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Towards a Laclaunian Approach to Peacebuilding

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Abstract: What is the local? This is one of the most controversial questions the local turn in peacebuilding faces. For some, the local refers to institutions and social movements, while others understand it as networks or processes in flux. Critics argue, among other points, that this literature tends to reify an international-local binary, whereas others emphasize the incoherence of adopting anti-foundationalist ontologies while defending the possibility of emancipation. In this article, I discuss these subjects through the lens of Ernesto Laclau's political theory and propose to frame the local as a form of non-essentialist collective identity. To do this, I review recent contributions to the local turn and identify some of its controversies. Considering the theoretical lacuna found, I propose Laclaunian concepts, such as the people, antagonism, and hegemony, as conceptual alternatives. Finally, I present some consequences to the study of peacebuilding which this type of discussion might open.

Keywords: peacebuilding; local turn; Ernesto Laclau; people; hegemony; hybridity

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> Hence it would be as well, before we examine the act by which a people elects a king, to examine the act by which a people is a people. For this act is necessarily anterior to the other, and is the true foundation of society.
>
> Jean-Jacques Rousseau,
> *The Social Contract* ([1762] 1994: 54)

Introduction

Peacebuilding in conflict-ridden countries is a controversial subject. Traditional approaches, usually labelled as the liberal peace, envisage the promotion of liberal, market-oriented democracies as the solution to post-conflict societies (Fukuyama 2005; Paris 2010). However, liberal peacebuilding has begun to receive criticism in recent years. From Marxist international political economy (Pugh 2005; Taylor 2011) to contributions inspired by post-structuralist and post-colonial insights (Duffield 2001; Chandler 2006; Mac Ginty 2011; Richmond 2011), the goal has been to point out alternatives to the liberal approach.

Among such contributions, the local turn has gained pre-eminence. Calling into question not only problem-solving perspectives on peacebuilding, but also some critical analyses, which may occasionally ignore 'local conditions' and 'the everyday', its proponents discuss the possibilities of resistance, reform, and even the subversion of the liberal peace through the agentive capacity of local actors. Contact between international and local agents is seen as a potential catalyst for something new, giving rise to a different type of peace vis-à-vis the liberal project.

Despite its conceptual innovations and empirical findings (e.g., Autessere 2010; 2014; Firchow 2018; Mac Ginty 2011; Richmond 2016), the local turn has not been free of criticism. First, it is not clear analytically what the local is. Is it local institutions? Social movements? Processes in flux? (Schierenbeck 2015: 1024). Second, it could be argued that this literature reifies the international-local binary, reinforcing the role of Western actors in the process (Paffenholz 2015: 858). Third, there is a contradiction stemming from its theoretical foundations, which are anchored in anti-foundationalist ontologies yet defend the possibility of emancipation (Randazzo 2016a: 2). Fourthly, the idea of a hybrid peace engineered with the help of foreign actors could block, for example, discussions involving the withdrawal of troops from countries (Bargués-Pedreny and Randazzo 2018: 2).

So, what are we to do? In this article, an exercise in conceptual scoping, I propose to understand the local as a form of collective identity. However, to do this we need to move past essentialist conceptions of identity and introduce non-essentialist approaches into the discussion.

One such possibility is Ernesto Laclau's (2005) theory of populism. Laclau proposes an ontological approach to collective identities, interested in their formal modes of articulation independent of their content. According to the author, collective identities have a

relational dimension, in the sense that to understand the self we must take the other into consideration. In this regard, his notion of antagonism is important, as collective identities are formed through antagonistic relations. However, we are not talking here about a clash between two fully constituted identities; for the author, the paradox of antagonism is that it is the condition of possibility and impossibility for the formation of collective identities. For example, racism is the condition that prevents antiracism movements from achieving their goals, but without racism these movements would have no reason to be constructed in the first place.

I defend that a Laclaunian approach matters to peacebuilding due to a lacuna found in the literature. While recent developments in the local turn literature add valuable insights and empirical findings to the debates, they still play what I call 'the revealing role'. That is, despite best efforts, the local is still framed as an element that should be brought into analyses and peacebuilding efforts, not something that emerges or is reinforced out of international-local encounters. From a Laclaunian perspective, conflicts and peace processes are contexts that can lead to the redrawing of social borders and the displacement of cultural and political institutions that regulate political subjects into relatively stable orders. Thus, Laclaunian insights could help us develop a framework to address how collective identities arise and/or are strengthened out of such scenarios.

Regarding methodology, my conceptual-scoping exercise is anchored in a literature review of works on the local turn in peacebuilding. This review highlights five analytical paths informing this literature and six key critiques. Then, bearing in mind these critiques to local turn, I explain how Laclaunian concepts can contribute to the debate. In terms of structure, I develop the argument through the article's three main sections. In the final remarks, I outline some consequences for the study of peacebuilding that this type of discussion might open.

The local turn in peacebuilding

Following the distinction made by Paffenholz (2016: 210), we have two local turns in peacebuilding. The first local turn emerged during the 1990s, very much related with John Paul Lederach's (1997) contributions to the field. The assumption was that instead of advancing externally designed projects, the goal should be to empower local people in peace processes, as this would be the best way to achieve sustainable reconciliation. Also, this first turn was concerned with bridging the gap between academia and policy, encouraging the emergence of different types of civil society peace-support projects around the globe (Paffenholz 2016: 211).

One of the consequences of the first local turn was the introduction of terms such as *local ownership* and *context sensitivity* to the liberal peacebuilding agenda. However, as Paffenholz (2016: 212) remarks, the dismissal of local institutions and perspectives, and the use of local agents to advance international actors' goals was a very present reality in practice. Considering these circumstances and adding to them the war on terror and the state building failures in Afghanistan and Iraq in the early 2000s, a new agenda emerged.

Stimulated mainly by the contributions of Oliver Richmond (2009; 2011), Roger Mac Ginty (2011), Severine Autessere (2010; 2014), and others, the idea is to go micro (Autessere 2012), that is, to reject assumptions that peace achieved on a national level will trickle down to the local, and explore local impacts and responses to peace processes. Unlike the first turn, now the local is conceptualized as a place of autonomy and resistance against the hegemony of the liberal peace, with possibilities for emancipation being sought through systematic analyses of structures of power and domination.

How can the local be analysed in peacebuilding? After a thorough review of this literature, I have identified at least five analytical paths that share concerns about the local but have their own particularities: (1) the everyday; (2) the hybridity approach; (3) friction in peacebuilding; (4) ethnographic peace research; and (5) the spatial turn.

The everyday could be considered the pioneering approach in the second local turn. Broadly speaking, this literature highlights the importance of social practices and bottom-up conflict-calming activities for bringing about sustainable peace. A key contribution to this debate comes from Oliver Richmond (2009: 578). He argues that the goal is to look at the everyday to grasp the potentialities of local agents to resist and reshape peace interventions. Therefore, the local here is best understood as a set of practices, not a politically or culturally bounded place. In a similar vein, Mitchell (2011: 1624) understands the everyday not as a local or international phenomenon, but as practices through which actors can inhabit and move between local and international worlds.

A second set of examples can be found in Roger Mac Ginty's and Pamina Firchow's work, as well as their collaborative papers (e.g., Mac Ginty and Firchow 2016; Firchow and Mac Ginty 2017a; 2017b), which form the backbone of the Everyday Peace Indicators project. A common thread running through all these works is the attempt to grasp, from the perspective of local communities, what everyday peace might look like. For instance, the authors develop theoretical discussions about the notion and practice of everyday peace – the methods used by individuals and groups to cope with situations of conflict in deeply divided societies (Mac Ginty 2014; 2017) – and an elaborate methodology to measure it based on the perceptions and agentive capacity of local people (Firchow 2018).

Finally, a third sequence of works that build upon the concept of the everyday are those that relate economics and peace. One crucial contribution here is Jennings and Boas' article (2015), which discusses everyday life in a peacebuilding context through the concept of the peacekeeping economy. According to them, a peacekeeping economy involves economic activities that either would not emerge without international presence or else would emerge but to a lesser degree. Activities such as jobs available to local staff due to UN presence in the field, unskilled and informal work like cleaning, cooking and guarding, and even increased demand for sex services are examples of peacekeeping economies.

Distler, Stavrevska and Vogel (2018: 139) provide a similar contribution. They define post-conflict economy formation as a multifaceted phenomenon that occurs in post-conflict settings and supports the introduction, or even the end, of given economic practices, with the potential to transform the fabric of societies. The formation of this type of economic system can have profound impacts on whether countries recover from war and

how they do so. Also, the path towards sustainable peace would depend on the construction of peace economies whose goal should be to reduce structural economic inequalities and address peoples' livelihoods. If the concept of 'peacekeeping economies' is designed to identify what these economies are and their main actors, 'economies of peace' aims at analysing how a post-conflict economy takes shape and what the possibilities of a peace economy may be (Distler, Stavrevska and Vogel 2018: 141).

The everyday has unveiled a constructive opportunity to explore the relationship between peacebuilding, local actors, and bottom-up practices, but without neglecting structures of domination and the search for emancipatory alternatives. The following perspectives have attempted to improve this avenue, adding new theoretical anchorages and/or methodological considerations.

Such is the case of the hybridity approach to peacebuilding. In the social sciences, hybridity first came to prominence in works of anthropology and ethnography and in the post-colonial literature (Bhabha 1994; Canclini 1995), which challenged essentialist perspectives on identity, culture, and power relations. In peace and conflict studies, the first use of hybridity comes from Clements et al. (2007), who are interested in understanding hybrid political orders in which liberal and illiberal norms, institutions and actors coexist.

A thorough dialogue between peacebuilding and hybridity, but from a more post-colonial perspective, can be found in the work of Oliver Richmond (2010; 2011). As employed by the author, hybridity aims to emphasize the capacity of international and local actors to engage with one another and create something new in terms of peace. According to Richmond (2011: 19), hybridity is the inescapable result of peacebuilding efforts, and the big question is whether this phenomenon offers emancipatory alternatives for peace. Richmond (2014: 2) also added a distinction between positive hybrid peace and negative hybrid peace. While the former focuses on the fact that legitimacy and the power of agency rise from the local sphere, the latter emphasizes the opposite, arguing that power and norms emerge mainly from the international sphere, marginalizing populations.

Mac Ginty (2011: 2) argues that one of the analytical gains of hybridity is that it avoids two predominant tendencies in the literature: the idea that liberal peace is something that is cohesive and coherent, and a rejection of a romanticization of the agentive capacity of local actors and institutions. He proposes a framework for mapping hybridization processes through four axes: (1) the ability and powers of external agents to force compliance with the liberal model in peacebuilding; (2) the external incentives for the installation of liberal peace; (3) the ability of local actors to resist, ignore, or adapt to interventions; and (4) the ability of these entities to present and maintain alternatives to the liberal model.

Sharing similar concerns, we have the friction literature, whose purpose is to unpack the interplay between global norms, practices, and actors in peacebuilding contexts (Bjorkdahl et al. 2016). The theoretical starting point for this perspective is Anna Tsing's (2005) concept, by which friction is regarded as a force capable either of hindering change or of provoking movements and transformations. Considering these insights, Bjorkdahl and her co-authors (2016: 1) argue that friction can accomplish at least two goals: illuminate different dynamics in peacebuilding, and provide an original standpoint for

understanding how global ideas relate to peace change and are transformed through their contact with post-conflict realities.

While it has some aspects in common with the hybridity perspective, friction has its own particularities. First, it emphasizes processes triggered by global-local interactions, not outcomes, as is the case in part of the hybridity literature. Second, processes of friction add a measure of complexity and unpredictability to peacebuilding encounters, since the implication is that actors at all scales (global, regional, and local) are potential agents in peacebuilding. This focus on processes attempts to avoid the reification of the international-local binary, since friction is also composed of various sub-processes, such as compliance, adoption, co-option, resistance, and rejection. Finally, the complexity and unpredictability of frictional encounters protects the concept from being co-opted like hybridity has been and used to advance the idea that a hybrid peace can be engineered from the outside, despite fierce criticism (Richmond and Mac Ginty 2014; Millar 2014)[1].

Insights from anthropology and ethnography have also inspired works grouped under the label of Ethnographic Peace Research (EPR) (Millar 2018a; 2018b). Acknowledging anthropological contributions to the study of experiences of violence and conflict resolution (e.g., Das 2007), EPR authors aim at bridging the divide between anthropology and peace and conflict studies.

The chapters in Millar's edited volume (2018a) defend the idea that liberal peacebuilding does not engage fully with the concept of culture, hence the need for ethnographic-oriented approaches. An EPR perspective is concerned primarily with describing and understanding experiences of conflict and peace and how they are filtered through social and cultural lenses. One of its key strengths is its methodological flexibility, as different settings demand the analyst to dynamically respond to their unique challenges. EPR also offers four other advantages: the potential to (1) analyse conceptions of peace, conflict and violence at various levels; (2) understand more accurately the impact of interventions and peace processes on local communities; (3) recognize and develop potential alternative practices of peace; and (4) develop ideas on how to assist local agents to build their version of peace (Millar 2018: 6).

Finally, we have the contributions from the spatial turn (Bjorkdahl and Buckley-Zistel 2016; Bjorkdahl and Kappler 2017). Drawing on insights from Critical Human Geography, which argues that space is where social relations become concrete and that space and society shape each other, the spatial turn aims at rethinking the interconnectedness between peace, space, and place. In that regard, while place is geographical location – the materiality that ranges from the body to the global – space is the imaginary counter-side of material place (Bjorkdahl and Kappler 2017: 2). From this standpoint, agency is the capacity to transform place into space (through the creation of its meanings and possibilities), but also to transform space into place (rendering ideas into material reality).

The main contribution to the spatial turn here is that places reveal the tangible and intangible legacies of conflict, situating peacebuilding processes and actors. Accordingly, as Bjorkdahl and Kappler (2017: 10) propose, the idea is to emplace analyses of peace, peacebuilding and agency in their appropriate spatial and temporal context, and frame

peace and conflict as a socio-spatial relationship that is always being made and remade (Bjorkdahl and Buckley-Zistel 2016). Also, as Bjorkdahl and Kappler (2017: 4) argue, from a spatial perspective the local is a place in space that has become a material location with geographical marks but is not essentialized in its identity.

The local turn and its criticisms

Although the studies have provided vital contributions to the local turn in peacebuilding, some questions remain. While conducting the literature review, I identified six main points of discussion surrounding the local turn: (1) what the local is; (2) the international-local binary; (3) agentive capacity; (4) the material context; (5) ontology and political prescription; and (6) the role of the interpreter. Some of these axes apply more to one or two of the works reviewed, while others apply to all of them.

Critiques regarding (1) what the local is and (2) the reification of the international-local binary argue that the grammar mobilized by the local turn leads to a lack of conceptual clarity (Paffenholz 2016: 214), demanding a more nuanced analysis of the actors involved. Also, as Debiel and Rinck (2016: 248) point out, methodological localism tends to naturalize concepts like the liberal international versus the illiberal local. If we do not move away from this conundrum, it will be hard to effectively counter Randazzo's (2016a: 12) contention that if everything is everyday agency, what is not?

Even in the hybridity and friction approaches, which attempt to transcend this dilemma, traces of it persist. For instance, while Richmond (2011) points out the importance of analysing contacts and interactions between the international and local spheres and insists that these interactions produce something different, he does not elaborate on how they impact the identities of the agents involved in them. What we have are international, national, and local actors – and even the figure of the local-local – uncovered by hybridity. Likewise, I agree with Randazzo's assessment (2016b: 157) of friction: although the concept intends to highlight the relational element of hybridity as a process, it does not go beyond identifying the identities subjected to frictional encounters.

The spatial turn and EPR are not exempt from criticism regarding the first two axes, either. As Brigg (2020: 7) notes, the spatial turn seems rooted in an epistemological framework that a decontextualized knower applies in various settings without considering other people's conceptualizations of place and space. Although EPR provides more nuanced interpretations of peacebuilding, new developments in anthropology are challenging traditional approaches to ethnography. For example, inspired in the works of authors such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2017) and Philippe Descola (2013), the ontological turn in anthropology opposes the idea that human difference can be grasped by differences in representations. Critiquing cultural and cognitivist anthropologists, Viveiros de Castro (2012: 153) says: 'one side reduces reality to representation (culturalism, relativism, textualism); the other reduces representation to reality (cognitivism, sociobiology, evolutionary psychology)'.

From this perspective, anthropology is not simply a study of 'world-views', but of essentially different 'worlds' (Vigh and Sausdal 2014). This has significant implications for ethnography, as traditional ethnography is mainly identified with the analysis of meaning and representations, and on occasion neglects the material aspects of reality. Also, an ethnographic analysis informed by these ideas should look to the more abstract categories found in a culture and be prepared to learn theoretical lessons from the concepts used by groups studied and to adopt/modify some of them to anthropological theory (Palecek and Risjord 2012).

When we consider the (3) agentive capacity and (4) material context axes, the critiques are that despite all the discussion about local alternatives to peace, we sometimes face hierarchical divisions in the literature, emphasizing the role of international actors to the detriment of locals. For example, Bargués-Pedreny and Randazzo (2018) argue that despite all the dynamism of hybridizations (and, I would add, of frictional encounters and everyday contexts), peacebuilders are still capable of distinguishing good from bad options and affecting the course of the process with some margin of intentionality, leaving little room for the local population to act. Likewise, there is the problem of selectivity: why are certain local solutions understood as being good for given contexts and bad for others? (Randazzo 2016b: 183).

With specific regard to the material context, Mathieu (2018) argues that the search for the local is heavily prioritized, yet many forget that this is just a first step. If we do not reconnect it with the socio-historical context that gave rise to it, the power relations that need to be addressed will be left unaltered. Adapting Anthias' comments (2001) to this specific discussion, the emphasis on cultural aspects to the detriment of materiality and politics ends up de-politicizing culture, failing to take account of how power is culturally exercised.

When it comes to (5) ontology and political prescription, Randazzo (2016b) points out the paradox existing between the anti-foundationalist anchorages behind the discussion about hybridity and the defence of an emancipatory path derived from hybridizations. A similar argument is developed by Nadarajah and Rampton (2015), when they differentiate descriptive hybridity, the result of international-local interactions, from prescriptive hybridity, which is, by definition, emancipatory in intention.

Finally, (6) the problematization of the role of the interpreter was inspired by Robert Young's interrogation of Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity. Young asks: 'is Bhabha describing a forgotten moment of historical resistance, or does that resistance remain inarticulate until the interpreter comes a hundred and seventy years later to "read between the lines" and rewrite history?' (Young 1990: 190). In the local turn literature, Mac Ginty (2015: 848) emphasizes that 'at the heart of this remaking of the local is an understanding that the local is a social construction. In order to find the local, we need to examine the ways in which we think.' Mathieu (2018) argues that we should make the implicit explicit – in particular, the position and the role of the researcher and the peacebuilder. Young's question remains unanswered, however: when we are talking about everyday peace, hybrid peace, frictional encounters, and places and spaces, are we describing a forgotten moment or does the interpreter need to attest it?

Before moving forward, I want to point out that I share Bjorkdahl et al.'s (2016: 11) view that many critiques of the local turn as intentionally romanticizing the local or

inherently reifying the international-local binary are unfounded. Still, as they also argue, the limited language of part of these debates has enabled such interpretations. Taking their cue into consideration, I propose to frame the discussion in different terms.

To do so, let me go back for a moment to Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity. My view is that there is an important point in Bhabha's thinking that is not fully developed in the local turn. Essentially, Bhabha's work can be understood as a series of challenges to the concept of identity and to a given vision of culture. For Bhabha, culture is not a static entity whose essence can be fixed in time and space. On the contrary, culture is perpetually in movement, and can be understood as a melting pot of different elements that are regularly added and transformed.

For Bhabha, hybridity allows for a third space to develop, which moves history and builds new structures of authority and new political initiatives, as well as allowing for the rise of new possibilities of collective action. The condition of possibility for the emergence of third spaces is the process of translation and articulation between cultures. However, it is worth emphasizing that 'the articulation of cultures is possible not because of the familiarity or similarity of contents, but because all cultures are *symbol-forming and subject-constituting, interpellative practices*' (Bhabha 1990: 210, emphasis added).

Considering these thoughts, let me add another conceptual distinction into the discussion: the Heideggerian division between ontological and ontic. According to Heidegger (1962), the ontic refers to entities in their own existence, with an ontic investigation having at its centre particular types of objects located within a given domain. The ontological, in turn, is related to the entities taken as objects of knowledge, with an ontological investigation concerning itself with the conditions of possibility of these objects and their investigation[2]. We move from an ontic experience to an ontological investigation when the customary sense of the things that surround us lose their meaning and lead us to question the foundations of our existence.

I argue, therefore, that Bhabha's hybridity deals with ontological matters, not with the ontic level. The entire discussion undertaken through hybridity is an attempt to question colonial authority, focusing on the fact that the so-called cultural superiority of the colonizer does not rest on secure ontological foundations. Furthermore, the development of third spaces allows for the emergence of new historical actors who can give rise to social transformations. Rejecting analyses that frame subjects in terms of social classes within society, Bhabha (1990: 220, emphasis added) argues that the people 'are there as a process of political articulation and political negotiation across a whole range of contradictory social sites. The people always exist as a multiple form of identification, *waiting to be created and constructed*.'

From this interpretation, I argue that a significant part of the conceptual grammar of the local turn debate is related to an ontic register, like the combination of elements originating from the international and local spheres. Thus, these approaches play what I call a 'revealing role': the local is still framed as an element that should be brought into analyses and peacebuilding efforts, not something that emerges and/or is reinforced because of conflicts or peace processes. An ontological investigation goes further: it does not have

to do with just finding the local, but also of analysing the political construction and/or political reinforcement of what we understand the local to be.

This ontological gaze on the political formation of new agents and new historical structures is a key insight drawn from Bhabha. However, although Bhabha insists that the people exist as a multiple form of identification, he does not develop this concept further. How are the people (or collective identities, broadly speaking) ontologically constructed? Is there any particular logic? These questions are also unanswered in the local turn in peacebuilding, and Ernesto Laclau provides conceptual elements worth exploring for the debate.

Towards a Laclaunian approach to peacebuilding

Laclau's (2005) theory of populism addresses the nature and logic of the formation of collective identities from an ontological standpoint, independent of their content. I therefore intend to bring Laclau's contribution to reflect on an ontology of the local. To defend my argument, I will address the six critiques previously listed through a Laclaunian lens.

What is the local?

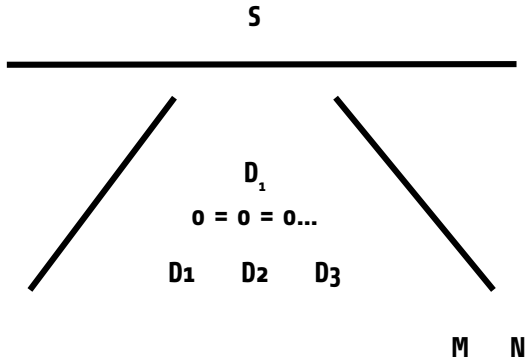
How can we analyse the emergence of collective identities? The first important decision is the choice of the unit of analysis. Instead of individuals or groups, Laclau opts for demand as the unit for analysing populism. We should begin by emphasizing that there are two ways of understanding this category. Demand can be a necessity or a request, and Laclau gives precedence to the latter. To give an example, we can imagine a group of people living in the same neighbourhood who would like to have a bus route to take them as close as possible to their workplaces. Introducing such a route and thereby fulfilling this demand would cause it to disappear and satisfy these people. However, if it was not satisfied, at least two alternatives could happen. The first would be the demobilization of these people and the end of the demand; the second would be the articulation of this demand with other unsatisfied demands, like education, healthcare, and so forth (Laclau 2009: 36).

This second alternative above presents us with some central elements of a populist logic. The first of these is the dichotomization of social space through the creation of an internal border and the construction of a relation of equivalence among unsatisfied demands. The demands have their own idiosyncrasies (demand for a bus route, education, healthcare, etc.), but vis-à-vis the municipality that does not meet their needs, they become equivalent. Figure 1 presents a graphic illustration.

The horizontal line represents the dichotomization of the social space, whereas **S** represents the antagonistic exterior that allows for the establishment of a relationship of equivalence between **D1**, **D2**, and **D3** – distinct demands that become equivalent in relation to the antagonizing element (**0=0=0**). This moment of antagonization is crucial in Laclau's framework. According to the author, antagonism is paradoxical in nature since it has two functions at the same time. Initially, it is antagonism against a given exterior that blocks demands from being fulfilled, but without this antagonistic exterior the emergence

of collective identities would not be possible. As Marchart (2018) claims, antagonism is experienced as intensity, and some degree of it is a necessary precondition for collective identities to arise.

Figure 1: The construction of the people



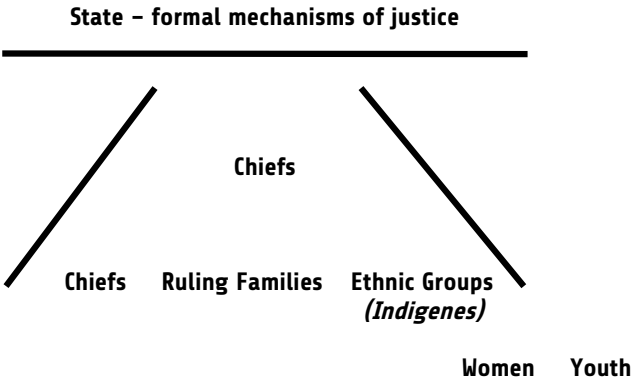
Source: Adapted from Laclau (2005: 148).

There is a third fundamental moment in this logic. Relationships of equivalence do not go beyond a vague sense of solidarity unless one of them begins to represent the entire chain. In Figure 1, **D1**, without completely losing its own particularities, comes to represent the whole. This is what Laclau terms *hegemony*, the moment in which a given element begins to give unity to a chain of equivalence without completely abandoning its particularities. One should note, however, that there is nothing essentially natural that would lead a specific signifier to play this role: several political forces can compete to become the hegemonizing element and it is not possible to say *a priori* which one of them will do so. In the figure, we still have **M** and **N** – demands that, under this specific set of circumstances, are not incorporated into the chain of equivalence and remain isolated.

Following Laclau, I propose that the local can be understood as an ontological category that can be operationalized for analysing the different ways collective identities emerge and interact in peace and conflict settings. This seems reasonable given the existence of different points of antagonism in peacebuilding contexts, whether between contenders in a civil conflict, or even between international peacebuilders and the population. Also, as Debiel and Rinck (2016: 251) state, a closer analysis of political settlements reveals that the local is anything but homogeneous. Instead, it is shaped by intra-elite contention and bargaining (political vs. economic elites, landed vs. non-landed, and so on); contention between elites and non-elites; and intergroup conflicts (e.g., regional vs. religious communities).

Although this article is a concept-building exercise, a couple of examples could help strengthen the argument. Paul Jackson (2017), in a study on power at the local level in rural Sierra Leone and Liberia, argues that the local structures of the judicial branch, dominated by chiefs, are sustained due to the inability of the population to access the state's formal legal structure. This allows the chiefs and their allies to dominate the local structures, which penalizes certain segments of society, especially women and youth.

Figure 2: Jackson's analysis

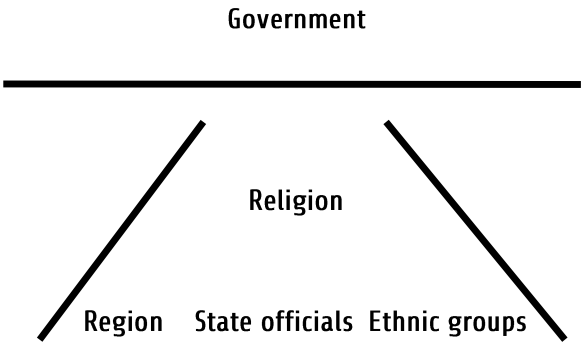


Source: Adapted from Jackson (2017).

We see here that antagonism with the state allowed for the constitution of a local elite, which is made up of different elements but is expressed through the figure of local chiefs. This chain of equivalence seeks to represent all local society, but its affirmation depends on an antagonism with the national level, as well as the exclusion of other segments of this same society.

Another example comes from Kalyvas' analysis (2003) of the ontology of political violence in civil wars. The author argues that alliances allow us to see civil wars as concatenations of multiple and often varied local cleavages, loosely arranged around a master cleavage. He exemplifies this interpretation with the 1992 civil war in Tajikistan, when regional groups rose up against the newly formed government. Disaggregating the master cleavage during the conflict (religion), we find several distinct conflicts involving issues such as regions, positions within the state apparatus, and ethnicity. In Laclaunian terms, there was an articulation of demands around religion, which formed the bloc that contested the government during this conflict.

Figure 3: 1992 Tajik civil war



Source: Adapted from Kalyvas (2003).

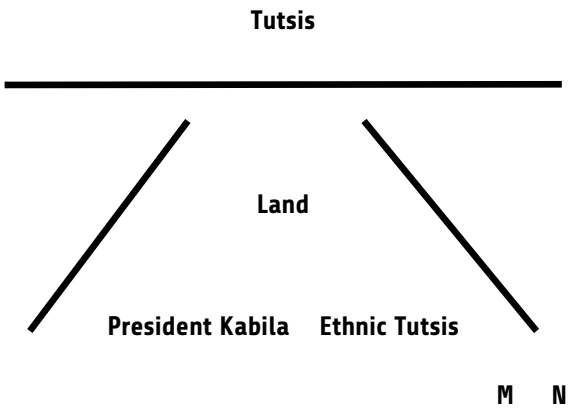
The international-local binary

One of the main criticisms directed at the local turn is that it reifies the international-local binary. From a Laclaunian point of view, the local and the international are collective identifications constructed antagonistically, and assuming them *a priori* is the problem. In this sense, the proposed solution is the same as the one sketched out by Laclau to discuss populism: to take demand as the analytical category. From a given hegemonic demand, groups articulate and conform to a given political identification. I will use another couple of examples to clarify this.

In her book about the Congo, Séverine Autessere (2010: xviii) introduces one of the questions she looks to answer: 'Why did some Tutsis ally with President Kabila, the indigenous Congolese's patron, to fight other Tutsis?' Approaches that stem from essentialist collective identifications, such as ethnic groups, would have trouble answering such questions. Not Autessere, who argues that for a better understanding of the problems of the Congo, conflicts at the micro-level – many of which are neglected by international actors – would have to be carefully addressed. At a given moment, Autessere (2010: 130-1) states that:

> the colonial state sowed the seeds of one of the main crises that developed after independence: the struggle for land. The colonizers declared all uncultivated land property of the state and either distributed it to colonial families, put it on the land market, or transformed it into national parks. They authorized the Congolese access to only the drastically reduced land reserved for the 'native community.' Access to land was crucial at that time, and it remains so now.

Figure 4: Autessere's analysis



Source: Adapted from Autessere (2010).

The situation described by Autessere is expressed in graphic terms in Figure 4. The demand for land, particularly in Congolese provinces such as Ituri and South Kivu, was

determinant for the conflict. It does not have to do with neglecting ethnic questions, but it does point to a specific moment in which the demand for land became hegemonic and central to the dynamic of war.

Another example comes from Bjorkdahl and Gusic's analysis (2016) of peacebuilding in Mostar, a city in Bosnia and Herzegovina. According to the authors, after the war ethnonationalists wanted to create a model of governance that would allow them to stay in power and ensure ethnonationalism was retained as the backbone of the city's political organization. As they argue, this type of ethnocratic governance was a major obstacle to international peacebuilding and democratization efforts.

However, although ethnocracy remains in place in Mostar, signs of democratization have appeared. The Democratic Front party has emerged as a challenger to ethnonationalists, attempting to formulate an alternative form of governance. This indicates that the liberal peacebuilding discourse has connected to alternative ideas held by local actors in favour of more democratic notions of governance. From a Laclaunian standpoint, we can see that antagonism has reinforced identities between ethnonationalists and liberal democrats, but also that these collective identities have coalesced around the demand for governance of the city, combining international and local components.

Agentive capacity

The core of this set of criticisms is that despite claiming to discuss the local in peacebuilding, part of the local turn literature still puts greater emphasis on the role of international actors. This is a type of critique I do not agree entirely with, but as commented above, it could be that the language of part of the debates regarding the local allowed such an interpretation. This problem is avoided in Laclau if we consider that the conformation of antagonism and populist discourse depends on the dichotomization of the social space. A Laclaunian analysis is grounded on a relational ontology that must therefore take into consideration the political dynamics on both sides of an antagonistic divide. An empirical example could help to clarify the point.

In their article on care as everyday peacebuilding, Vaittinen et al. (2019) analyse the Muslim situation in Kashmir, arguing that:

> for the Muslim community, being exposed to state violence as *a community*, fostered intracommunal care relations, which are not limited to victims of violence. For instance, during the 2016 shut downs, villagers sent truckloads of vegetables to the city to feed the inhabitants who were facing food shortages. Such relational ties, formed under the asymmetric threat from a common oppressor, holds social life in Kashmir together – helping to maintain everyday cordiality amongst Muslim, regardless of the social, political and other differences within the community (Vaittinen et al. 2019: 203, emphasis in original).

This passage shows how antagonistic relations, while reproducing conflicting identities between two poles, ended up strengthening a given identity and creating the conditions for agentive capacity. In the face of a common oppressor, the idea of a Muslim identity has gained hegemony, creating conditions for everyday acts of care to emerge within different people in the community. Thus, even acts of what one could call everyday peace need some degree of antagonism to emerge.

Material context

The criticism on this point is that part of the analyses of the local neglect material aspects of reality and do not relate the everyday to the broader context. Laclau also suffered criticisms of this type, when his theorization was said to be abstract or was said to transform everything into discourse, failing to give attention to the material conditions of antagonism. I will now add some clarifications and an analytical proposition.

Laclau holds that the meaning of social beings is always mediated discursively. This means that in addition to their material existence, objects have a dimension of shared structural meaning, as explained in the following passage:

> The fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has nothing to do with whether there is a world external to thought, or with the realism/idealism opposition. An earthquake or the falling of a brick is an event that certainly exists, in the sense that it occurs here and now, independently of my will. But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of 'natural phenomena' or 'expressions of the wrath of God', depends upon the structuring of a discursive field (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 94).

For Laclau, all meaning stems from an articulation of linguistic and extra-linguistic elements. In this case, an earthquake is an extra-linguistic element (material existence), but its construction as a natural phenomenon or an expression of God's wrath is equivalent to giving this existence a set of articulated and shared meanings.

This meaning-construction dimension is also important in peace and conflict studies. For example, let us take Vogel and Field's description (2020) of tourism and trade in Ladakh, India. According to them:

> An example would be the theatrical performance that occurs daily on the India-Pakistan border at Wagah (on the Indian side) and Lahore (on the Pakistani side). At this site in Wagah, crowds gather to be entertained by Bollywood music followed by a 'hyperbolic choreography of male aggression' as the Indian army performatively slams the gate on Pakistan. The aim is to emphasize a continuing aggression with the neighboring state and a violent frontier. While the gate itself is a direct and 'hard' border as it keeps Pakistan 'out', the daily Wagah ritual is more indirect, serving as a regular and

> conspicuous reminder of separation, difference and tension between the two nations (Vogel and Field 2020: 3).

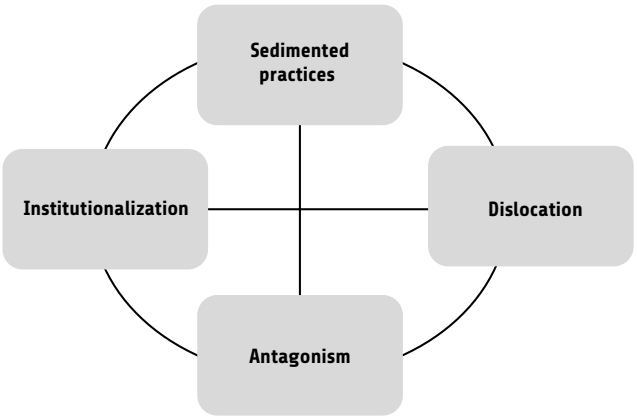
As we can see in the example, all the material acts deployed by the Indian army make sense due to a shared meaning structure, which is reinforce through this theatrical performance.

It is also worth making a second clarification. The proposed unit of analysis is demand, but as we have seen, demands have particular characteristics, such as religion, gender equality, environmental protection or peace. What we see, then, is that in empirical analyses the material aspect of struggles is a fundamental trait for the constitution of a populist discourse. Moreover, I subscribe to Marchart's (2018) view that an analysis based on Laclaunian demands allows one to verify the political micro-logic of a demand, from when it is only a necessity to when it forms a chain of equivalences, and then on toward a macro-level of contestation, where a new political identity begins to threaten the status quo.

This analytical proposal implies adapting the framework suggested by Nabers (2015) for analysing peacebuilding processes.

Nabers' first axis, *sedimented practices,* refers to a given hegemonic order that has become sedimented due to particular historical circumstances. Let us take the Taliban rule in Afghanistan (1996–2001) as an example. One of the reasons the group was able to establish a chain of support (with local and international elements) was the chaos that attended the civil war in the 1990s. During its most hegemonic time, the Taliban controlled approximately 90% of Afghan territory (Rashid 2010). Orders, however, are challenged by other political possibilities, which brings us to the second moment, exemplified in Figure 5 by the *dislocation* axis. At this moment, the hegemonic order enters a crisis and its means of maintaining hegemony are tested. In the case of Afghanistan, after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the US intervention toppled the Taliban and displaced that political order (Rashid 2010).

Figure 5: Nabers' framework



Source: Adapted from Nabers (2015: 124).

We then have the emergence of the third moment, *antagonism,* through which new antagonisms arise from the displaced structure, which allows for new attempts at hegemonization. Returning to Afghanistan, once the Taliban was ousted, new and old antagonisms emerged between interveners, local groups, and regional actors. After almost 20 years, the US and other international actors were unable to build a new hegemony in the country, leading the way to the Taliban return. Finally, we have *institutionalization,* a situation in which a new order is instituted. Currently, the second Taliban emirate is establishing its control in the Afghan territory and rebuilding institutions, such as a grand army (Al Jazeera 2022).

This is just a brief example of how to operationalize the framework and the related Laclaunian concepts. Further empirical analyses are needed to expand the framework's heuristic potential and understand other set of socio-political circumstances.

Ontology and political prescription

Regarding the criticism that focuses on the incoherence between adopting anti-foundationalist ontologies yet defending the possibility of emancipation, it is worth pointing out that a Laclaunian perspective allows us to have a different take on this discussion. For instance, considering the critiques toward descriptive hybridity and normative hybridity, I would subscribe to Alleta Norval's (1999) contention that this type of ambivalence is grounded in the belief that hybridism is what leads to resistance. However, as she argues, if we understand resistance as something that may or may not emerge from hybridity, the need to distinguish descriptive and normative hybridism becomes moot.

In addition to Norval's remark, it is also worth emphasizing another point, given the object of study here. In an article that reviews the main questions about the local turn, Richmond and Mac Ginty (2015) state that Marxist, post-structuralist and post-colonial analysts criticize them for sometimes defending similar alternatives to those presented by liberal peace[3]. They counterargue that their purpose is to theorize and empirically identify alternatives for peace, something hard to achieve using these perspectives (Richmond and Mac Ginty 2015: 175). Additionally, Richmond (2016: 35) has affirmed that post-structural approaches, although open to peace formation and engagements with difference, are not suited to envisioning universal institutions or to accepting interventions necessary to an everyday peace.

Does a Laclaunian approach suffer from the same problem? From the perspective adopted here, it could be said that there are emancipatory alternatives, but that these are restricted to the ontic register. Ontologically, antagonisms are not eradicable, and a given emancipatory practice can only sustain itself until such a time as it is challenged by another. Thus, there are no secure ontological foundations to sustain a so-called emancipatory alternative. Does this mean there is a normative deficit in Laclaunian theory?

In the perspective adopted here, there are no ethical or normative principles whose validity is independent of the entire community space from which they emerge. As Laclau (2014: 134) explains:

> [B]ecause I live in a world in which people believe in A, B and C, I can argue that the course of action D is better than E; but in a totally presuppositionless situation in which no system of beliefs exists, the question is obviously unanswerable.

This certainly implies the possibility of reversals, suggesting that the way to assure advances is for constant negotiations between demands to be articulated within hegemonic discourses. For example, demands for gender equality, environmental protection and peace will always need to couple with other demands to guarantee victories. Consequently, political advances must be constructed and defended constantly.

The question of the interpreter

On this specific point, the criticism is that an interpreter needs to come in and attest that hybridizations have occurred. How can we get around this problem? From the perspective of Laclaunian theory, the suggestion is to look for points of antagonism around given demands and then identify whether a given collective identity was built. Despite the difficulties of empirical research, it seems less complex than looking for hybridizations and running afoul of the danger pointed out by Young (1990). Besides, although the ontological instance of antagonism escapes scientific measurement, I agree with Marchart (2018) when he argues that conflicts of everyday life can be approached empirically through ethno-methodology or conversation analysis.

Additionally, the proposal advanced here dialogues with a suggestion made by Nadarajah and Rampton (2015). They argue that critical analyses should begin with struggle, not peace. The focus should fall primarily upon how state and international practices are historically integral to domination and resistance, not exogenous to them. As they put it:

> what is therefore advocated here is a historically informed and context sensitive scholarly engagement that focuses on, and is prepared to explicitly position itself within, the interwoven and often violent dynamics of domination and resistance (Nadarajah and Rampton 2015: 71).

As I hope to have shown, a Laclaunian approach to peacebuilding, emphasizing antagonism, demand, and the construction of the people, seems to be a good alternative.

Facing the consequences

Having built this conceptual argument, I now present some consequences derived from this discussion. One of the main challenges, assuming that the Laclaunian proposal for peacebuilding is conceptually sustainable, is to begin empirical research. Although I have presented short empirical explorations of the Laclaunian approach, they were not as thorough as I would like them to be. As this article is a conceptual-scoping exercise, I had to

dedicate most of its parts at identifying theoretical and conceptual problems the local turn still present. From there, I developed Laclaunian ideas for the peacebuilding debate. Now, empirical investigations are underway, and I plan to introduce them soon.

One implication refers to the concept of the people. The way Laclau conceived of the emergence of the people as a process of collective identification could be an analytically alternative way for us to understand identity formation in peacebuilding contexts. This is because civil conflicts, interventions and peace operations are events that displace local orders and create the conditions for the emergence of new antagonisms and, consequently, the formation of new identities. On this last point, with its ontological gaze, a Laclaunian perspective goes beyond only revealing actors that matter for the process: it provides tools to think about how the process itself can constitute new collective actors.

Second, I argue that an ontological reflection provides analysts with a formal understanding of given categories. If it is counter-productive to understand the local through specific traits of given ontic experiences, perhaps a fruitful avenue is to try to grasp its formal and defining features. Like Laclau's populism, the meaning of the local should not be found in 'any political or ideological content entering into the description of the practices of any particular group, but in a particular mode of articulation of whatever social, political or ideological contents' (Laclau 2009: 34). This offers us a way to recover the heuristic potential of the local as an analytical category.

Thirdly, the Laclaunian approach can promote productive dialogues with other critical perspectives in the peacebuilding debate. For instance, feminist, post-colonial, and decolonial approaches to peace and conflict studies (e.g., Tickner 2001; McLeod 2015; Barkawi 2017; Cruz 2021), with their emphasis on gender, the consequences of Eurocentrism, and the colonial matrix of power, have upheld different forms of relational thinking and mutual constitution between actors and structures. With its relational ontology based on antagonism, the Laclaunian approach can enrich this type of discussion. Incidentally, as a significant part of Laclaunian studies comes from Latin America, the approach developed here can encourage other researchers from the region to engage with the local turn in peacebuilding, increasing the number of Global South scholars in this discussion.

Fourthly, one consideration has to do with the discussion about peacebuilding itself. From a Laclaunian perspective, peace should be understood as having no ultimate ontological foundations, but as something that strives ontically for hegemony through the emergence of empty signifiers. If peace has no ultimate foundations, only contingent ones, peace is therefore hegemony. Is that such a bad thing?

On the contrary. Even if there is always a danger of setbacks, the impossibility of universalisms opens many possibilities, with one of them being the emergence of the people. Following Mendonça, Linhares, and Barros (2016), I dare also say that a Laclaunian approach to peacebuilding, through its emphasis on contingency, articulation, and the political character of any order, allows us not only to think about alternatives, but also to be certain that alternatives are indeed possible. This conclusion therefore reinforces a key idea from this debate: that peace can and should be built by the people who experience it every day.

Notes

1 Two examples of this co-option can be found in DFID (2011) and World Bank (2011).

2 Glynos and Howarth's example (2007) clarifies this. If we are interested in analysing national identity in different contexts, yet we take the notion of national identity as a given, then we are operating on the ontic level. If we problematize the assumptions that determine what can be understood as national identity, then we are on the ontological level. To sum up, 'the more an inquiry is directed at the categorical and existential preconditions of a practice or regime, the more the ontological dimension is foregrounded' (Glynos and Howarth 2007: 109).

3 Richmond (2007: 459), for example, states that on occasion 'there are also more emancipatory forms of human security, associated with individual emancipation and social values, that offer a significant opportunity to enhance the process of building peace in post-conflict states.'

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Rumo a uma perspectiva Laclauniana para a construção da paz

Resumo: O que é o local? Esta é uma das questões mais controversas que a virada local para construção da paz enfrenta. Para alguns, o local se refere a instituições e movimentos sociais, enquanto outros o entendem como redes ou processos em fluxo. Os críticos argumentam, entre outros pontos, que essa literatura tende a reificar o binário internacional-local, enquanto outros enfatizam a incoerência de adotar ontologias antifundacionalistas ao defender a possibilidade de emancipação. Neste artigo, discuto esses assuntos mediante a teoria política de Ernesto Laclau e proponho enquadrar o local como uma forma de identidade coletiva não essencialista. Para isso, reviso as contribuições recentes à virada local e identifico algumas de suas controvérsias. Considerando a lacuna teórica encontrada, proponho conceitos laclaunianos, como povo, antagonismo e hegemonia, como alternativas conceituais. Por fim, apresento algumas consequências para o estudo da construção da paz que esse tipo de discussão pode abrir.

Palavras-chave: construção da paz; virada local; Ernesto Laclau; povo; hegemonia; hibridismo

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