A Requiem for Peacebuilding?

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CHAPTER 1

Peacebuilding's Predicament: A Dark Mood Among the Experts

Jorg Kustermans, Tom Sauer, and Barbara Segaert

1   INTRODUCTION

This volume collects nine chapters about peacebuilding as a global prac-
tice. The chapters were first presented at a workshop on peacebuilding
that we, the editors of this volume, organized. That workshop was the
third in a series of three workshops on various understandings of war
and peace in the present era. The first workshop examined the contin-
uing relevance of pacifism as a politico-ethical doctrine (Kustermans et al.
2019). The second workshop revolved around the notion of non-nuclear
peace and investigated a 'possible future' (cf. Patomäki 2006) world

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without nuclear weapons, exploring more particularly whether and how peace could be maintained in such a context (Sauer et al. 2020). As organizers of this series of events, we had originally thought that the workshop on peacebuilding would be the more self-confident one. After all, peacebuilding has secured for itself institutional footing. The United Nations has had a *Peacebuilding Commission* for some 13 years now and its Secretariat now also—since 2019—has a *Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs* (which used to be named rather more simply *Department of Political Affairs* [1992–2019] and before that *Department of Political and Security Council Affairs* [1952–1992]). To the extent that meaning can be read in such a change of names, it suggests an increased commitment to peacebuilding on the part of the international community and thus, enough reason for self-confidence among its practitioners and its observers. However, that was not the impression that we got during the workshop, where, quite on the contrary, a dark mood reigned.

Admittedly, we did not invite field practitioners nor U.N. civil servants to the event. The workshop was a scholarly gathering and it is to be expected that scholars will critically assess whatever phenomenon they decide to engage with. That is, after all, the scholarly vocation. We do not celebrate; we examine. We do not champion; we question. And yet, more appeared to be going on. The two other workshops that we organized were scholarly workshops much in the way that the third one was, but the same kind of generalized skepticism did not animate the discussions there. In spite of pacifism and nuclear elimination having rather less institutional support than peacebuilding does, the tone was rather more hopeful then than it was in the deliberations about peacebuilding. Obviously, this could be due simply and exclusively to the selection of participants, but we do not think so. We think there is more going on and we call this 'more' *peacebuilding's predicament*. Interestingly, peacebuilding's predicament may imply that peacebuilding—as a global practice, but also more particularly as an international project—will outlive our qualms about it and our sense of its moribundity. Peacebuilding's future may be more secure than we think. Our singing, or even our composing, its requiem may be rather premature.

We do admit to advancing these claims as outsiders looking in. We (the editors) ourselves are not involved first-hand in the study of peacebuilding. We organized a workshop and are now introducing the volume that was 'birthed' during that workshop. What we will do in the remainder of this introductory chapter, therefore, is to explain how

our claims emerged from the workshop (and thus from the chapters that comprise this volume). In a first section, we document the 'dark mood among the experts' as it transpired from the workshop and as we also see it evidenced in the broader literature on peacebuilding. We obviously recognize that not every expert shares in this mood and we give ample space to more hopeful voices in the second part of this volume. It is significant, though, that these more hopeful voices typically draw attention to forms of peacebuilding that are developing outside of the reach of capital I and P 'Internationalized Peacebuilding.' Peacebuilding persists as a global practice—as an all but spontaneous, *human* practice, that is—even if it is being challenged as an international project. At the same time, it is unmistakable that peacebuilding is being challenged as an international project and this needs to be addressed. At the end of the first section of this chapter, we reflect on the reasons for this dark mood. What explains it? In a second section, we turn toward the future. Here we introduce the idea of *peacebuilding's predicament* and we explain why scholars sounding its requiem may be acting prematurely.

2   A Dark Mood Among the Experts

2.1   The Dark Mood Documented

A mood is by definition intangible, but to say that a mood is intangible is not to say that it is fleeting. Quite on the contrary. While emotions are experienced in immediate response to a particular event, moods develop more slowly and, once in place, are more difficult to shake off. One easily imagines the expression of disappointment at the failure of this or that particular peacebuilding initiative in the 1990s, but the overall mood, at that time, remained one of optimism or even triumphalism (Hobson 2015, p. 3). By now the mood has swung like a pendulum, and disappointment has become pervasive. Assessments of the failures of peacebuilding become ever more radical, with a leading scholar recently coming to the conclusion that the 'liberal peacebuilding framework [was] an accident of the historical moment and liberal overconfidence in the 1990s. A policy blip that was always destined to fail based as it was more on our naïve idealism than any understanding of the world' (Chandler 2017, p. 12; Chandler is paraphrasing Lake 2016). Very similar sentiments are being expressed in some of the chapters in the present volume. For example, in what was originally meant to be a somewhat hopeful

reflection on the future of peacebuilding, Oliver Richmond diagnoses the current predicament of international peacebuilding as one of 'increasing moribundity.' Chandler (2017, pp. 6–9), it might be noted, pushes the idea further and claims peacebuilding has come to its end already, citing a number of United Nations documents announcing that the U.N. will no longer do peacebuilding. Chandler appears to be documenting the euthanasia of peacebuilding. Our contributors do not appear to agree with that radical assessment, although their diagnoses, like that of Richmond, are often sobering. Michael C. Pugh, a veteran observer of the international peacebuilding project, expresses severe doubt with respect to the possibility of 'salvaging' the practice and he ends his chapter with a disabusing observation, when he suggests that 'peacebuilding, like King Lear, is becoming senile.' In a similar vein, in the conclusion of his chapter on the so-called local turn in peacebuilding (and in development policy), Filip Ejdus wonders whether 'the local turn still provides a progressive avenue for the future of peacebuilding,' but immediately adds the possibility that it may have been 'only a swan song of the declining liberal order.' Similarly skeptical is the assessment of Cynthia Carrillo, who, in her chapter on the peace-fostering role of Peasant Reserve Zones in Colombia, presents 'the decline of international peacebuilding' as though it were an obvious fact.

We are well aware that our emphasis on these quotes and the words that appear in them—historical accident (Chandler), moribundity (Richmond), senile (Pugh), swan song (Ejdus), decline (Carrillo)—do not do justice to the complexity of their argument. Actually, we do not even think that any of them would totally agree with David Chandler that peacebuilding is definitively on its way out. But at the same time, it would be a mistake to dismiss the use of these words as mere rhetorical flourish, as the kind of expressions that academic authors will occasionally use to give slightly more rhetorical punch to their otherwise overly nuanced arguments. We think that rhetorical flourish has considerable significance insofar as it serves to indicate a mood. The (somewhat) poetical words chosen by our authors are signals of the intellectual mood in which they find themselves operating. A dark mood reigns among the experts indeed.

2.2   The Dark Mood Qualified

If we are well aware that the arguments of scholars cannot be reduced to the intellectual mood that suffuses those arguments, we are equally aware

that not everybody in the field of peacebuilding is experiencing the same mood. Plenty of scholars and practitioners of peacebuilding are soldiering on courageously. It is not difficult to find relatively recent research articles, published in the more prominent journals, which express a belief that international peacebuilding, as instituted and organized by the United Nations, can indeed be successful. It may have to be remodeled a bit here and there, but, on this view, nothing should be assumed *intrinsically* to stand in the way of its ultimate success (e.g., Gizelis 2009). An important, and still relatively recent, book by Peter Wallensteen (2015) exemplifies the position too. Wallensteen introduces the concept of quality peace and argues that we should evaluate any situation of peace and any plan for peace in light of this notion. If one bears in mind that other scholars are arguing in favor of increased recognition of the inevitability of 'compromised peacebuilding,' the significance of Wallensteen's championing of such notion as 'quality peace' is all the more obvious. It signals a refusal to give up on the promise of peacebuilding. That Wallensteen ends his book with a chapter discussing different 'paths to peace' and that here he summons the great powers of the moment not to turn their back on international organizations signals more specifically his continued commitment to peacebuilding as an international project. Cognizant of the many challenges that international peacebuilding faces, Wallensteen nonetheless keeps the faith. His last lesson learned thus states (somewhat understatedly and somewhat enigmatically): 'Unorthodox forms of cooperation between international organizations may further the ability of the international community to succeed in building quality peace.'

Similarly optimistic voices can be heard in some of the contributions to this volume. A prominent example is Nina Wilén's chapter on the possible achievement of a feminist peace. Wilén recognizes that 'some of [her suggested] reforms are difficult to implement in a post-conflict context where resources are scarce and institutions are fragile,' but then adds, in what other contributors might experience as an unduly optimistic way, that this problem can probably be overcome because in that same post-conflict context, 'many states enjoy strong support from external organizations, both in terms of human and financial resources. [...] external organizations [can] play a role conducive to gender equality by earmarking some of the budget to ensure that services such as healthcare and child care facilities are affordable and accessible to all.' *A bit of remodeling here and there, but*, Chandler and other radical critics aside, *no*

reason to think that international peacebuilding is necessarily doomed. On the contrary, as per Wallensteen, it is called for more than ever.

No one mood marks the study of peacebuilding, but while there are always multiple moods, it seems fair to argue that, at least in our case, one mood is dominant and the other recessive. Judging by the chapters of this book, the optimistic mood is clearly the recessive one and the more pessimistic mood the dominant one.

2.3   The Dark Mood Explained

If we agree for the moment that a dark mood reigns among the experts of peacebuilding, this invites the question why this would be the case. Settling that question with some degree of confidence would demand proper research into it. Scholarship such as that of Catherine Goetze (2017; on the habitus of peacebuilders) should be a helpful starting point in this regard. Within the confines of this introduction, and bringing back to mind that we are outsiders looking in (or perhaps *looking on*), we can do no more than offer a few possible explanations. There are three that we want to mention.

One could argue, somewhat counterintuitively, that the very institutional prominence of peacebuilding explains the dark mood that now marks it. Compare pacifism and the championing of a future non-nuclear peace. Both stances remain minority positions (Kustermans et al. 2019; Sauer et al. 2020). Both stances, that is, can assume a posture of resistance. They oppose dominant approaches to war and peace. Pacifism opposes the hegemony of just war thinking and anti-nuclear activism pits itself against widely accepted notions of nuclear deterrence. And while continuing resistance can create a sense of *fatigue*, it also creates a sense of solidarity and worthiness, and hence also of (moral) certainty, which is more difficult to sustain for those in a position of institutional prominence. What is more, because they remain in the minority and because they are opposing dominant frameworks, pacifism and anti-nuclearism also enjoy the comfort of remaining aspirational. As long as an ethico-political approach is not tested by reality, it is so much easier for it to retain a sense of youthful enthusiasm (cf. Mill 1879, ch. 2; referenced in O'Meara 2015, p. 13).

It is with this kind of reality check that most people explain the dark mood that suffuses the literature on peacebuilding. The dark mood, this account holds, simply reflects a realistic appraisal of the achievements of

international peacebuilding. Peacebuilding failed and the documentation of its failures will, understandably, not give occasion to celebratory prose. What defines the argument, more particularly, is the assumption that the failure of peacebuilding is due to its DNA, namely that peacebuilding had to end in failure because it was ill-conceived from the start. It was a top-down project and top-down projects cannot possibly work (cf. Ejdus). It was a neoliberal project from the start and neoliberal projects cannot possibly work (cf. Pugh, Omer). It is this kind of idea, we think, that leads people—such as David Lake (2016) and David Chandler (2017)—to argue that peacebuilding was an 'historical accident' and no more than a 'policy blip'—*a mistake*, the failure of which was predictable. Notice, in this context, that the argument is increasingly that peacebuilding did not simply fail, but that it often exacerbates the problems. Recent analyses of how peacebuilding 'enables autocracy' (von Billerbeck and Tansey 2019) (rather than promotes democracy) illustrate this more radical interpretation of peacebuilding's intrinsic and all but inevitable failure.

A third possible explanation of the increasingly dark mood vis-à-vis peacebuilding would make reference to changed circumstances. In her chapter, Carrillo (drawing on Chandler 2017, p. 1) hints at the impact of technological innovation on the organization of peacebuilding, expressing doubt that sustained, on-the-ground—i.e., meaningful (cf. Duffield 2010)—peacebuilding action will continue to happen. However, the change of context that receives by far the most attention in the contemporary literature on peacebuilding (and in the study of global governance more generally) is that of emerging powers. What consequences will the emergence of non-Western, non-liberal powers have on the international community's commitment to the practice of peacebuilding (cf. Call and de Coning 2017)? It is interesting to note, in this context, that Filip Ejdus strikes his most pessimistic note about the future of peacebuilding when he reflects on this change of context. He appears to discern a chance for redemption, for retooling and remodeling, in the practice of peacebuilding, but then appears to fear that it will ultimately be overwhelmed by a changing geopolitical landscape.

'One is left to wonder', he writes, 'what we can make out of the "local turn" in a world of rapid democratic backsliding, surge of populism, revival of nationalism, return of geopolitics and rise of authoritarian powers. Does

the "local turn" still provide a progressive avenue for the future of peace-building? [Or] was it only a swan song of the declining liberal order [?]'

3   What Does the Future Hold in Store?

There is a touch of the dramatic to the title of this volume—*A Requiem for Peacebuilding?*—which is only partly balanced by the question mark at its end. And yet we would insist on the importance of that question mark, because we—let us repeat: three outsiders looking in—are far from sure about the future of peacebuilding. Singing its requiem may be rather premature. There are reasons to believe that we may have to rethink the precise nature of peacebuilding's predicament. While its current predicament is that it is *in rough waters*, that it is experiencing *a crisis of confidence*, its more general predicament may well be that *it is bound to stay afloat*. Whenever there is political authority, there will be peacebuilding (of some kind). Peacebuilding will have to adapt to changed circumstances, but unless we are witnessing the total disintegration of (international) political order, there will be peacebuilding. It will evolve, but it will not die off. In the paragraphs that follow, we try to clarify these claims.

3.1   An Afterlife for Peacebuilding

The contributions to the second part of this book discuss a number of case studies. All of these chapters share, to a greater or lesser extent, a pessimistic diagnosis of the project of International Peacebuilding. Yet all of them also show, more or less deliberately, the naturalness of peace-building as a human practice. This intuitive commitment on the part of the majority of human beings to the containment of conflict and the (re-)establishment of a condition (or at least moments or spaces) of peace has been thematized in the scholarly literature in terms of 'everyday peace' (MacGinty 2014). In situations of protracted violent conflict, and notwithstanding the consuming nature thereof and thus the likelihood of the development of toxic emotions in such situations, some people—oftentimes women (Ring 2006)—will be investing time and effort in building peace. What this means is that even if International Peace-building with capital I and P were to come to an end, other forms of peacebuilding—of building peace—would most certainly emerge. People

understand the benefits of peace (and will work toward its achievement) without having to be told by the international community and certified peacebuilding experts. The global practice of building peace will survive the demise—were it to occur—of the international project of Peacebuilding.

The danger here, as a number of scholars have warned, is to want to romanticize such developments (e.g., Holanda Maschieto 2016). While some of the chapters (Lopez and Ingelaere; Bräuchler) do put emphasis on the *promise* of locally grounded forms of peacemaking, some of the other chapters (van der Borgh; Carrillo) strike a more sober note. Van der Borgh's account of the so-called *Pax Mafioso* illustrates the danger of romanticization. The Salvadoran government negotiating a truce with and among gangs represents a clear case of pragmatic, locally grounded peacebuilding, but at the same time, many of us would hesitate to name it that. We tend to think of it as a false peace, but then we should be aware that in many cases the (spontaneous, intuitive) practice of peacebuilding will lead to the achievement of (what peace activists would call) false peace. *True peace*, as Saint Augustine (2004) taught us a long time ago, *cannot possibly be achieved within the earthly city*. True peace, as he saw it, belongs to the city of God. Therefore, whether it materializes as a locally grounded global practice, or as a top-down international project, peacebuilding will always have its critics.

In other words: we expect that peacebuilding will continue after the demise of International Peacebuilding, but then we also expect it to continue to disappoint. Critics of Peacebuilding with a capital P will become critics of locally grounded peacebuilding. The concept of 'peace' fosters expectations in them (*true peace, positive peace*), which the reality of 'peacebuilding' cannot possibly live up to.

3.2   *A Continuing Story of a Death Foretold*

It was an assumption of the previous paragraph that Peacebuilding as an international project might well be on its way out. However, there are reasons to assume that International Peacebuilding will remain an institutional reality—after all, the fact that the United Nations now has a *Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs* suggests as much. Earlier signs proved deceptive, like the U.N. documents that questioned the validity of the practice, to which David Chandler attributed a lot of significance in his analysis of the crisis of peacebuilding. It should further

be noted, in this context, that many of the more critical authors in this volume recognize the contribution that the international community (i.e., international discourses, international networks, international resources) can make to locally grounded efforts at peacebuilding. They are careful not to throw out the baby with the bathwater.

However, this is not the point that we want to make here. Rather, we wish to argue that there are reasons to think that International Peacebuilding will remain an institutional reality even if nobody thought that it was a good idea.

The clearest such argument occurs in Michael C. Pugh's opening chapter. Pugh ends his contribution with the warning that 'peacebuilding [might be] becoming senile.' But these concluding words reflect mood more than argument, and if one looks carefully at the argument itself, it is about 'persistence' (in spite of failure) rather than about 'demise.' Pugh points to the political-economic embeddedness of International Peacebuilding and he clearly expects that the vested interests that dominate the global political economy will continue to dominate and that International Peacebuilding (in spite of its failures) will continue as long as those vested interests benefit from it. Pugh recognizes the threat of right-wing nationalism, but one nonetheless gets the impression that he expects that global political-economic elites will be able to weather this storm too.

A slightly different argument is developed in Oliver Richmond's concluding chapter. His is in essence an evolutionary argument with a progressive twist. He documents the historical development of peacebuilding from before International Peacebuilding (capital I, capital P) and projects its future form onto an increasingly digital age. Richmond recognizes, in proper evolutionary fashion, that every form of peacebuilding, which emerges as a 'solution' to particular types of problems, creates its own problems and thus fosters the further development of ever new forms of peacebuilding. The process does not stop—indeed, it cannot stop, because no solution is ever definitive. Michael Barnett (2009) has made a similar argument about humanitarianism as an international practice, depicting an evolution from 'emergency' to 'alchemical' humanitarianism as a result of the increasing interference of states in humanitarian action. Again, humanitarianism changed but did not disappear.

But then biological evolution has witnessed the disappearance of species. If environmental conditions become too inhospitable, a species can actually go extinct. This is the fear that people articulate when they point to the effect of non-Western, emerging powers on the persistence

of peacebuilding. It is a common assumption that emerging powers will change shared understandings of the 'moral purposes' (Reus-Smit 1999) of the international community to such an extent that the commitment to practices such as peacebuilding will wane. This is ultimately an empirical question, however, and at least in the case of China, it has been argued that the country has such a rich history of humanitarian thought and policy (Krebs 2014) that its emergence does not necessarily herald the end of humanitarian international practices, although it will probably entail a shift away from 'liberal' peacebuilding.

The ultimate reason for us hypothesizing its persistence, which encompasses both Pugh's argument about vested political-economic interests and Richmond's and Barnett's evolutionary argument, is that we are in a time in which authority is increasingly situated at the international level (whether it is the authority of great and emerging powers, of global elites, or of international organizations) and all authority must legitimize itself (Zürn 2018). Historically, by far the most common way for political authority to legitimize itself is to argue that it 'brings peace' (cf. Orford 2011). To the extent that power has internationalized, and to the extent that international power wishes to be considered authoritative, it will therefore want to associate itself with the promise of peace (also Sending 2015, Ch. 3). This is what 'authority' does at whatever scale it develops. Hence our prediction that peacebuilding will remain an institutional reality also at the international level.

3.3   A New Ethos for Peacebuilding

We have made two predictions thus far. A first prediction held that peacebuilding will always lead to disappointment, whether it materializes as an international project or as a global practice. The second prediction held that peacebuilding will continue to exist as an international project, although it is likely that the international project of peacebuilding will undergo important transformations. In conclusion to this introductory chapter, it may be useful to insert a reflection on whether those transformations can or should be goaded in a certain direction. Change is inevitable and the direction of change is largely determined by changing circumstances—whatever those turn out to be. But 'largely determined' does not equal 'totally determined' and there is always some room for agency in processes of change. Scholars can make clear what they consider

to be desirable directions for change and thus potentially influence the course that change will take (Sauer et al. 2020).

So what might we propose? In the conclusion to our volume on pacifism, we observed that twenty-first-century pacifism had developed into a 'chastened pacifism'—a pacifism that showed itself rather less cocksure than its twentieth-century predecessors. In the wake of increased recognition of the limits of liberal triumphalism, the articulation of this chastened pacifism chimes with recent calls for more 'humility' (Hobson 2016) and more restraint (Steele 2019) in Western international policy-making and could serve as an inspiration for the future development of peacebuilding as well. This is not the place to elaborate what 'chastened peacebuilding' would look like. It is a notion (and at this point it is not more than that: a suggestive notion) that recommends the cultivation of an alternative ethos for peacebuilders. Brent Steele (2019) ends his recent book on restraint in international politics with a discussion of Reinhold Niebuhr's serenity prayer:

> O God, give us the serenity to accept what cannot be changed, the courage to change what can be changed, and the wisdom to know the one from the other.

As readers read the chapters in this volume, it may be useful for them to keep Reinhold's prayer in mind. It may help them better understand some of the failures of peacebuilding that our authors identify and discuss. It should also help them assess the suggested directions for future forms of peacebuilding that are included in the chapters of the third part of this book. With their authors, we remain committed to the practice of peacebuilding (even if only because it will persist anyway), but more explicitly than them, we would insist on the importance of tempering one's expectations about the kind of world, the kind of peace, that peacebuilding will bring about. If a chastened peacebuilding does not develop, then the practice risks continuing to do more harm than good—and continue it will.

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