

# **Towards a sustainable peace: the role of reconciliation in post-conflict societies**

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## **Abstract**

Over the last few decades, the notion of peacebuilding has been shifting from a mainly institutional view to a more holistic understanding of both concepts and practices. Within this holistic view, one of the main concerns has been the inclusion of concepts such as “reconciliation” and “transitional justice”, advocating for a more context-sensitive notion of peace, which addresses topics such as memory, truth and justice instead of an externally-conditioned notion of statebuilding. In this essay, we engage with these concepts to demonstrate the conceptual innovation and relevance of the need to deal with the past in post-conflict societies.

## **Introduction**

One of the main theoretical (and practical) concerns in the field of peace and conflict studies is, undoubtedly, to explain and prevent conflict from happening but also to provide some insights on how to achieve peace. It does not suffice to define peace as the absence of conflict (violent conflict, at least): it is also necessary to think about the means by which peace is achieved, the processes that take place in order to make it last. In that sense, this essay will try to explore the notion of peacebuilding in conflict-afflicted societies and to demonstrate how a more “effective” (or at least more encompassing) notion of peace can be achieved using the concept of reconciliation.

Even though the concept of peace is not, by any means, a consensual or a finished one, the last decades (especially from the 1970s onwards) have been fruitful in providing some working definitions concerning this matter. The most common one was drafted by the former UN General Secretary Boutros-Ghali in 1992, stating peacebuilding as “an activity or action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid relapse into conflict” (apud CHARBONNEAU and PARENT, 2012:5). However short, this definition is quite revealing of how the United Nations has commonly dealt with the issue: the focus is not on the agents, but on the structures and the formal mechanisms needed for peace to work. I argue on this essay that peace can and should be achieved recurring to formal means but also that it should be heavily complemented by what John Paul Lederach calls “a holistic and multifaceted approach” (apud Charbonneau and Parent, 2012:5-6), that drives the focus of peacebuilding away from traditional state-centered actions and diplomacy (cf. Lederach, 1997:37). In order to do so, we shall look briefly into the characteristics and critiques of the “mainstream” peacebuilding approaches in the first place and then work towards an alternative, provided in this specific case by the concepts of transitional justice and reconciliation.

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When we take a look at the theoretical approaches to peacebuilding, one can easily pinpoint the major steps that are usually taken by post-conflict societies, in order to achieve some degree of peaceful agreement (cf. Anderlini:2007 apud Maulden, 2012:19): demobilisation, disarmament, reintegration of soldiers (in what is usually called the DDR approach - in op. cit. p. 25), building of institutions and establishment of good governance practices. These are usually considered top-down approaches (mainly mobilized by the socioeconomic and political elites) and such a traditional view of peacebuilding is heavily criticised by authors who consider this model an expansion of the Western market-oriented way of life, fostering what Michael Pugh so aptly calls “the political economy of peacebuilding” (2005) and transforming peacebuilding, in the eyes of authors such as David Chandler (apud Charbonneau and Parent, 2012) in the sum of practices of an empire “who does not speak its name”. This approach to peacebuilding theories and practices is reflected not only in terms of structural organization but also in terms of social and psychological response to conflict, as it is argued by Wessels and Monteiro (2001, apud Charbonneau and Parent, 2012: 10), who put forward the concept of *psychological imperialism* to demonstrate how local agencies and local memories and experiences tend to be overlooked when peacebuilding actions take place within this frame.

In order to subvert this paradigm (and taking into account the failures of peacebuilding operations during the last decades), it is now deemed appropriate and necessary to take a different road in dealing with the aftermath of conflicts. The concepts of reconciliation and transitional justice were brought into this field, and can consist of different modalities, which are not exempt from problems. The first steps have already been taken in the form of the so called *truth commissions*, which consist of legal mechanisms who not only provide a juridical framework to the atrocities committed during times of conflict but also work as a tool of recollection of memories and re-writing of History (the most notable of all being the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, established in 1995 immediately after the end of the apartheid regime). This specific institution in had the task of providing for “the investigation and the establishment of a (...) complete picture of the human rights violations”<sup>2</sup> committed during the period of apartheid and, even though the practice of truth commissions has been praised as a valuable attempt to build the bridge between institutions and people, they are not exempt from criticism themselves. For instance, Sandrine Lefranc (2012: 34) makes the distinction between truth commissions and what she calls “dialogue-based” initiatives, the former being (still) not quite independent from the state and possibly a tool for the establishment of an official historical narrative, which may discard other voices. Our approach goes in the same direction: without, by any means, belittling the work of truth commissions, it is not quite clear how these are completely independent from state agendas (cf. Lefranc, apud Charbonneau and Parent, 2012). In their task of revisiting historical events in order to acknowledge victims and perpetrators, how much is left behind? How are the narratives of those who do not fit into the official post-conflict historical narrative dealt with?

These questions are the main reasons why we do not think truth commissions alone can be an effective tool in achieving sustainable peace in some cases. Even though the concept of transitional justice is indeed very relevant to post-conflict societies as a “process by which societies move either from war to peace or from a repressive/authoritarian regime to democracy” (Quinn, 2009:3) by examining both legal and social questions, the latter are usually not fully explored by it. In such cases, the concept of *reconciliation* can be more

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<sup>2</sup> Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act n°34/1995. Available in: [www.justice.gov.za/legislation/acts/1995-034.pdf](http://www.justice.gov.za/legislation/acts/1995-034.pdf), last seen on 10.01.2016

useful. How can we define and work towards reconciliation, then, in order to build a more “sustainable” and long-lasting peace?

As far as conceptualization goes, and even though there are various explanations (most of them, arguably in one of the shortcomings of this approach, have a religious connotation usually linked with the subject of forgiveness) (Hamber and Kelly, apud Quinn, 2009: 287), it is fair to say that the notion of reconciliation rests upon two basic characteristics: one, the emphasis of the (re)building of social and interpersonal relationships, thus repairing the damaged social tissue that results from conflict; and the second, of the dynamic nature of such process (Quinn, 2009). Reconciliation is, therefore, a permanently-constructed concept, which shifts and adapts to better suit each society (in an effort to drive them away from “one-size-fits-all” solutions who have further helped to (re)breed more conflict). Even though this is criticized by some as a “soft concept”, which may leave room for impunity (cf. Hamber and Kelly, apud Quinn: 2009), we truly believe reconciliation can be the key to a more encompassing and social-toned take on peacebuilding. Not only can it work on a more “local” level (and therefore respond to more specific needs than the state-level), it can also have both a deep personal and global impact on conflict riven-societies.

Nevertheless, it is also worthy to point out that reconciliation is not a “magic” concept, free of constraints or critiques. It is a quite tricky and time-consuming concept to put in practice, because of what Trudy Govier (2009) so clearly describes as the *contents of acknowledgment*: in order to reconcile with a violent and/or traumatic past, societies must go through a phase of *existential acknowledgment* (in which the existence of an “other” with a right to his own views and dignity is granted and accounted for), a phase of *aversive acknowledgment* (in which the occurrence of a problematic event is recognised) and, last but not least, a phase of praising positive aspects or successful events (ibidem). The difficulties lie, unsurprisingly, in the second phase, where our dichotomies of victim/perpetrator (which are by no means definitive) come into play and where the demands of one side can meet resistance from the other side, which may try to justify its actions in the context of a higher purpose or state interests (Govier, 2009: 40-41).

However, and even though the critiques need to be considered (one of the authors we quote, Sandrine Lefranc, goes so far as to call the “dialogue-based” initiatives of peacebuilding – where we took the liberty of incorporate the concept of reconciliation – an opportunistic critical stance which ends up professionalizing itself and creating the same structures it was designed to challenge) (cf. Lefranc, 2012:38), reconciliation can be achieved through a persistent and continued social initiative, which seeks to re-humanize all the parts in conflict (both by appealing to the conscience and memory of those who lived and suffered under violent circumstances). In order to do so, societies must undergo five stages towards successful reconciliation (Hamber and Kelly, 2009: 291-292), the first being the sharing of a common vision of future as a society, the acknowledgment and dealing with past experiences (once again, the role of memory and testimony), the third being the building of positive relationships and also the significant cultural and socioeconomic change. Only then, the authors argue, can a successful reconciliation be achieved.

Last but not least, we would also like to clarify and bring our attention to some aspects on two terms commonly associated with reconciliation: coexistence and consensus, which are usually presented as synonyms of the former. It is not always the case concerning coexistence (two groups can coexist without violence without truly reconcile) and certainly not the case of consensus in a broader sense. Concerning the latter, it is quite interesting to see how some

authors (cf. Mouffe, apud Keller Hirsch, 2012: 4) have, once the concept of conflict is devoid of its violent facet, defended the need for what we call ideopolitical conflict in democratic societies; this means that two people or groups can have conflictive views on an issue who can be sorted out through debate and dialogue, without viewing the other as an enemy (rather, a temporary adversary) and, most importantly, without resorting to violence and/or aggression.

## Conclusion

To conclude, this brief essay outlined some theoretical insights on the insufficiency and the critiques of the traditional ways of describing and practicing peace in post-conflict societies (which are seen as too “westernized” solutions who more often than not do not meet the needs of those in need of re-establishing a functional society) and, on the other hand, on the need and actual possibility of an alternative theoretical approach to the dominant standards of peacebuilding, by emphasizing the role not only of transitional justice (which is, in our opinion, incomplete in some aspects) but more importantly the role of reconciliation and reconciliatory practices (such as acknowledgement of past violent event and the use of memory) in order to ensure a more efficient notion of peace, which prevents societies from keeping conflicts silently breeding within their scope.

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