arbitrary interventions that ignore the desires of the people that are substantially affected by armed warfare, on the other hand. This raises the question of ways to reconcile these seemingly exclusive alternatives.

Reconciling conflict transition with entangled peace

Pospisil's approach of affirmation seeks to provide for an – as unmediated as possible – access to the entangled complexity of the world in order to enable the formalisation of unsettlement for the purpose of conflict transition. While Pospisil opens up many possible approaches to effectively engage with and respond to armed conflict, he also leaves too much space for arbitrary decisions in doing so. Thereby, instead of setting the stage for a broad consensus for or within peace processes, Pospisil in the end provides a theoretical legitimation for ignoring any

such eventually sustainable foundation in cases where repression provides sufficient political stability.

Torrent's entangled peace, on the other hand, is meant to serve as a guiding concept for peacebuilding in a world that rejects any form of instrumentality. Unfortunately, its vague and conceptual character establishes a too inflexible and – again – arbitrary reference that runs the danger of essentialising the world. In the end, Torrent's attempt turns out to be too instrumental without intending to do so. This might also relate to a certain ambiguity that lies in his rejection of determinism in the form of what he calls, 'entanglement fetishism', which eventually follows from a materially closed ontology. At the same time, he follows Whitehead who emphasises the 'autonomous' character of the 'individual' and its independent creativity. However, this leads to a contradictory depiction of agency as entangled and autonomous at the same time.

In order to find a way out of this dilemma, Torrent's contradictory understanding of agency has to be reconsidered to maintain entangled peace as a concept in the Anthropocene. Instead of clinging to notions about autonomy of single and independent human beings, agency must be fundamentally related to the incommensurability of an infinity of positionalities. Each positionality represents a unique configuration of entanglements between the human and the non-human world. Accordingly, agency and creativity are the result of a certain and unique constellation that is grounded in its entangled character and not in individuality, autonomy or independence. A corresponding rearticulation of Torrent's entangled peace is eventually less prone to essentialisation as it draws its instrumental aspect from its entangled character, which is genuinely anti-essentialist. Navigating Pospisil's conflict transition along a thoroughly entangled and anti-essentialist rearticulation of entangled peace would allow the maintenance of openness to the complexity of reality and to still relate interventions to the people that are affected by (armed) conflict.

Despite their flaws, Torrent's 'Entangled Peace' and Pospisil's 'Peace in Political Unsettlement' introduce much-needed rearticulations of peacebuilding in the Anthropocene. They seek to leave behind the realm of abstract imaginaries and instrumental desires and to propose approaches to engage with entangled worlds for the purpose of peace.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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