

Reclaiming power with from below: Nascent subaltern peacebuilding in Canada, Colombia and Iraq

*Reclamando el poder desde abajo:
Consolidación de la paz naciente en Canadá,
Colombia e Irak*

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Abstract

Three field-based case studies of grassroots peacebuilding from Canada, Colombia, and Iraq contribute to an ongoing critique of the peacebuilding industry, as it is understood and practiced both within academia and within the professional peace industry. In essence, located in multiple matrices of power, peacebuilding itself is the conflict: ontologically, epistemologically and politically.

The case studies point to macro power relations being contested and resisted at the local level, not only in terms of the actual social conflict, but also against institutions claiming some peacebuilding space (Eg. Intergovernmental organisations, NGOs, Academia). Those subaltern voices are not simply resisting the appropriation of agency by 'peacebuilding' operatives, they are claiming a locality (space, participation, agency) and narrative that is designed solely by them.

Keywords

Peacebuilding, Grassroots, Agency, Narratives, Canada, Iraq, Fallujah, Colombia.

Resumen

Tres estudios de caso sobre los cuales se estructura una crítica a la construcción de la paz en Canadá, Colombia, e Irak, tal como se entiende y se practica tanto en el mundo académico como en la industria profesional.

Dicha tesis gira esencialmente en torno a las múltiples matrices de poder existentes, y a cómo el conflicto ontológica, epistemológica y políticamente resulta propulsor mismo para la consolidación de la paz.

Ejemplos que trascienden el nivel local no sólo en términos del conflicto social actual, sino también institucional, evidenciando voces subalternas que se resisten a la apropiación de la agencia en la búsqueda de dicho fin, y además reclaman una localidad y practican una narrativa diseñada por sí mismos.

Palabras clave

Consolidación de la Paz, base, Agencia, narrativas, Canadá, Irak, Faluya, Colombia.



Intro

Throughout the world, local-local peace-builders increasingly argue that they are feeling used by international agencies, as well as some local peace organizations, which they see as commodifying their experiences in order to appropriate their peace-building processes.

At the center of these critics, articulated in a growing subaltern resistance is the realization that their ideas, time and communities are used to sustain an industry that they see as infantilizing them through narratives of “protection”, while at the same time jealously guarding their peace-building spaces as their own territory. As a response to this perception as well as the realization of their own power, an increasing number of youths and communities have chosen not to engage with international and local peace industry initiatives, while others have used their platforms to formulate their own agendas, hence carving out a space for their own agency to express itself.

This paper seeks to analyze the different attributes of subaltern resistances to peace building, as well as their permeating of academic realms. Our case studies and “field” research from Colombia, Canada and Iraq contribute to an ongoing critique of the peacebuilding industry, as it is understood and practiced both within academia and within the professional peace industry¹.

In this context, grassroots peacebuilding becomes an important site to examine the role of localized peacebuilding in creating decolonizing spaces for reconfiguring power relations locally and beyond. It becomes an opportunity talk about decolonizing work, activism, praxis and peacebuilding in terms of epistemology, power and research methodologies. Similarly, grassroots practices and subaltern knowledges become a site to critically self-reflect on the power inherent in epistemological positional superiority manifested in ‘common sense’ narratives and research methodologies.

¹ See such works as Jabri, Vivienne 2006. And S. Fisher and L. Zimina 2008.

The case studies herein point to macro power relations being contested and resisted at the local level, not only in terms of the actual social conflict, but also against institutions claiming some peacebuilding space (Eg. NGOs, Academia, International and/or National state institutions). Making visible the particularity of power and authority, grassroots, subaltern community members in these case studies are striving to challenge the nature of neo-colonial dominant systems of Euro-centric peacebuilding thought and practices of 'power over' through developing inclusive and collaborative processes, analyses, strategies and decision-making across varying identities and constituencies.

We argue, in essence, that located in multiple matrices of power, peacebuilding itself is the conflict: ontologically, epistemologically and politically. Epistemologically and ontologically, the peacebuilding conflict is one of voice, agency and narrative. This is a two-fold argument. One site is grassroots peacebuilding and subaltern voices. Here, excluded from a relationship of equity with formal peacebuilding institutions, processes and actors, various subaltern grassroots efforts are aimed at reformulating the larger conflict narrative by amplifying their own voices and situated understandings. This is more than resistance to power, it is acts of agency, voice and the bottom-up production of new knowledges and emancipatory practices.²

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In contrast, "peacebuilding" narratives and practices undertaken by institutions too often enact "power over" rather than "power with". Located within a professional industry of peacebuilding, those narratives and practices reproduces hierarchical decision-making, the imposition of external voices and priorities, and state-centered neo-liberalism; or, in the case of academia, its role as "traditional intellectuals" (Gramsci) that reinforce common sense narratives.

As a grassroots activist and an academically-positioned peace researcher committed to social justice, non-violence and peacebuilding, we approach research as one means to concretely contribute to practical political and social change. Guided by an

² See Escobar, Arturo 2008, Conway, Janet 2004 and Gaventa, John 2005.

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ethics of social justice, solidarity and decolonising methodologies that demand the forefronting of subaltern ways of knowing, such peacebuilding research inherently raises a number of challenges pertaining to negotiating power, knowledge and positionality.³

Power and peacebuilding is inherently tied to a deconstructing and decolonizing of western academic social science research and the prevalence of (neo) positivist epistemologies.⁴ As such, our research looked to provide a space to “tell an alternate story: the history of Western research through the eyes of the colonized”.⁵ The “eyes of the colonized” are a differently situated positionality that critiques the positional superiority of Euro-centric globality and systems of internal neo-colonialism.⁶

As scholar-activists, we are interested in examining the practical implications for both grassroots and subaltern communities seeking to build peacebuilding, and decolonizing relationships of solidarity and/or negotiate partnerships. To do so, the research pointed to a number of key questions. First, what did various grassroots and subaltern community members have to say about the conflicts they are confronting? Second, how and when were peacebuilding professional understood as helpful (or not)? Third, how is power negotiated in terms of voice, agency and practice?

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In the sections below we provide three field examples of subaltern peacebuilding that explicitly and implicitly critique the peace

³ See Tuhiwai Smith, Linda 1999 and Denzin, Norman K., Lincoln, Yvonne and Tuhiwai Smith, Linda 2008.

⁴ K. Mutua, K and Swadener, B. B. 2004, Semaili, L. M., and Kincheloe, J. L. 1999 and Denzin, Norman 2007.

⁵ Smith, Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples.

⁶ “Euro-centric globality” is Arturo Escobar’s term to describe “that expanding 21st century colonizing and universalizing world system of Euro-centred beliefs, economics and governance that is the underlying directives and objectives within ‘globalization’” It is the current system of neo-imperialism. One of the ways neo-imperialism and internal colonialism is actualized and expanded is through research and knowledge production that negates colonized and subaltern knowledges, experiences, and self-governance. See Escobar, Arturo 2008: 3-4.

industry, or rather, the way organizations and state institutions construct narratives and practices that reflect their own external voices and priorities, subordinate the agency and voice of subaltern communities, and imposes hierarchical and state-centered decision-making and program that reinforce 'common sense' narratives and Euro-centric globality.

Case Example #1: Canada⁷

The first case example (researched by Rick Wallace) concerns Grassy Narrows First Nation (known as *Asubpeeshoseewagong Natum Anisnabek*), an Anishinaabe community of 1,200 people in northwestern Ontario, Canada. The research documented aspects of a grassroots discourse of solidarity between Grassy Narrows First Nations (GNFN) community members ("blockaders") and non-Indigenous activists as they sought to protect these territories from forestry companies' ongoing exploitative practices of unsustainable clear cutting. In the case of Grassy Narrows, choosing their own way of development, has meant opposing the level of industrial deforestation undertaken by international forestry companies. The Grassy Narrows approach to development has been to connect a profound ecological understanding of their environment with a long-term guardianship of the land. It has been a reclaiming of agency and the restoration of community decision-making over their territories.

Grassy Narrows First Nation 'blockaders' (a self-identifying term used by GNFN community members who spent significant amounts of time/effort on the blockade) reclaiming of community autonomy and leadership was juxtaposed to the practices of a number of non-Indigenous social justice and Environmental NGOs (ENGOS) in terms of decision-making, organizational commitments and understandings of the conflict itself.

The structural and cultural violence faced by GNFN stretches back to at least 1873 and extends into the present through government-sanctioned hydro-electric flooding, physical displacement,

⁷ This case study is taken from Wallace, Rick 2013.

intentional economic underdevelopment, residential schooling and mercury poisoning (Amnesty International 2007). These deep-seated impacts on GNFN were further exacerbated by their loss of control over natural resources, specifically the widespread development of commercial logging in the 1980s and its clear-cutting practices, resulting in roughly 50 percent of the community's traditional territory having been logged.

Set up in December 2002, the blockade attracted national and international attention and at any one time had anywhere from half a dozen to over 150 people participating. The blockade was self-organizing claimed space and was supported by diverse community members, other Indigenous activists, non-Indigenous individuals and a number of NGOs. This blockade expanded in numbers, size and meaning, with continual daily occupation until June 2004, and remains in force at the present.

Since the 1980s, Grassy Narrows community resistance has taken multiple approaches, from legal appeals and letters to key provincial and federal ministers, ministries and forestry companies, to legal action by trappers, petitions and public protests. One GNFN community member summarized the frustration they felt with these approaches:

And as a group at the blockade it seems that we went through phases ... first we tried going through what the government wanted. Their procedures, I guess you know, writing letters and stuff like that and it didn't work.

The lack of meaningful redress was endemic in the asymmetric relations of power between Grassy Narrows and the Canadian government. The structural violence experienced by members of Grassy Narrows was particularly evident in their ongoing attempts to negotiate with government bureaucracies. Grassy Narrows community members experienced the negotiations and legal approaches with the government as a win-lose situation, with themselves on the losing end in terms of both process and outcome.

They [Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources] keep telling me that we have to talk ... and I do meet with them. Sometimes the blocks or area of the wood that I want to be saved, aren't saved you know [whereas] ... at the beginning you know, [OMNR says] "we'll do a win-win agreement you know ... you'll win and I'll win." (...) It's frustrating 'cause you give them a concern and they'll open up this big manual —sometimes they'll have three or four of them— and they'll look up a section under that that gives them permission to cut [Laughs].

The negotiating and decision-making processes are controlled by the government, which is itself a party to the conflict. This asymmetrical situation inherently produces inequity for Grassy Narrows.

When we asked the Minister of Natural Resources to put a halt to logging nothing happened.... Order came down from the Minister of Environment that "yes, there will/ may be a halt but we have to do some investigating and this could take six months." So it wasn't fair at all.

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In January 2007, the community called for a moratorium on industry, particularly logging, within their traditional territory. They pointed to the contextual history and contemporary nature of the structural violence:

We practice our way of life on our trap lines on our traditional territory. Our way of life has been seriously threatened in the past by residential schools, mercury pollution, flooding for hydro dams 118 Grassy Narrows / 119 and relocation by the federal government. Now what remains of that way of life is being destroyed by clear-cut logging of the Boreal Forest for Abitibi and Weyerhaeuser in collusion with the provincial government and the willful blindness of the federal government. ((Grassy Narrows First

Nations Press Release, January 17, 2007)

In short, for GNFN, the issue of clear-cutting is directly tied to the larger history of colonial relations. The Ontario provincial

government's usurpation of Grassy Narrows' historical control and traditional community-based decision-making has resulted in unsustainable government-sanctioned forestry practices and multinational corporate exploitation, with little real economic benefit to the community whilst inherently threatening their very survival as a people.

Grassy Narrows community members, particularly "blockaders," acted from their own ontological, epistemological and ethical framework. Two elements were important in the GNFN blockaders' framing of the conflict; first, the totality of the colonial experience and second, their collective identity as intrinsically linked to the land.

All of the GNFN blockaders interviewed actively voiced that the conflict and blockade were a direct challenge to their collective experience of colonialism and its ongoing impact and were a means to retake control and re-assert their Anishinaabe identities, individually and collectively. It was the totality of the colonial experience and its impact on GNFN that led one of the blockaders to say, "it's [blockade] about everything": family, identity, culture, colonial history, genocide and recovery. This experience of (post) colonialism became framed in a number of conjoining ways. GNFN blockaders spoke about the conflict in relation to a history of internment and underdevelopment: "confined in these ghettos they call reserves. Look around the reserves, there is absolutely a lot of poverty out there." They posited it as a situation of asymmetrical power manifesting itself through a complex contemporary mixture of racist government policies and alliances with industry.

And we have the government and industry on one side and us on the other side, so it wasn't fair right in the beginning. So that's why I'm saying the government is making sure white people have jobs. The GNFN blockaders' ontological worldview linked their identity to the land and considered their relationship to the land as intrinsic to their cultural survival. Grassy Narrows blockaders spoke about

the land and their symbiotic attachment to it; there was no division between themselves and the land. One GNFN blockader noted: For us our fight is to protect the land because that's part of our Creator-given responsibility and because also the land is like who we are.... Everything about us is the land.

GNFN blockaders' articulation of their own situated standpoint served as the basis from which to challenge the asymmetry in relationships with both larger external institutions and non-Indigenous activists. In the context of such structural and cultural violence, the conflict for GNFN blockaders was about many things: recouping and asserting a way of life, language and culture, reclaiming space and territory, strengthening community cohesion, celebrating, gathering and reflecting. "It's almost like the blockade is where you realize who you really are, you know."

Equally important was GNFN's process of asserting their own history, lived experience and cultural knowledge as a basis for organizing internally and externally. Their discourses were themselves a counter-hegemonic practice of negotiating relations of power, knowledge, trust, processes and actions at the local level. In the specific local context, it concerned the demarcation of a leadership role to GNFN as well as an assertion and recognition of their situated knowledge, experiences and cultural values. Simultaneously, the local context contested the hierarchies of knowledge and privilege inherently invested in non-Indigenous activists, in part by disabling those standpoints and processes of dominance, and replacing them with a space encouraging both autonomous and collaborative actions.

Within these larger themes of knowledge/power, trust and relationship- building, there were multiple and complex situated standpoints, ontologically and epistemologically. In the case of Grassy Narrows First Nation blockaders, decolonization was the cultural and political project of exerting their own knowledges and reclaiming community control over their territories. Differently situated, decolonization for non-Indigenous activists supportin

Grassy Narrows was the ceding of their socially and politically privileged positionality, narratives and practices.

A component of trust was in knowing that a non-Indigenous supporter shared a corresponding set of values and beliefs about the context and political situation of GNFN.

And to me, in order for me to trust someone, I have to get to know them, I have to be in the same like, knowing what my beliefs are and what my rights are, I have to know if that other person agrees with what I believe in or at least is at the same level of what I believe in. Another area of trust was honour and speaking the truth about representing GNFN.

Yes! I expect everybody that's involved in the struggle to be as honest as us. To be truly honest.... They cannot exaggerate. They cannot lie about our struggle. They have to speak the truth.

The theme of non-interference and autonomy was an important GNFN cultural and political value for trust. Set within a context of colonialism and asymmetry, respecting the role of the GNFN leadership at the blockade was pivotal for building trust. Taken up later under the theme of tensions at the blockade, one specific example highlights the erasing of trust when GNFN's lead role was displaced by a non-Indigenous activist. As one blockader put it:

What we kind of got from XXX and YYY [ngos] was that they kind of used us for their own publicity.... And in the end I see that they was there for their own glory. And I could never trust them, and they know that.

The GNFN blockaders referred to non-Indigenous activists' attitudes and behaviours that emulated historical relations of colonialism, including ill-informed understandings of the community's sophistication.

And they [particular ngo] seemed to be interested in ... giving us ideas about how to move the community forward a little bit. It almost like they thought we were ten years behind or something.

A second area of tension for GNFN blockaders were non-Indigenous ngo organizing and decision-making processes that ran counter to GNFN community approaches, which valued informality and time differently. Structured ngo processes and meetings were seen as undermining GNFN collaboration and community participation.

Like when they say, “You have to develop a needs assessment” ... it’s such like a rigid format ... so sometimes you know we have to step in and say, “Stop, you know, that’s not working for us.” And they’re starting to know that. We do things differently. And our time is slower ... we do things slower. We need to check. We need to observe and see, you know, where things are going. It could take years, you know, for us to come up with a comfortable room where we can say this way or that way about something, you know.

Third, the tensions that arose in those practices had larger ramifications in reproducing feelings of disempowerment and mistrust. One key GNFN blockader disagreed with a particular ngo’s organizing process, arguing that the community felt disempowered by the process. In particular, it was felt that certain ngo practices created moments wherein GNFN was no longer in control of the tactics, nor was the community adequately consulted about whether or not to participate.

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They [certain ngos] wanted to keep it quiet that we were going to be blocking ... like really hush-hush. I feel like from the very beginning we never had anything to hide... I felt like they were doing what we were fighting against — not giving these people their own choice if they wanted to be involved or not... I felt like that made us look like we weren’t in control [rather] that they were.

Fourth, the asymmetrical levels of power of representation were seen as reproducing themselves in the process of communication between the protestors (Anishinaabe and external ngos) and the police, whereby Grassy Narrows people were relegated to the back. The consequence of that positioning of voice was that the media coverage centred on the ngo message. This reduced opportunities

for GNFN community members to be empowered and control the process, and led to a sense of their having being used, and ultimately, it undermined trust, so key to negotiating future joint collaboration.

What we kind of got from XXX and YYY [ngos] was that they kind of used us this summer for their own publicity. That's how I see it because all over the papers it was like XXX was led.... It wasn't Grassy Narrows.

Indicative of differently situated non-Indigenous cultural ontologies, ngo imperatives, organizational and cultural patterns of organizing, and larger relations of situated power, the GNFN blockaders discourses on tensions positioned certain non-Indigenous activists' attitudes, behaviours, processes and actions as fundamentally disempowering, disrespectful and inducing mistrust. Based on starkly different ontological and epistemological references than those of non-Indigenous activists, GNFN community decision-making processes and criteria was one such challenge. For example, Grassy had social processes of community decision-making that were not necessarily visible to non-Indigenous activists. Moreover, whereas the GNFN blockaders' cultural notions of time focused on long-term priorities and a conflict transformation framework that spanned hundreds of years, ngo campaigns were often defined by shorter-term goals and internal organizational priorities. These situated frameworks translated into practices of decision-making that were organizationally and culturally different.

To summarize, the point here is that GNFN is engaged in a struggle for cultural, political and economic survival set within a larger conflict of ongoing internal Canadian colonialism overlaid with Euro-centric globality. The key state institutions have looked to propagate processes of negotiation and treaty settlement processes with Indigenous communities within Canada, and yet those State discourses, practices and legislation subordinates the agency, voice and self-determination of those affected communities. In the case of

non-Indigenous ngos, they too can easily replicate and reproduce asymmetrical power in their peacebuilding efforts with Indigenous communities even as they strive to create ‘power with’ rather than ‘power over’. The consequence is an ongoing conflict over power, voice, agency and peacebuilding.

To continue with two other case studies, respectively from Colombia and Iraq (researched by Victoria Fontan), we discuss the “power over” dimension of peace and its repercussions in relation to subaltern establishment of alternative narratives that constitute a significant form of agency. From this perspective, the “power over” dimension of the peace industry has the potential to be transformed into “power with.” When this is not the case; and the conflict related “power over” deepens, the consequences catastrophic.

Case Example #2: Colombia

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The contemporary manifestation of the conflict with left wing guerilla forces emerged out of *La Violencia* in Colombia in the 1950s, and by the mid-1960s the guerilla groups were established, the main one being the FARC.⁸ The conflict has lasted until today and a peace process is currently being negotiated between the main guerilla groups and the government in La Havana, Cuba. Drug trafficking has fanned flames of the conflict, and the south of Colombia has been a historic coca-growing and cocaine manufacturing part of the country, whose control has been heavily disputed by guerilla groups, paramilitaries and the State. The border zone with Ecuador is the most violent part of the country at the moment and the main export point of drugs down the rivers to the pacific coast. Youth groups are particularly important to the peace building scene because they are prime candidates for recruitment into armed groups.

⁸ Contextualization paragraph established by Dr Adam Baird, University for Peace, Costa Rica.

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On May 3rd 2013, a group of 14 youth activist from the South of Colombia, the Mesa Juvenil 14 (MJ14), wrote an open letter to what they consider to be their upper ‘food chain:’ the local and international institutions that they see as making profits in their name, under the front of peace building.⁹ Over the previous four years, they had been meeting in different youth roundtables organized by international and national NGOs. From different communities of the South of Colombia, they had forged a solid working relationship that led to the establishment of the organization.

In their letter, they denounce what they see as the practice of appropriation of their names and standing in their communities by the “peace industry” in order to legitimize decisions that are not taken at the grassroots. According to them, the dialogues established between peace institutions and youth groups are organized to both reassure donors that their funds are reaching target groups, and obtain communities buy-in of their projects. From their perspectives, workshops soon turn into a dialogue of the deaf, in which the exchanges “are not respected as a principle [for them to] consolidate [themselves] as an independent youth process led by the men and women of [their] region.” In addition, they contend that their “autonomy becomes an excuse and is eventually diminished by institutional actions.”¹⁰

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The process that led to this conscientization took place over several years. Hubert Cordoba Moreno, from Ipiales, explains how it happened for him:

“I am from an LGBT group which mostly caters to the youth. Since those issues are not usually welcomed in our society, we decided to focus on youth issues and soon started to be invited to workshops and roundtables on topics surrounding peace and empowerment. We attended, year in, year out, always met the same people in

⁹ Interview with Hubert Cordoba Moreno, Departmental Youth Platform Co-ordinator, Ipiales, Colombia, May 30th 2013.

¹⁰ “Nuestra Voz” open letter of the MJ14, May 3rd, 2013, Ipiales, Colombia.

activities organized by several different institutions, and after a while, we stopped pouring our hearts into the activities, because they were repetitive, and also because they never got us anywhere as individuals and as a community. Personally, I realized that I was being used as a youth whose participation to the workshop would be accounted for by the organizer to their funder. I was not supposed to think for myself, only to be there and look pretty, just like a plant. On several occasion, our organization put a project forward to one of these institutions. Each time, they ended up stealing it from us for their own benefits.”

Hubert’s reflection highlights two main points regarding the issues to be discussed and the processes that led to a collective resistance to peace-building. In terms of the issues to be discussed as part of the peace-building scene, it is apparent that Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgender issues were are welcomed by both the local and international organizations respectively organizing and funding the activities, as well as, according to Hubert’s reflection, society itself. For Hubert’s organization to carve a space for itself as part of the peace-building scene, he therefore has to exist as a “non-deviant” version of himself as well as a representation of his community. Only can he then exist in the public sphere. As established by Lukes (1974), an ultimate dimension of power resides in agenda-setting and the maintenance of a common discourse. The “power to” set an agenda resides in hands of the event organizers. From this perspective, subaltern voices are silenced, either openly or as a result of self-repression by what constitutes the “norm” (Foucault 1976).

In relation to the processes that lead to the resistance voiced by the MJ14, Hubert relates to a process of collective conscientization. He contends that they were used as peace-building fodder by organizations that need a certain number of youth to validate their expenditures. As they kept meeting over several years, the same issued were raised, the same answers given, and more importantly for many, they realized that the meeting’ agendas were established by others. Elberth Quiñones, from Tomaco, also explains:

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“Through all these years, no one stopped to ask us what we wanted. We were to be educated on peace, human rights, empowerment, but not once did we take part in setting the agenda for those meetings, or someone asked us if what we were being evangelized on was actually relevant to us.”¹¹

From Herbert’s perspective, the resistance expressed by the MJ14 letter was first characterized by a feeling of powerlessness, leading to a collective conscientization. Since a network had been established, the group decided to re-appropriate its own process while at the same time being part of institutional activities. Juan Pablo Buesaco also explains:

“Instead of stopping to attend those workshops, we decided to make them work for us. Since most of us don’t have internet at home, we decided to use our workshop time productively by establishing our own virtual platform on twitter and Facebook. Soon, two types of dialogues were simultaneously taking place, the deaf one, and our own where we organized ourselves into the MJ14. Since those workshops had internet, they helped us organize and formulate our ideas”¹²

The organization of the MJ14 stemmed from the collective realization that the help they were supposed to benefit from on part of the peace industry was an appropriation of their processes and communities for fundraising purposes, but also that as a group, they could also be the actors of their own peace-building. From this perspective, the realization of their own agency enables them to seek to level the power dynamics between their group and event organizers (Richmond & Mitchell, 2012). Their demands are straightforward: after four years of dialogues on peace and human rights, they want to comprehensively systematize their experiences and assume the responsibilities that derive from years of dialogue. They want to set the local agendas for peace in their own environments, and to be the direct focal point with international

¹¹ Interview with Elberth Quiñones, Co-ordinator of the Departmental Youth Platform for the Colombian-Equatorial border, Ipiales, May 31st 2013.

¹² Juan Pablo Buesaco, (Vice-coordinator of the Departmental Youth Platform for the Colombian-Equatorial border, Ipiales, Colombia), interview with Victoria Fontan, May 30, 2013.

donors. They also want to bring others to the table, who they consider to be the subalterns of the peace industry.

For years, the communities of Jardines de Sucumbios, have not been reached neither by the Colombian government, neither by any NGO. Situated at the border between Colombia and Ecuador, in a mountainous region surrounded by various armed groups (FARC, ELN, drug gangs), the community was just too dangerous to be approached by institutions, local-local ones included. What the MJ14 decided was to open a dialogue with them, towards an inclusion at all levels of youth communities in border settings. From the perspective of the MJ14, the more geographical space their network occupies, the more legitimacy and power it will gain.

Self-qualified subaltern peace-building voices seek to exist as a vital stakeholder to peace in the region. Yet they are facing an important dilemma: whether to maintain a dialogue with institutions, including local-local ones, or go their own independent way. Jean-Paul (who is this?) explains how they are faced with two choices, either reject those institutions altogether and go “underground” as subaltern collectives, or use the local peace industry to grow as a network of equals. Jean-Paul thinks that the latter is preferable, while Hubert has lost all faith in what any institutions can achieve in the name of peace. Of importance to this dilemma is the realization that power is at the core of their demands. Where does power lie, can there be any equity, power-wise, between the local, local-local, and the subaltern?

Case Example #3: Iraq **Occupy Fallujah**

Another group, this time in Iraq, has also sought to regain power in relation to post-conflict peace-building, albeit in a surprising way. This initiative has since failed, but is worth looking into.

In January 2005, general elections were organized by the US-led coalition in Iraq to establish a transitional government whose main task was to urgently draft a new constitution. Since Iraq was under

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occupation at the time, most of its Sunni Muslim population decided to boycott the election that it saw as a mere political maneuver on part of the occupation forces to place their preferred political leadership in place (Fontan, 2008). This strategy proved to be disastrous to the Sunni community of Iraq, since it led to the massive voting of Shi'a Muslim into all strategic governmental offices, leaving only token ministries to Sunni Muslims representatives (Herring & Rangwala, 2006). A bitter civil war ensued, which led to an ethnic cleansing of key parts of Baghdad and other mixed areas of the country, furthering talks of federalism and partition alongside religious lines.

Today, according to Human Rights Watch, countless Iraqis, mainly Sunnis, are being illegally held and tortured in Iraqi prisons.¹³ The means utilized are predictably familiar: rape, electrocution, and mutilations, to mention only a few.¹⁴ Moreover, people feel restricted in their beliefs, economically, and also in their movements. While it was the US-led coalition's idea to impose religious beliefs on ID cards, the mention of Sunni or Shi'a is now being matched with one's location. Mohammed, a Fallujah resident, explains: "I have family in Takhmiya," a Shi'a-Sunni mixed district of Baghdad, "I cannot visit them because if I cross a checkpoint and the police sees that I am heading in a direction that is not my home, they can detain me on suspicion of terrorism."¹⁵ Sunni Muslims parts of Iraq, which comprises around 40% of the territory, are becoming increasingly isolated from power.

After years of sterile open confrontation against the government, the Fallujah Salafi leadership, associated to al-Qaeda, had chosen to resort to non-violent action, to mobilize the Iraqi population as well as the international community to its plight. This was of course

¹³ See "Human Rights Watch World Report, Iraq 2013", <http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2013/country-chapters/iraq>

¹⁴ The following interviews took place with Victoria Fontan, July 5th 2013. Present were Abu Hussam, whose brother was detained in Tikrit throughout 2012; Abu Omar, who was detained in Baghdad in February 2013; Abu Fadel, detained between January 2011 and February 2013.

¹⁵ Mohammed (name changed of security reasons), interview with Victoria Fontan, Fallujah, Iraq, July 6th 2013.

before the recent upsurge of violence.¹⁶ Occupy Fallujah came into existence in February 2013, and can be said to be representing a significant portion of the population of Fallujah.¹⁷ They set up to physically occupy a piece of land at the entrance of their town, which they humbly called “the demonstration”. Its physical presence consisted of a circle of tents articulated around a podium where they run their general assemblies. They maintained a twenty-four hour presence in this space, where they shared everything from organic food to moral support. They meditated and prayed several times per day in the Mosque-tent. Overall, they sought to share ideals of consensus, coherence with their spiritual beliefs, and inclusiveness with their local community. They perceived themselves as the voiceless, the economically and politically downtrodden in a country filled with natural resources which they, and many others, had no access to. They hoped that their physical presence in a limited space would afford them visibility, and that eventually they would rally support from outside their immediate community, and maybe even abroad. They hoped that the government would eventually listen to their demands, which they had been formulating for a year. They knew that this model of collective action had worked elsewhere in the world, and that while tents are also part of their traditional way of life, they had become a symbol of democracy. While not in numbers, they believed that they were the 99% in spirit. Sheikh Mohammed, Occupy Fallujah’s media relations officer, explained:

“We really wanted to have an impact, not only for our own population, but also the rest of the world. We hoped that the UN in Baghdad would actually notice our efforts towards political, social and religious equity. Everyone was in agreement and we have raised an important sum of money since every tribe in the city is present in the demonstration. We still hope that the government will listen to us; we also need the rest of the world to know about

¹⁶ See http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/maliki_s_anbar_blunder.

¹⁷ While all ‘tribes’/groups representing the population of Fallujah have contributed to Occupy Fallujah, it is difficult, in the absence of quantitative research, to ascertain what percentage of the population supports the movement. It is the author’s (Victoria Fontan) perception that a significant majority supports it.

us. Sadly, no one has ever come from abroad to cover our story. You are the only foreigner to visit us (sic) since we started.”

Typically, the name Fallujah evokes armed conflict. It is the town where four Blackwater contractors were ambushed in March 2004, and whose bodies were hanged from its now infamous British-engineered bridge across the Euphrates river.¹⁸ This incident sparked two separate battles in the following April and November of the same year, which destroyed more than seventy-five percent of the city. Reputed to be the toughest city in Iraq, Fallujah sees itself as the city that never surrenders.¹⁹ From this perspective, when the people of Fallujah decided to set up their own “occupy” movement, it ought to have been taken seriously.

Sheikh Mohammed explained that as long as Sunnis are not an integral part of the Iraqi government, Iraq as a whole would not be at peace. He argued that the demands of Occupy Fallujah were very straightforward: “[f]irst, we want an end of what we see as the exclusion of Sunni Muslims from government employment,” which relates to the infamous de-Baathification of Iraq, a decision that led to the marginalization of more than a million former Baath Party members from holding government jobs (Fontan, 2008). Not only was this ruling devoid of any logical sense, since more Shi’ites were Bath party cardholders than Sunnis due to the demographics of the country, it also harmed the future reconstruction effort of the country, since many of those individuals were skilled and experienced professionals whose work ethics would have undoubtedly benefited Iraq as a whole. Occupy Fallujah’s second demand was for the government to:

“(…) end all talks of federalism, which would further divide Iraq and undoubtedly lead to great conflicts over its natural resources. In essence, we do not want Iraq not to become another Lebanon, look at the mess they are all in right now! Our third and most important demand is for Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to step down and free and fair elections to be organized.”

¹⁸ It is in a village close to Fallujah that the epic resistance against the British invasion of Iraq was also initiated in 1920.

¹⁹ Hajji Ummar, interview with Victoria Fontan, Fallujah, July 3rd 2013.

Those demands had emerged in a Fallujah mosque as early as December 2012. They not only spread across the city but also throughout the Anbar province and four other governorates, all harboring a majority of Sunni Muslims: Nineve, Salaheddin, Kirkouk, and Dyiala. The Iraqi government had repeatedly ignored them, and the demonstrations that spread across those governorates had culminated in the killing of dozens of protesters in Hawija, near Kirkouk, last April, and then the occupation of the Anbar province in January 2014.²⁰ If carried out in any other country, the government's brutal repression would have been widely condemned. Sheikh Mohammed is still incredulous:

"(...) the UN never gave [us] any support, and only called for an end of violence on all sides. Other demonstrations in the rest of the country were acknowledged by them, but never ours, as if we were invisible."

Sheikh al-Hamoudi, Occupy Fallujah's leader, in whose mosque the movement started, re-iterated that "[UN Under-Secretary general] Martin Kobler had done nothing to help us validate our Occupy Fallujah's demands, or at least come in open contact with the government." He then complained: "over the years, the UN has denied us assistance, especially for the children born with congenital malformations due to the use of chemical weapons by the US in 2004." He was executed a few meters from the tents of Occupy Fallujah last December.²¹

From the assertions of the Occupy Fallujah leadership, and some of its supporters, it was clear that from their perspective, peace and non-violence are only validated when put forward by some chosen few, labeled as peacemakers and understood to be part of a certain peace architecture. From this perspective comes the resentment of what the Occupy Fallujah movement referred to as a discrimination, an exclusion. Sheikh Mohammed explained:

"(...) why can't we be taken seriously as peacemakers? Because we are from Fallujah? Because we are Sunni Muslims from Iraq? Is

²⁰ See Human Rights Watch, Iraq: Investigate Deadly Raid on Protest, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/04/24/iraq-investigate-deadly-raid-protest>

²¹ See <http://www.victoriacfontan.com/1/post/2013/12/sheikh-al-hamoudi-and-the-right-to-peace.html>.

there not a right to peace for all? We set our movement up in good faith, and right now, I am wondering if it was worth it. You see, we are not afraid of having our city destroyed again, if that's God's will, but seriously, why does it always end like this?"

Can the right to peace, or the right to use non-violence, not be afforded by all? Before eliminating him, the Baghdad leadership did contact Sheikh al-Hamoudi. They offered him a ministerial position and a house in Jordan for his dismantling of the tents, he did refuse, but his counterpart in Ramadi accepted. Power from above, incarnated both by the deaf Baghdad leadership and the unresponsive UN, is simply denying peace as the narrative of the subaltern.

Hope can be constructive when rewarded, and devastating when betrayed. Occupy Fallujah as a movement was also affiliated to the same figure who led the Fallujah resistance against the US in 2004, Sheikh Abdallah Janabi. Until 2012, Sheikh Janabi was fighting in Syria as part of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, an al-Qaeda affiliate. His return meant that Occupy Fallujah would not be waiting forever, and that slowly but surely, the olive branch that it indeed represented would mutate into an open armed conflict between Anbar and the government of Iraq. It is undeniable that, as the conflict escalates, the polarization between Iraqi Sunnis and Shi'ites will be irrevocable. "We are not afraid of confronting Baghdad," said Sheikh Janabi, "if they do not listen to our demands, we are ready to take them on, on our own grounds, and this time, there will be no one to betray us."²²

The case of Occupy Fallujah is an oddity. It seems that the population of Fallujah was granting itself the agency to narrate its own reality, but that this narrative was not legitimized or acknowledged by institutional powers. Only after the beginning of the hostilities between the Maliki government and the Anbar province last January did the UN acknowledge that there was a demonstration in Fallujah. The people of Fallujah were not granted the validation to establish their own narrative form a peace perspective, yet the specter of violence has now granted them a

²² Abdallah Janabi, interview with author, Fallujah, July 7, 2013.

renewed aura of power over their counterpart in hypothetical peace talks. It seems that from this perspective, resilience can only express itself in terms of violence rather than in connection to peace. The renewed presence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham, an offset of Al-Qaeda, testifies to this. Yet, if acknowledged, would this peace narrative have constituted a first expression of Fallujah's resilience towards peace?²³ From a subaltern perspective, could the right to peace also be articulated through the threat of physical force? Has Occupy Fallujah lost its peace-building conflict? Was the threat of violence part of its narrative?

Summary of Case Examples #2 and #3

Both case studies of Colombia and Iraq highlight the importance of power dynamics in terms of peace-building and peace formation. In relation to Colombia, the subaltern agency expressed in its interaction with power has created a hybrid form of peace formation on part of the youth group voicing its resistance. They are facing with the choice to both use their standing in the youth platform to organize and establish their own narrative, as well as to carve out another space for the subaltern voices that were not, until then, part of the peace-building scene in their region. This act of re-appropriation of both narratives and power is can be seen as an expression of the potential for "power with," as expressed in not only conventional hybridity, but subaltern hybridity. The Iraqi case is more complex. It highlights the fundamental question as to who has the right to peace and resilience towards peace? It also tells the cautionary tale failed recognition of the potentiality of "power with," and how both characterization and marginalization of voices, in the name of "power over" may lead to further conflict. Again, peacebuilding, becomes the source of greater conflict, pushing the stalemate towards another level that had the potential to both extend the conflict within time, and heighten the entropy of whatever peace that was squandered.

²³ The author thanks Louis Kriesberg for his insights on this particular point, i.e. the hypothesis, yet to be researched, of the potential of resilience of armed groups towards peace-formation.

Conclusion

The three field research examples point to the ongoing problem of asymmetrical power and the negotiation of differently situated subaltern voices and agency versus the peacebuilding narratives, practices and decision-making undertaken by what we call a 'peace industry'. Peacebuilding itself is a conflict over power.

Listening to the subaltern is very much about subaltern communities strives to displace the power of dominant narratives and Euro-centric notions of globality. They are acts of agency, voice and the bottom-up production indicative of new knowledges and emancipatory practices.

As such, the three field research examples begin to problematize power and peacebuilding. They also offer their own epistemologies that point to critical pedagogy and cultural practice and knowledge as a means of deconstructing the privileging of colonial legacies and power relations by dislocating the authority, location and privilege of (neo-) colonial narratives. Also referred to as "emancipatory discourses" and "pedagogies of resistance" by Denzin, Lincoln and Smith (2008), critical pedagogy can be defined as "an approach and practice of looking to disrupt and challenge hegemonic cultural practices and ways of seeing and in its place, positing alternatives rooted in a more just, democratic and equitable society" (Denzin, Lincoln and Smith 2008).

At the same time, critical pedagogy, and grassroots subaltern peacebuilding is a performative practice; the notion that we create our world as we act in it (Giroux 2007: 1-5). Grassroots community-based peacebuilding is a self-reflexive performative practice located within specific historical and political relations. Such a practice reflectively frames each of us as producers of knowledge and actualizing agents of social change through our relationships, discourses, praxis, and ethical-political visions. In short, it is a self-reflective politicization of our lives. In terms of a decolonizing critical pedagogy, it is the approach of critically deconstructing colonialism and creating decolonizing knowledges.

Finally, we return back to the notion of solidarity research and decolonizing methodologies as a stance to engage in social justice peacebuilding aspiration and to self-reflexively engage ourselves in listening to and collaborating with subaltern communities.

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