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David Chandler

Centre for the Study of Democracy, University of Westminster, London, UK

To cite this article: David Chandler (2013): Peacebuilding and the politics of non-linearity: rethinking ‘hidden’ agency and ‘resistance’, Peacebuilding, 1:1, 17-32

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2013.756256

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Peacebuilding and the politics of non-linearity: rethinking ‘hidden’ agency and ‘resistance’

David Chandler*

Centre for the Study of Democracy, University of Westminster, London, UK

(Received 20 September 2012; final version received 19 November 2012)

This article reflects upon the shift away from linear understandings of peacebuilding, which assumed that Western ‘blueprints’ could be imposed upon non-compliant elites. Today, it is increasingly suggested, in both policy and academic literatures, that there should be a shift towards non-linear approaches. Rather than focusing upon Western policy prescriptions intra-elite bargaining and formal institutional structures, these understandings stress non-linearity, hybridity, local societal processes and practices and the importance of ‘hidden’ agency and resistance. This article highlights that, while these approaches set up a critique of liberal linear approaches, they tend to reify hybrid, non-liberal or non-linear outcomes as the product of local inter-subjective attachments. In this way, they reproduce the voluntarist and idealist understandings of liberal peace, locating the problems or barriers to peace and development at the cognitive or ideational level rather than considering the barriers of economic and social context.

Keywords: agency; hybridity; non-linearity; resistance; liberal peace

Introduction

For much of the 1990s it seemed as if the internal political processes of problematic states were irrelevant to international policy making. The problems of peacebuilding in post-conflict statebuilding interventions were seen as largely technical questions concerned with the export and establishment of certain institutional frameworks. In which case, problems of peace were narrowly understood in terms of exporting democracy and good governance. The barriers or limits to success were seen essentially from two inter-linked perspectives: first, concerning the limits of Western will, resources or co-ordination; and second, the illegitimate blockages of local elites concerned to maintain their control of power, patronage and resources. This technocratic approach, to democracy promotion and peacebuilding, worked on the basis that local elites were not representative of their societies’ needs or interests; elites were seen as illegitimate representatives, influencing society but manufacturing their support through illegitimate means of patronage, media manipulation and corruption. The assumption was that the populations concerned had real interests in supporting Western aspirations for reform and that therefore these reforms would work smoothly once blocking elites were removed, undermined or constrained by the policies of conditionality.

Today, approaches which are based on imposing a set of international policy-prescriptions through bargaining, bypassing or constraining local elites are seen in a much more negative light. These approaches are seen to be externally driven, hubristic – in their
assumptions of external actors having the right policies and the means to attain them – and to express a limited understanding of politics as an inter-elite process of bargaining or co-option, focusing solely on the limited and artificial formal or public political sphere. Approaches which appreciate the limits of the ‘linear’ approach emphasise that international peacebuilding is not a technical question of application or implementation but a ‘political’ question, involving a problematic which is not open to easy calculation and ‘elite bargaining’. The ‘non-linear’ understanding of the limits to peacebuilding interventions starts not with international designs and blueprints but with the problematic of the local or societal agents and actors and the processes, practices and interrelationships that shape ideas and understandings. By emphasising the importance of system- and process-based thinking, and the contingent and unknown factors involved in the peacebuilding process, in particular, these non-linear approaches seek to highlight the importance of local agency (often hidden or unrecognised) in resistance to international aspirations.¹

From linearity to non-linearity

The civil conflicts of the 1990s, unleashed by the collapse of the cold war divide – which impelled the transformation of Soviet-style regimes in Central and Eastern Europe and the removal of super power clientelism in sub-Saharan Africa – provided the backdrop against which understandings of peacebuilding interventions and their limits were developed in linear ways. Perhaps paradigmatic of linear understandings of peacebuilding in terms of compliance with international blueprints was Mary Kaldor’s highly influential analysis of ‘New Wars’. Using this framing, she described conflicts in ways which constructed a moral divide between the understanding of war and conflict in the West and in the non-West. The binary of old and new war had little to do with the spatial framing of conflict as intra-state rather than inter-state, for example, the US or Spanish civil wars would be construed as old wars rather than new wars.² Following Kalevi Holsti’s analysis of ‘wars of the third kind’,³ Kaldor drew a conceptual distinction where old wars were rational – constitutive of a collective or public interest and politically legitimate – whereas new wars were understood to be irrational – driven by private interest and politically illegitimate. This conceptual divide then enabled Kaldor to argue that illegitimate political elites had no right to hide behind the rights of sovereignty and that external peacebuilding interventions were morally necessary and legitimate, casting international interveners as interest-free enforcers of emerging international peacebuilding norms which could be universally applied.

Another leading example of the linear framing of international intervention in the cause of peace, with its implicit liberal telos, was Keck and Sikkink’s influential book

Activists beyond Borders which argued that, to diffuse liberal norms of democracy and human rights, illegitimate state-based or interest-based barriers to communicative interaction needed to be removed. The overcoming of barriers, seen to be at the level of state government resistance, was construed in terms of the ‘boomerang effect’, which allowed the spread of liberal norms as international actors ‘removed the blockage’ of the narrow interest-based action of repressive regimes, ‘prying open space’ for domestic civil society actors which were bearers of these democratic aspirations:

Voices that are suppressed in their own countries may find that networks can project and amplify their concerns into an international arena, which in turn can echo back into their own countries … networks open channels for bringing alternative visions and information into international debate … At the core of network activity is the production, exchange and strategic use of information.

In these linear discourses, peacebuilding transformation was understood, in a highly voluntarist way, as an act of subjective will rather than a matter of social and economic transformation. It was thereby the task of international institutions and powerful Western states to remove the narrow ‘interest’ blockages of entrenched power elites, thus freeing the local agency of civil society, understood to be unproblematic. This framing was perhaps most clearly exemplified by those advocating international intervention in the break-up of Yugoslavia, particularly in the Bosnia war 1992–95, which was one of the key foreign policy focuses of the mid-1990s. It was held that international interveners were acting in the support of local civil-society actors in seeking to preserve multi-cultural Bosnia against the machinations of unrepresentative nationalist elites who were acting in their own narrow and criminal interests. Once international intervention had removed the nationalist leaders from power, through prosecutions for war crimes and the oversight of free and fair post-war democratic elections, it was assumed that the population of Bosnia would express their support for universal liberal democratic norms in voting for non-nationalist political representatives.

In these 1990s framings of linearity, formal political processes at the local level were often problematised – for example, in terms of local elite resistance – but these problematic blockages to liberal international norms were understood as amenable to resolution through a combination of top–down international carrots and sticks. Once local elites were removed from power or constrained, it was assumed that the externally drawn-up plans for democracy-promotion or for peacebuilding could continue unhindered. However, these linear liberal interventionist aspirations have since dimmed – in the wake of failures in the Balkans and in other post-conflict scenarios from Afghanistan to Iraq. The understanding of political blockages has shifted from the more easily accessible formal level of local state institutions to concern with the less accessible level of societal relations. With this shift, the emphasis has moved from linear ends-based or goal-

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5 Ibid., x.

orientated interventions to understanding the limits to change in the non-linear or ‘hybrid’
politics of social or everyday practices and interactions.

Rather than being understood to be resisting through the political motivations of self-
interest, elites are today more likely to be understood as lacking the capacity or the authority
to implement Western policy-making goals. A recent book which upholds the linear
approach, advocating that international actors should assert more leverage over recalcitrant
elites, stands as an exception to the general trend in thinking in the post-conflict literature.\(^7\)
Critical international relations theorising – focused on the Western export of ‘liberal peace’
and the problematic nature of ‘top–down’ frameworks which ignore local societal influences
– stresses the need for ‘bottom–up’ theorising; giving a much larger role to local agency and
the spaces and mechanisms which need to be accessed in order to understand, empower and
transform local actors. Rather than focusing on the formal public political sphere of domestic
elites, analysts argue that researchers needed to go deeper into the societal sphere, particularly
to those actors capable of expressing, influencing and shaping ‘grass roots’ opinion.

This understanding of ‘politics’ works in a very different register to the ‘top–down’
liberal institutionalist frameworks, which had tended to ignore the societal sphere. In the
early post-cold war years of intervention, liberal statebuilding approaches envisaged states
being constructed on the Western, or ‘Weberian’, model, focusing on the export of liberal
institutions standing above society, assumed to operate independently from social forces.
Assuming the universal nature of the liberal subject, these approaches understood the
institutional framework as determining the outcomes of social interaction. Liberal peace
would thereby be assured through the introduction of a liberal state: through attention to the
construction or reform of neutral constitutional arrangements, political party represen-
tation, civil service appointments, the army and policing, and the courts and judiciary.\(^8\)

The failure of these experiments in exporting liberalism led to attention shifting to the
societal sphere and a critique of institutionalist assumptions regarding state–society
relations and the universality of the liberal subject. Today’s approaches reverse liberal
institutionalist frameworks, understanding states as operating upon and through the societal
sphere rather than standing neutrally above it, as if the state was purely a technocratic and
administrative body along Weberian lines. Work on the institutional level is increasingly
seen to be purely formal and superficial when it comes to post-conflict governance for
sustainable peace. For non-linear approaches, work purely on the level of elites and state
institutions is seen as mistaking a part for the whole and assumes the successful top–down
or linear imposition of the end goals of Western peace and democracy promotion.

As Körppen and Ropers note: ‘systemic approaches understand phenomena as an
emergent property of an interrelated whole; hence, a phenomenon cannot be fully
comprehended by analysing its constituent parts’.\(^9\) Roger Mac Ginty has similarly argued
that linear approaches ignore the local relational and contextual aspects; for this reason he

\(^7\)Christoph Zürcher and others, Costly Democracy: Peacebuilding and Democratization after War

\(^8\)See Nicolas Lemay-Hébert, ‘Statebuilding without Nation-Building? Legitimacy, State Failure
and the Limits of the Institutionalist Approach’, Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding 3, no. 1

\(^9\)Daniela Körppen and Norbert Ropers, ‘Introduction: Addressing the Complex Dynamics of
Conflict Transformation’, in The Non-Linearity of Peace Processes: Theory and Practice of
Systemic Conflict Transformation, ed. Ropers Körppen and Hans J. Giessmann (Opladen: Barbara
deploys the concept of ‘hybridisation’ to bring clearly into question top–down understandings of temporality and linearity.10 ‘Bringing the local back in’ thereby indicates a shift from a linear approach to a non-linear or systems approach focused upon societal relationships and interactions at both the local–local level and the local–international level.11 In this way, academic commentators have focused on the ‘hybrid’ outcomes produced by attempts to impose formal liberal institutional frameworks on what is argued to be non- or a-liberal societies.12 These hybrid outcomes are held to indicate that the ‘top–down’ shaping of state institutions has little broader social impact and that liberal aspirations are easily undermined or blocked by ‘resisting’ or countervailing societal practices and institutions.13 Non-linear approaches thereby seek to work at the societal level, focusing on addressing the transformation of societal processes and understanding the social reproduction of resistances to democracy and peace, allegedly ignored by liberal universalist ‘top–down’ policy making.14

The problematic of how states can be strengthened through accessing and influencing social or societal processes has thereby become positioned at the heart of the peacebuilding problematic.15 Non-linear approaches seek to highlight how attention to societal processes, instead of the formal institutional frameworks of government, necessitates a different form of interventional practices and understandings. In focusing on the peacebuilding shift to society and societal processes, non-linear conceptions build upon the growing interest in the shift to governance approaches of societal intervention.16 This framework of governance, and the focus on the ways in which external actors can influence the societal environment in which individuals make choices and take decisions, fundamentally challenges the traditional liberal assumptions on which the division of the

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11 Ibid., 210.
public and private spheres were based – the societal sphere becomes problematised and ‘life’ becomes the subject of governance.\textsuperscript{17}

In this respect, Michel Foucault’s work, on shifting liberal governing rationalities and the birth of biopolitics, serves as useful starting point for the non-linear analysis of the barriers or ‘resistances’ involved in the social practices which produce and institutionalise cognitive and ideational understandings. As Foucault indicated, this shift away from state-based, sovereign and disciplinary power to a biopolitical or ‘society-centred’ approach, constituted ‘the population as a political problem’ and, within this, focused on the real lives or the everyday of individuals and communities ‘and their environment, the milieu in which they live . . . to the extent that it is not a natural environment, that it has been created by the population and therefore has effects on that population’.\textsuperscript{18} It is this inter-subjective ‘milieu’ that is understood to shape social and individual behavioural choices and to account ‘for action at a distance of one body on another’ and thereby ‘appears as a field of intervention’ for governance policy making.\textsuperscript{19}

In this framework, any external peacebuilding intervention can only operate on society indirectly, through connecting to, understanding and facilitating the inter-subjective processes of societal life itself, rather than through the formal framework of public law in relation to individuals as citizens: ‘action is brought to bear on the rules of the game rather than on the players’ as Foucault states in \textit{The Birth of Biopolitics}.\textsuperscript{20} In this shift, liberal understandings of linear politics with the state (as representing and directing society from above) and the subject (as universal, rational and autonomous) are fundamentally altered.

\textbf{The discovery of the ‘local’}

The shift from linear to non-linear understandings and, with this, the shift from the formal sphere of government institutions and elite interactions to a sustained focus on the local or societal level is captured well in the pioneering work of John Paul Lederach. His work has been crucial in establishing this approach in the policy literature.\textsuperscript{21} Lederach was the first leading policy-academic to problematise ‘top–down’ or linear approaches to peace and democracy. Lederach took the emphasis away from international diplomatic agendas and local elites to focus on a societal approach. This approach is also known as a ‘relationship-’, ‘practice-’ or ‘process-orientated’ understanding. In this framework, the role of external actors is to assist in establishing an ‘infrastructure that empowers the resources for reconciliation from within that society’.\textsuperscript{22} In his focus upon ‘the experiential and subjective realities shaping people’s perspectives and needs’, Lederach argued that institutional structures and elite settlements were not the key concern:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{17}See further, for example, Michael Dillon and Julian Reid, \textit{The Liberal Way of War: Killing to Make Life Live} (London: Routledge, 2009); David Chandler, \textit{International Statebuilding: The Rise of Post-Liberal Governance} (London: Routledge, 2010).
\item \textsuperscript{18}Michel Foucault, \textit{‘Society Must Be Defended’: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–1979} (London: Allen Lane, 2003), 245.
\item \textsuperscript{20}Foucault, \textit{The Birth of Biopolitics}, 260.
\item \textsuperscript{21}See, for example, John Paul Lederach, \textit{Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies} (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 1997).
\item \textsuperscript{22}Ibid., xvi.
\end{itemize}
traditional mechanisms relying solely on statist diplomacy and realpolitik have not demonstrated a capacity to control these conflicts, much less transform them toward constructive, peaceful outcomes. Contemporary conflict thus demands innovation, the development of ideas and practices that go beyond the negotiation of substantive interests and issues. This innovation, I believe, pushes us to probe into the realm of the subjective-generationally accumulated perceptions and deep-rooted hatred and fear.\footnote{Ibid., 25.}

Lederach’s approach was to point towards the dominant understandings of the 2000s. His key break with existing practices was not merely to reject the focus on state-level elites but to insist that Western policy-conceptions, posed in linear terms of ‘conflict management’ or ‘conflict resolution’, were misplaced. Instead of linear thinking of the imposition of external blueprints, he argued that social scientists needed to learn from the new thinking of natural scientists, particularly in physics, where both quantum and chaos theory indicated that the system itself was more important than looking at its individual parts.\footnote{Ibid., 26.} Rather than understanding politics in terms of leaders, elites and political programmes, or ‘throwing money at problems’, he suggested that societal spaces, practices and processes should become the starting point for transforming social subjectivities.\footnote{Ibid., 87.} In this focus on societal processes, the concern was with social practices and relationships, rather than the external design or imposition of some alleged ‘solution’ to conflict.\footnote{Ibid., 112.}

It is useful to consider how, in this framework, the space of politics – the space of blockages to peace and their removal – shifted from the formal institutional sphere to the informal social sphere. For Lederach, the formal political sphere of elite politics lacked representational legitimacy, not in the ‘linear’ sense of Mary Kaldor’s ‘new wars’ analysis – where, as we have seen, elites were seen to be criminal and corrupt – but in the sense that elites were no longer understood as ‘representative’ of, or as fully connected to, society. Local elites were seen to represent the formal machinations of government; elites in this understanding, precisely because of their public visibility, were inevitably conservative upholders of the status quo, dependent on military, political or media power for their standing, and thereby were less connected to society itself.\footnote{Ibid., 38–41.} For the non-linear, societal or process-based approach it is the social milieus of everyday life that are crucial, not formal politics operating in the rarefied sphere of international-elitist diplomacy and negotiation.

The sense of a ‘disconnect’ between formal political authority and social processes and practices is central to non-linear approaches to peacebuilding. In these framings, international policy-makers need to connect with, to understand and to enable or influence local agency, now seen as key to successful peacebuilding outcomes. For Lederach, the key to peacebuilding was not Western knowledge or resources but local agency: ‘The greatest resource for sustaining peace in the long term is always rooted in the local people and culture.’\footnote{Ibid., 94.} In this framework, locals were foregrounded, not in terms of formal political representation but the social processes and relationships in which they were embedded. In which case, the approach to the local was transformed, to ‘see people in the setting as resources, not recipients’.\footnote{Ibid., 94.} In this way, there was a ‘move beyond a simple
prescription of answers and modalities from outside the setting’ to ‘empowering the
resources, modalities, and mechanisms for building peace that exist within the context’.30
There was no quick diplomatic solution to conflicts which could be agreed and somehow
imposed from the top–down, rather, it was ‘the healing of people and the rebuilding of the
web of their relationships’ which took centre-stage.31

Lederach is worth quoting at length to gain an understanding of the distinctive nature
of ‘non-linear’ as opposed to ‘linear-thinking’, regarding the ‘infra-politics of peace’:

An infrastructure for peacebuilding should be understood as a process-structure, in the way
that quantum theory has proposed. A process-structure is made up of systems that maintain
form over time yet have no hard rigidity of structure . . . In more specific terms . . . a process-
structure for peacebuilding transforms a war-system characterized by deeply divided, hostile,
and violent relationships into a peace-system characterized by just and interdependent
relationships with the capacity to find nonviolent mechanisms for expressing and handling
conflict. The goal is not stasis, but rather the generation of continuous, dynamic, self-
regenerating processes that maintain form over time and are able to adapt to environmental
changes. Such an infrastructure is made up of a web of people, their relationships and
activities, and the social mechanisms necessary to sustain the change sought. This takes place
at all levels of the society.32 (emphasis in original)

Non-linear, systems-based approaches seek to transform social practices and
behaviours understood as self-reproducing processes. Understood as systems of societal
reproduction, there can be no ‘solution’ which fixes some settlement. It is a matter of
ensuring that societal reproduction through practices and relationships becomes
sustainable at a level at which conflicts are managed peaceably. As Berghof Director,
Hans Giessman notes:

The inter-linkages of causes, intervening variables and consequences of conflict dynamics are
still widely under-researched. In complex conflict scenarios it can be hard to distinguish
between causes and consequences, and the borders between both become fuzzy, if not blurred.
Goal-seeking linear approaches will most likely fail in such scenarios . . . The actual matter of
transforming (violent) conflict into constructive interaction is about people internalising the
 chances for socialising alternative non-violent patterns of beliefs, behaviour and relations.33

While Lederach stressed the need to engage with community leaders with well-
established links and reputations, ‘chosen not for their expertise or profession, but for who
they are in the network’,34 other, more critical, academics have argued that societal
transformation needs to operate at a deeper level still. Thania Paffenholz, for example,
argues for a more comprehensive approach to conflict transformation with greater
emphasis on context sensitivity and local agency.35

This may have seemed a radical departure from dominant theorising but non-linear or
systems-based approaches reproduced, and in fact deepened, the voluntaristic or ideational
framings of liberal understandings, focusing not on the structuring of economic and social

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30Ibid., 95.
31Ibid., 78.
32Ibid., 84.
33Hans J. Giessman, ‘Foreword’, in Köppen and Giessmann, The Non-Linearity of Peace Processes,
7–9, quote at p. 8.
34Lederach, Building Peace, 96.
35Thania Paffenholz, ‘Conflict Transformation Theory: A Reality Check’ (paper presented at the
International Studies Association annual convention, San Diego, California, USA, April, 1–4,
2012).
relations but at the level of inter-subjective understandings, spaces and practices. Here, societal problems are addressed at the level of practices, ideas and cognitive frameworks held to produce the problematic reality or problematic responses to the stresses of post-conflict transformation. By shifting ‘politics’ to society, these approaches opened up ‘a new object, a new domain or field’ for policy intervention.\textsuperscript{36} the ‘local’.\textsuperscript{37}

In non-linear approaches, the focus of the problematic is the local level, understood as the sphere within which political agency operates in the production and reproduction of barriers to – as well as the facilitation of – peace. This radical understanding, of the societal or informal reproduction of social identities and practices, which can be seen as ‘resistance’ or as a barrier to liberal statebuilding aspirations, owes much to Louis Althusser’s conception of the individual subject as always and already ideologically embedded through its insertion into material social practices.\textsuperscript{38} He argued that these social practices were shaped by the ‘Ideological State Apparatuses’ of religion, culture, the family, communicative media and so on – operating in both the public and private spheres and, through which, cognitive and ideational understandings were continually formed.\textsuperscript{39} Contra Marx, therefore, individual understandings were not shaped by the real conditions of existence but instead, dominant ideological framings ‘represent to them there [through social practices] … the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live’.\textsuperscript{40} Imaginary, false or ‘ideological’ understandings were therefore inescapable ‘material’ products of the social practices of everyday life, through which subjects were always and already interpellated inter-subjectively.\textsuperscript{41} It is here that different ‘rationalities’ or ‘temporalities’ are held to be in play, which resist or contest the linear demands of liberal peace.

The local production and reproduction of difference through micro-practices, spaces and relationships is at the heart of non-linear understandings and the ‘embedded’ understanding of the subject. Liberal linear approaches were discursively dependent upon universal presumptions of the rational subject, which merely needed to be ‘freed’, in terms of the removal of elite blockages. The non-linear subject can no longer be ‘freed’ by peacebuilding interventions, as if the ‘blockages’ somehow existed outside the subject and its relations and understandings. Thus, the shift away from rationalist approaches – which were held to ignore the societal relations shaping cognitive understandings – and attention to the deeper social practices of ‘everyday life’ shaping cognitive and behavioural choices, is fundamental to understanding current academic and policy perspectives criticising linear peacebuilding rationalities of intervention. Althusser’s work on ideology thereby provides a template for critical and post-Marxist approaches, which have considered informal social practices more in terms of the active reproduction of ideas and cognitive frameworks than as the products of social and economic relations.

\textsuperscript{36}Foucault, \textit{The Birth of Biopolitics}, 295.
\textsuperscript{37} See, for example, the ‘Local First’ development and peacebuilding initiative, launched in November 2012, led by Peace Direct and supported by the Overseas Development Institute and linked into the UK Government’s Building Stability Overseas Strategy (http://www.localfirst.org.uk/).
\textsuperscript{39}Ibid., 17–18.
\textsuperscript{40}Ibid., 38–9.
\textsuperscript{41}Ibid., 47–50.
The ‘local’, ‘bottom–up’, focus on ‘the hidden’ processes of the societal sphere focuses on this sphere as the problematic barrier preventing better, more effective, more adaptive responses to post-conflict stresses. This ontological framework, focused on the real lives of local actors and their ‘everyday’ practices, thereby assumes that social practices are much less open to transformation through external intervention which focuses on the formal, public and political sphere. It is through this construction of the ‘local’ – as self-producing of emergent rationalities and temporalities of difference – that external peacebuilding interventions become inevitably understood to produce non-linear or hybrid outcomes.

The ‘hidden’ politics of resistance

As long as liberal rationalist approaches to politics were the dominant framework for understanding peacebuilding, the formal political sphere of inter-elite bargaining was seen to be the sphere through which problems could be understood and overcome, for example, by forcing illegitimate elite practices to change through compliance practices, such as conditionality. In non-linear, hybrid, approaches there is a very different approach to politics and the space and mechanisms of its action. In these understandings, politics is primarily understood in terms of societal processes held to be self-reproducing. For Coleman et al., for example, politics is seen to operate through social practices in a form that is more analogous to the reproduction of cancer – operating beneath the surface and transforming from the inside – than a clash of political interests or structural contradictions:

An intractable conflict can be looked upon as a ‘malignant’ social relation. Cancer works by penetrating the structure of the organism and enslaving essential elements of the body, which then lose their original functions and begin working in the service of the structure of cancer ... The richness and multidimensionality of all the processes occurring in a healthy society become entrained in the structure, leaving no opportunity for positive interactions.\(^{42}\)

Here, systems come to the fore, with complex mechanisms of interaction below the surface. In this new framework, in the words of EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy, Javier Solana, ‘domestic politics matter’.\(^{43}\) He explains:

Domestic politics matter because they limit what is achievable ... This is never more the case than when the problem is a dispute over the control and legitimacy of the state ... In the Balkans and elsewhere, the aim of crisis management has been to create the space for politics to work. But functioning politics is one thing that foreigners cannot provide; only the locals can do that.\(^{44}\)

Traditional, linear, ‘top–down’ or technical approaches assumed that the West could bring democracy and sustainable peace through the removal of blockages and opening the ‘space for politics to work’. Today’s understandings suggest that the problem is precisely that of ‘politics’ itself. ‘Politics’ in this sense, is not merely a matter of establishing or imposing technical solutions but refers to the area outside of external or Western influence. As the UK government Foreign Office and Department for International Development

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\(^{44}\) Ibid.
now argue ‘politics is central to stability’.

The British government sees this as a shift from previous approaches of the international community, which merely ‘looked for technical fixes to conflict’. What the West cannot easily influence through external interventions is the social space in which ‘politics’ is now seen to operate. In this space, there are blockages which do not appear to be amenable to Western influence. This is the space in which resistance works and where ‘only the locals’ can take responsibility.

It seems that the discovery of ‘hybridity’ has brought back ‘politics’; but not the linear politics of representation, with its linear understanding of state–society interactions. The politics of ‘the local’ operates in the informal and societal sphere, out of the reach or vision of Western policy-makers and linear social theorists. This shift is reflected in Mary Kaldor’s view of the increasing importance of ‘subterranean politics’ where political contestation (in all its xenophobic, populist and emancipatory forms) is seen to operate below the surface. The important point is that, using this framework, social mobilisations and collective activities are re-interpreted as ‘public displays of subterranean politics’.

In these analyses, trying to understand politics through a focus on elites would miss the bigger and more important picture, which can only be found through engaging with society itself. Kaldor argues that, with hindsight, this blind-spot can be clearly seen in relation to the 1989 ‘velvet revolutions’ of Central and Eastern Europe. Policy- and academic-analysts were caught blindsided because they were only studying elite and inter-elite relations.

For authors, such as Oliver Richmond, it is precisely here that we see the limits of linear, top–down understandings of liberal peace ‘compliance’ in the hidden or neglected political agency of the masses:

How do we know these agencies exist if they are hidden? Where is their empirical proof? An easy response to this counter-critique is because power, state and sovereignty, as well as international blueprints for which IR maintains compliance – an enormous gathering of the power of liberal modernity – have not had their way so far. This has been one of the lessons of modernity . . . How do the ‘powerless’ engage in politics and international relations should be its starting question, not whether they do.

Here, there is no understanding of the economic and social structures beyond the reach of local agency, in fact, any such structures are explicitly written out of the picture once the gap between asserted aims and policy outcomes is entirely the product of hidden agency. With the dismissal of social and economic relations all that is left is ‘politics’. However, this is no longer politics understood in terms of the rational pursuit of self-interest and as amenable to top–down ‘solutions’ or ‘settlements’. Nor does the return of politics imply a focus on the public politics of the formal sphere of representation. The politics of hidden agencies and resistances operates in the social sphere and is, by necessity, not amenable to

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46 Ibid.
48 Ibid., 24.
traditional liberal political theory, with its episteme of linearity and means–ends relations. This shifting conception of resistance has already been well noted and is usefully highlighted by Hollander and Einwohner in their discussion of resistance literature, considering resistance as both political and formal or public as well as identity-based and therefore stemming from the informal or private sphere of interaction. 50

James C. Scott has probably had more influence than any other author on our understanding of resistance as below the surface of formal political processes, for example, through emphasising the importance of access to non-public ‘hidden transcripts’ – the cognitive and sociological institutional contexts in which shared meanings are produced and transmitted at the local societal level. 51 Scott, in his focus on resistance under authoritarian rule, where open political contestation was impossible, articulated a conflation of the political and the social which speaks powerfully to us today, through his emphasis on the ‘infra-politics’ of resistance and his location of political understandings in the spaces, practices and relationships of ‘everyday life’.

As Scott argued, social science has failed to understand the politics and conflicts of the societies it examined as it has ‘focused resolutely on the official or formal relations between the powerful and the weak’ 52 and, essentially, in focusing on the formal level, was ‘looking in the wrong place for political conflict’. 53 Scott articulated the hidden, subterranean, societal space for politics in the socially embedded practices, relationships and networks of the informal sphere set apart from power. 54 It was the ‘infrapolitics’ of these relations which provided ‘the cultural and structural underpinning of the more visible political action’ 55 and enables us to understand how political conflicts can escalate in ways which social movement approaches or public choice theory fail to. 56

The blockages of politics thus shift from the resistance of elites, seen to be easily amenable to international resolution, to the blockages of the ‘local’ or social sphere which, by their very virtue of being ‘hidden’, are much less amenable to understanding or to external influence. It is here that Scott’s critical anthropology begins to resonate with current policy understandings of the difficulties of overcoming the barriers of local resistance which does not necessarily take public or formal political forms. Scott thereby suggests that it is the ‘infrapolitics’ which are key to understanding the blockages to democracy-promotion and peacebuilding, as here:

There are no leaders to round up, no membership lists to investigate, no manifestos to denounce, no public activities to draw attention . . . infrapolitics is . . . the realm of informal leadership and nonelites, of conversation and oral discourse, and of surreptitious resistance. The logic of infrapolitics is to leave few traces in the wake of its passage. By covering its tracks it not only minimizes the risk its practitioners run but it also eliminates much of the documentary evidence that might convince social scientists and historians that real politics was taking place. 57

52 Ibid., 13.
53 Ibid., 17.
54 Ibid., 151–2.
55 Ibid., 184.
56 Ibid., 203.
57 Ibid., 200.
Non-linear and systems-based approaches appeal increasingly as external interventions at the level of formal politics are seen to be ineffective. This understanding is confirmed by academic work in the areas of democracy promotion and peacebuilding. Elena Semenova, in a survey of Central and East European political elites has highlighted the problem, noting that: ‘We can’t use parties to identify elites. The party system is quite unstable.’\textsuperscript{58} A similar finding is confirmed by Christoph Zürcher from research in post-conflict states where, similarly, there seems to be a breakdown between political elites and social or political processes: ‘We have no idea who really are the power holders in these regions. In post-war contexts we have no clue who these people are. We just don’t know.’\textsuperscript{59} The starting assumption is that local agency, in fact, draws strength from its hidden forms of evading the liberal gaze. ‘Infrapolitics’ is no longer analysed as a product of weakness and repression but as an ontological starting point for explaining the limits of peacebuilding.

The reification of ‘resistance’

The assertions at play in current understandings of politics operating below the surface and through ‘hidden’ agencies of resistance are quite astounding. Resistances may be hidden, as Scott’s research shows, they may be ‘mobile and transitory’ as Foucault suggests and may even become ‘strategically codified’ to ‘make a revolution possible’, as he further indicates\textsuperscript{60} but, as suggested above, resistance can never become the ontological limit to liberal universal ideals without the rejection of any understanding of the importance of structures of economic and social relations.\textsuperscript{61} It seems that Foucault’s much quoted statement on the imbrication of power and resistance has been turned into a reification of resistance as marking the limit to liberal aspirations and linear understandings. In fact, the actual articulation in his sentence is this: ‘Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.’\textsuperscript{62}

It seems that (in an entirely opposite reading to that of Foucault) it is a ‘relationship of exteriority’ that drives the search for ‘hidden agency’ in the sphere of the ‘local’. This approach is probably best exemplified in the work of Oliver Richmond who argues that International Relations, as a discipline, ‘needs a theory of resistance’\textsuperscript{63} and that, along the lines of Scott, the discipline’s lack of attention to ‘hidden capacity and resistant agency’

\textsuperscript{61}This logic will be drawn out further towards the end of this section.
\textsuperscript{62}Michel Foucault, \textit{The History of Sexuality. Volume 1}, 95. Power cannot be conceptualised without resistance, without a strategic problematic enabling power to project itself and to ‘secure’ itself through its operation. This is why, for Foucault, power needed and produced ‘resistance’ (see further, Foucault, \textit{Security, Territory, Population}). In this reading, it could be argued that the boom in ‘resistance’ studies (and their funding by the European Union and other bodies) highlights that there is a ‘resistance’ problem, a discursive field through which new techniques of peacebuilding intervention are emerging.
\textsuperscript{63}Richmond, ‘Critical Agency, Resistance and a Post-Colonial Civil Society’, 421.
means that the real workings of politics are ignored. That, in fact, ‘hidden resistance’ is entirely exterior to liberal power: akin to the dark matter of physics, upon which the world itself depends; forming ‘a massive percentage of the scale of all capacity for reform, development, justice, institutions, civil society, rights, needs, peace and emancipation’.\(^{64}\) It is thereby hidden resistance which explains the limits to external projects of intervention, operating as ‘a conglomeration or aggregation of fragmented and hidden everyday forms of resistance’, which ‘cannot be seen or easily resisted by power’ or co-opted by it, yet is capable of agency and ‘holds power to account and illustrates the limits of its sovereignty’.\(^{65}\)

The need for theory to understand ‘resistance’ is thereby of prime importance; Richmond sets out the new research agenda thus:

> It has now become axiomatic in several other disciplines that the sum of disaggregated, uncoordinated and fragmented, hidden, disguised and marginal agencies represents a significant totality. It is not homogenous, unidirectional or unilevel, but still it is almost impossible to predict or to countermand. It represents decentralized, bottom–up and grass-roots forms of identity, culture and legitimacy, and a capacity that disrupts hegemony.\(^{66}\)

Non-linear approaches, bringing a variety of self-reproducing frameworks of explanation to bear on the reproduction of cultural and ideational barriers to peacebuilding success, have increasingly come to dominate the academic and policy agendas in the 2000s. Non-linear and hybrid approaches reflect well the sense of limits in today’s world. However, they tend to reify or to naturalise these limits as somehow inherent in the world and beyond the reach of liberal reason.\(^{67}\) The limits of peacebuilding can therefore be understood as a product of the hubristic linear thinking of Western modernity rather than as economic and social structural problems eliciting the possibility of social transformation. Resistance articulated as the limits of liberal aspirations for democracy and peace thereby no longer needs the transformative political agency of subjects. It is for this reason that Oliver Richmond can suggest that resistant agency is a vital determining factor, much as the dark matter of space. This agency is resistant objectively, in its mode of life or being, regardless of subjective political actions or demands.

Once we understand resistance or the limits of liberal peacebuilding aspirations as objective aspects of the world, then it is easy to understand how the academic boom in ‘resistance studies’ articulates these assumptions.\(^{68}\) Resistance as an objective characteristic of the world beyond the focus of the linear epistemes of liberal modernity needs no politics.\(^{69}\) It is for this reason that complexity and new materialist approaches can

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\(^{64}\)Ibid., 424.  
\(^{65}\)Ibid., 433.  
\(^{66}\)Ibid., 434.  
\(^{67}\)See, for example, Popolo, *A New Science of International Relations*, 128.  
\(^{69}\)For example, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri give ontological priority to resistance rather than to power, enabling the ‘Multitude’ to resist ‘Empire’ through the nature of their biopolitical being rather than traditional political forms of organisation, which remain trapped in territorial understandings; see Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (London: Penguin, 2005), 315.
further dilute our understandings of agency and resistance to suggest that non-human actors can also be seen to ‘resist’ and ‘undermine’ the linear causal assumptions at the base of international policy making.\textsuperscript{70} Whereas the old ‘historical materialism’ understood that the structuring of inequalities was amenable to conscious human transformation, the world of agency of the ‘new’ materialism lacks the possibilities for structural change. The actor-network framework of Bruno Latour is a good example of this approach, where social explanation needs the ‘missing masses’ – both human and non-human – whose ‘hidden’ influence is seen in the uncertainties and contingencies of the world.\textsuperscript{71}

In this way, non-linear approaches explain the limits of liberal linear reason as a product of the objective complexity of assemblages or associations of human and non-human actors, in a flat world of ‘quasi-objects and quasi-subjects’. Latour’s ontology is the same as that of Richmond’s in his insistence that the ‘dark matter’ or ‘plasma’ of the world, untouched by the social sciences of liberal modernity, is the key to overcoming our ‘astronomical ignorance’ and the hubristic fantasies created by this. Latour differs merely in his understanding that this ‘vast hinterland’ is limited and bordered by the lack of inclusion of both human and non-human actors or agents and also in his more radical challenge to liberal linearity, in his assertion that these excluded agencies are ‘not hidden, simply unknown’ (emphasis in original).\textsuperscript{72} In this ontology, it is the ‘recalcitrance’ of being itself that resists liberal linear framings rather than conscious or intentional political activity on behalf of the subject.\textsuperscript{73}

Conclusion
While Foucault insightfully argued that ‘where there is power, there is resistance’, this survey of the shift towards non-linear understandings of peacebuilding suggests that there is the danger that the power/resistance binary has become a formalistic and reified one, explaining, rationalising and legitimating ‘hybrid’ outcomes. In reifying peacebuilding outcomes, the transformative aspirations of peacebuilding become muted and dissipated. The analytical focus on the ‘local’ and upon ‘hidden agency’ naturalises the understanding that the limits to peace are located at the local level and are internally generated or reproduced through local ways of life or modes of being which are understood as ‘resistant’ to external ‘liberal’ forms of compliance. While it is understandable that Western assumptions of exporting external ‘blueprints’ should be criticised as both politically and practically problematic assertions of unaccountable power and that attention should be drawn to the importance of local agency and capacity in the face of these moralised frames of understanding, the non-linear discourses of local ‘hidden’ agency neither create the basis of any genuine understanding of the limits to liberal peace nor provide any emancipatory alternative.


\textsuperscript{72}Ibid., 244. However, neither Richmond nor Latour renounce the possibility of knowing or tracing these hidden agents through the use of more anthropologically grounded approaches.

In the first place, the power/resistance binary, as applied in the non-linear peacebuilding discourse, provides an entirely voluntarist or idealist understanding of the limits to peacebuilding. The success or failure of liberal peacebuilding goals is seen to be determined by a clash of subjective wills, cultures, cognitive frameworks and temporalities. Ironically, the non-linear approach shares much with the linear approach highlighted at the top of the article, which assumed that the problem was subjective elite will or understanding rather than the social and economic context. In evading the question of the material social and economic explanations for the limits to liberal universalist aspirations, non-linear approaches, in fact, share much with the conservative understandings of new institutionalist economics, forwarded by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, similarly concerned with highlighting the local (rather than international) limits to economic development – understanding these limits to be endogenous, self-produced and emergent on the basis of cultural and ideational differentiation.  

Second, the ontologicial assumptions of non-linear framings tend to problematise the emancipatory objectives behind peace itself rather than the problematic imposition of external projects per se. The ontological assumptions of hybrid understandings rest on the privileging of difference, where conflict is understood as an inevitable product of temporal and cognitive clashes between different modes of being, never amenable to the homogenising gaze of liberal linear thinking. In effect, the liberal frameworks for legitimising external intervention, through the telos of the promise of peace, are rejected while the need for external intervention is accepted as long as it takes new, more reflective and less liberal or ‘post-liberal’ forms, which accept the need to work with the ‘hidden’ agencies of the local rather than against them.

Third, and perhaps more importantly, from within this framework, peacebuilding interventions can no longer be held to account through highlighting the gap between their legitimating promise and their reality in terms of outcomes. In the world of ‘resistance’ rather than ‘compliance’ the limits of Western liberal aspirations are not constructed as the effects of the market inequalities, structuring the asymmetries of intervention, but are seen instead to be the product of cultural or ideational choices of ‘resisting’ or ‘recalcitrant’ subjects. Peacebuilding interventions working on the ontological basis of hybridity would merely institutionalise lower expectations and horizons, allocating responsibility for this to local agency. Failure would be re-presented as success, both in recognising local agency and in rejecting the ‘hubris’ of the liberal past.

Notes on contributor

David Chandler is Professor of International Relations and Research Director of the Centre for the Study of Democracy, University of Westminster, London, UK. For the academic year 2012–13 he is Senior Fellow, Centre for Global Cooperation Research, Käte Hamburger Kolleg, Universität Duisburg-Essen, Duisburg, Germany. He is the founding editor of the Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding and the editor of the journal Resilience: International Policies, Practices and Discourses. Personal website: www.davidchandler.org.