Inspirations for Post-Liberal Peacebuilding from Latin America

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The political changes in certain South American countries, including most notably the case of Bolivia, could act as inspirations in the ongoing search for locally grown, hybrid variants of a post-liberal peace.

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Responding to the sobering results of international peacebuilding missions around the world, a rich academic debate has emerged that, from different perspectives and with different aims, criticizes the practices and premises of peacebuilding. In particular, critics have suggested that the liberal template of social and political order ('liberal peace' and 'liberal democracy') which guides peacebuilding is a crucial part of the problem. As a consequence, scholars have started to think about – and empirically study – alternatives to the liberal peace. This idea of a hybrid, peaceful order that develops out of the encounter between external and local efforts at building peace is captured, most prominently, by Oliver Richmond's notion of 'post-liberal peace'. The crux of this deliberately ill-defined concept is that it denotes the emergence of hybrid social orders that somehow combine liberal and non-liberal (but not necessarily anti-liberal or non-democratic) norms and practices. Such orders, thereby, go beyond and may also partially contradict liberal principles – but do so without following an established, alternative template. According to Richmond (and other critical peacebuilding scholars), local resistance to, and local

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appropriation of, international peacebuilding activities will inevitably produce such hybridity. Yet, there is still limited empirical evidence and rather abstract theoretical ideas about what such post-liberal forms of peace could look like.

With this piece, I bring in experiences that are usually not reflected in the debate about peacebuilding, namely: current political changes in a series of South American countries, including most notably the case of Bolivia. The context in which these processes occur is very different from the so-called post-conflict societies in which peacebuilding takes place. Yet, precisely because of these differences, conditions for locally driven experiments with post-liberalism are arguably better in Latin America.

While the attempt to move beyond liberal peacebuilding does certainly not need yet another template to be implemented worldwide, these experiences might well serve as inspirations in the ongoing search for locally grown, hybrid variants of a post-liberal peace. Against those that defend liberal peacebuilding by suggesting that there is, simply, no alternative (as Roland Paris has argued), the Latin American experience at the very least shows that there *are* actual alternatives to liberal mainstream conceptions of political and economic order – even if post-liberal experiments in South America are limited and uncertain, diverse and contradictory.

Post-liberalism in South America

In recent years, scholars working on Latin American politics have noted 'post-neoliberal' and 'post-liberal' trends in the region. On the one hand, the so-called left turn, i.e. the election and reelection of several left-of-center governments across the region, has been accompanied by attempts to turn away from neoliberal economic policies. On the other, with diverse experiences

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of participatory democracy at the local level and, in the Andean region, the adoption of new constitutions that partially deviate from the mainstream model of liberal democracy, contours of a possible post-liberal democracy have begun to take shape. These developments are diverse and contradictory, but they share one basic commonality: They are the result of attempts to go beyond liberal, representative democracy and neoliberal, market-oriented economics without entirely replacing the preexisting political or economic order through a new, alternative model of development. The new constitutions in Bolivia and Ecuador, for instance, maintain all the well-known institutions of representative democracy and the usual series of political and civil rights but add or strengthen mechanisms of direct democracy and societal participation, expand the notion of human rights in areas of economic, social and cultural rights and include collective indigenous rights.

In the area of economic policy, contemporary attempts to strengthen the economic role of the state and expand social policies, to deepen the domestic market and implement some kind of redistributive policies differ from country to country, but in general do not break with the entire neoliberal model. The prefix ‘post’ in both post-liberal democracy and post-neoliberalism is precisely meant to capture this partial, and hybrid, combination of continuity and change.

Redefining the nation-state and the rule of law

A core question for international peacebuilding concerns the related task of nation-building. For obvious reasons, most post-conflict societies lack a common national identity. An innovative response that has emerged from Latin America, and particularly from the indigenous movements in Bolivia and Ecuador, is the notion of a ‘plurinational state’. On the one hand, this concept openly breaks with the unitary conception of the nation-state: The state at hand

is supposed to not only include different cultures ('multicultural') or ethnic communities ('pluriethnic'), but several nations or peoples that have their own right to self-determination. On the other hand, however, the concept as used and constitutionally recognized in Bolivia and Ecuador is rather a hybrid: It combines an overarching national identity with an acknowledgment of particular indigenous identities. The plurinational state, contradictory as this may seem, is both a unitary nation-state and an umbrella organization that includes partially autonomous indigenous peoples. This formula has been severely contested – and continues to be so – in both countries and is, certainly, far from offering a panacea for the complex problems of nation-building in divided societies. But it may still be worthwhile to take into account.

Directly related to this, another crucial issue in the peacebuilding debate concerns the rule of law – and, more specifically, the tension between liberal state law that is to be implemented 'from above' (but usually does not work very well) and local forms of community justice that exist at the grassroots level (and frequently work much better but exhibit non- or illiberal features). The same kind of tension exists in a series of Latin American countries and concerns the existence of indigenous or community justice at the local level – also not least a result of the factual absence of the state's judicial institutions especially in rural areas. Responding to this reality and to increasing claims by indigenous movements, several Latin American countries since the 1990s have progressively recognized indigenous customs and practices. In the case of Bolivia, the new constitution goes so far as to place ordinary and indigenous legal jurisdiction on an equal footing.

In general, research on indigenous community justice in the Andean region shows that it works relative well: When compared to the state's justice

system, which is often hardly pre-sent in rural areas and frequently perceived as alien, community justice provides an important mechanism for resolving a broad range of conflicts in ways that local populations generally regard as much more efficient and legitimate. While studies show that indigenous community justice is not at all arbitrary, but follows specific rationalities, its logic is clearly different from the rationality guiding ordinary state justice: The overall aim is to preserve the social harmony of a given community; its main strategy is some kind of reconciliation. From this perspective, long-term imprisonment is irrational, while what is regarded as physical punishment from a liberal perspective (e.g., whipping with nettles, ice water baths) is considered rather symbolic acts of purification and/or reconciliation.

Just as in quite a few post-conflict societies legal pluralism in the Andean region is both an empirical reality and a normative challenge – and research on the experiences in Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru offers a series of crucial insights about both the diverse practices of indigenous/community justice and about different ways of dealing with legal pluralism in more or less pluralist ways.

Broadening democratic participation and human rights

In the mainstream model of liberal democracy, the people do not in fact govern but through elected representatives. In debates about peacebuilding, a common criticism has precisely been directed against an overly focus on (early) elections. In South America, disenchantment with the ways in which real-existing representative democracy worked has led to experiments with more direct and 'participatory' forms of democracy. Important innovations in this regard include the introduction of recall referenda that enable the citizens to

revoke the mandate of their elected representatives and different types of participatory budgeting and participatory development planning.

A related criticism of liberal peacebuilding concerns its focus on a relatively narrow, and specifically liberal, set of political and civil rights. Especially when combined with neoliberal recipes of economic reform, this frequently implies a disregard for economic, social and cultural rights, which are equally established as human rights at the international level. Yet, given the existing socioeconomic conditions in the global South, liberal democracy's emphasis on formal political equality rings quite hollow to many people. As a consequence, across Latin America, the failure of democratic regimes to significantly reduce the dramatic socioeconomic inequalities has led, since the turn of the century, to a reemergence of the 'social question' and the 'left turn' discussed above.

Social and economic rights have consequently been strengthened in several countries, but most notably in the new constitutions adopted in Bolivia and Ecuador (but, previously, also in Brazil, Colombia and Venezuela). And, with the 'leftist turn' (and the commodity boom), governments have generally started to govern a bit more in line with this notion of socioeconomic rights by expanding social policies, improving basic public services, and reducing poverty. To be sure, nowhere in the region has the constitutional recognition of a broad catalog of human rights led to a consistent policy of guaranteeing universal socioeconomic rights. Still, the constitutional promise of progressive change at least establishes an important normative reference point for those that mobilize in the name of 'social justice'.

Caveats

The experiences indicated above also caution against expecting too much from experiments with alternatives to liberal democracy and neoliberal economics. Most notably for the debate on peacebuilding, the search for (some kind of) post-liberal political order – and, thus, also for post-liberal peace – is itself a conflict-ridden process. While 'localizing' peacebuilding may plausibly reduce conflicts between external and local actors, it may well increase intra-local struggle – precisely because local-local interactions then become decisive. If the very fundamentals of the politico-economic order are up for discussion, this plausibly increases the risk of violent conflict. In fact, the process of constitutional change in Bolivia was characterized by an open clash between different conceptions of democracy – and by mutual allegations that what was presented as democratic by the opponent was precisely the opposite (colonial or imperialist, exclusive or secessionist, autocratic or totalitarian).

The Bolivian attempt to construct some kind of post-liberal democracy also brought about more specific risks. On the one hand, the transition process meant dismantling an existing structure of democratic institutions and led to a certain, if temporary, institutional vacuum during which the democratic shape of the future political order was uncertain. On the other hand, features of Bolivia's new political order such as the emphasis on direct democracy do not only increase the power of the people, but more specifically the power of the majority; at the same time, a popular president can use plebiscitary mechanisms to further increase and consolidate his/her power vis-à-vis the opposition, minorities or other powers and levels of the state.

Finally, the current economic crisis, triggered by the decrease in international commodity prices, reveals the limitations of the post-neoliberal economic

policies in the region – and immediately threatens the advances in the reduction of poverty and inequality.

Conclusion

The most important feature of the debates about post-liberal peace, post-neoliberal economics and post-liberal democracy is, arguably, that they are not aimed at identifying yet another universal peacebuilding template. If anything, the main academic and political purpose is to open up discussions that have been too narrow and closed for too long. Thinking about alternatives, however, still requires concrete ideas about elements and characteristics, dynamics and paths that may characterize (different) post-liberal configurations. And while theoretical reflections are certainly needed, the very idea of post-liberalism as something arising 'bottom up' from dynamics at least partially driven by local knowledge and local agency points to the need to empirically study developments that point in some post-liberal direction. In this sense, I have argued, recent experiences from Latin America do offer political inspirations as well as important caveats which might be of interest for both scholars of peacebuilding and for those engaged in building whatever kind of hybrid peace in whatever kind of place.

Photo of a traditional Aymara ceremony in Copacabana, on the border of Lake Titicaca in Bolivia. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

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