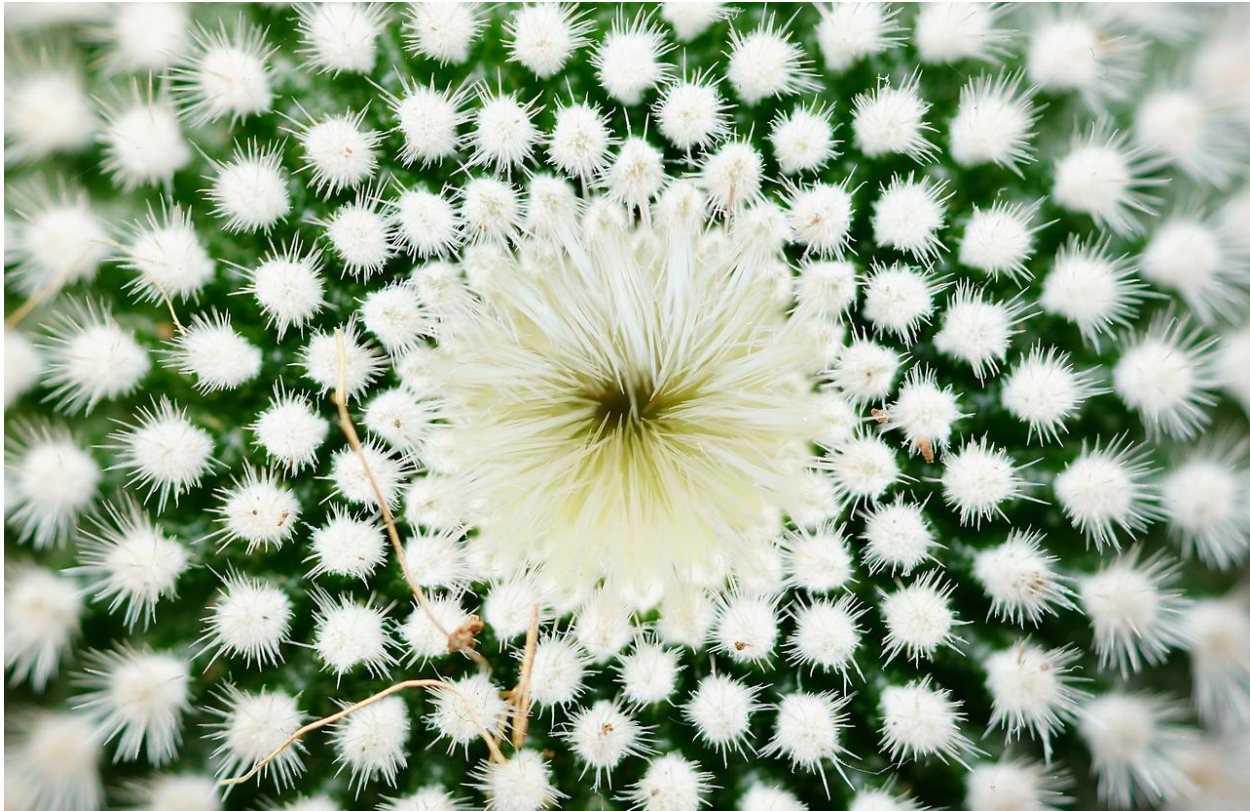


Pluriversal peacebuilding

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PLURIVERSALITY; PEACEBUILDING; EPISTEMIC VIOLENCE; ONTOLOGICAL VIOLENCE;
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This entry explores how a pluriversal approach to peace could reflect both the ontological and ethical aspects of pluriversality. On the one hand, the recurrence of diverse notions of 'peace' across various situated ways of knowing and being helps to disclose the pluriverse in all its complexity and interconnections. The exploration of the similarities and incommensurable differences between these pluriversal notions of 'peace' might in turn offer insights into the practice of pluriversal politics and attendant possibilities for engagement and solidarities to promote peace within and across the various lifeworlds that constitute the pluriverse. Taken together, the ontological and ethical valences of pluriversal peacebuilding offer important conceptual and ethical tools for promoting visions of peace beyond the direct, epistemic, and ontological violence of a Eurocentred modernity.

Abstract

Pluriversality is a concept from decolonial theory that names the existence of irreducibly plural ways of knowing and being that connect people to one another and to the world(s) around them. Decolonial theory reveals how modern Eurocentric epistemologies support their claims to universality by eradicating resources for imagining and enacting alternatives to a world structured according to the racialized, gendered, territorialized, and capitalist logics of modernity. The reality that a multiplicity of lifeworlds exist and are directly threatened by the epistemic and material demands of modernity compels an ethical obligation to resist their erasure at the hands of universalizing modern-colonial epistemologies and the patterns of social, economic, and political hierarchies that they promote. Ironically, however, the concept of peace has often functioned to justify the imposition of these very logics and systems, particularly through the era of 'liberal peacebuilding' that defined roughly two decades of international peacebuilding efforts that followed the end of the Cold War.

But what if peace was re-envisioned in a more pluriversal mode? This entry explores how a pluriversal approach to peace could reflect both the ontological and ethical aspects of pluriversality. On the one hand, the recurrence of diverse notions of 'peace' across various situated ways of knowing and being helps to disclose the pluriverse in all its complexity and interconnections. The exploration of the similarities and incommensurable differences between these pluriversal notions of 'peace' might in turn offer insights into the practice of pluriversal politics and attendant possibilities for engagement and solidarities to promote peace within and across the various lifeworlds that constitute the pluriverse. Taken together, the ontological and ethical valences of pluriversal peacebuilding offer important conceptual and ethical tools for promoting visions of peace beyond the direct, epistemic, and ontological violence of a Eurocentered modernity.

Introduction

The notion of 'world peace' reflects a prevalent (albeit often idealised) vision of a world without war. But what if the world itself is not one, but many – a world of worlds, each with its own understanding of peace potentially incommensurable with those of the others? Even more troublingly, what if some prevailing visions of peace actually place other worlds at risk?

These are some of the important questions raised by the concept of *pluriversal peacebuilding*. Pluriversal peacebuilding reassesses the theory and practice of peacebuilding in light of the decolonial concept of *pluriversality*, a praxis-oriented way of relating to the many worlds instantiated through diverse ways of knowing and being. Pluriversality insists on the already-existence of other worlds entwined within distinct epistemologies, ontologies and cosmologies, and promotes an ethical obligation to live in ways that do not actively endanger worlds not our own (Dunford, 2017; Escobar, 2018; M. FitzGerald, 2022; Hutchings, 2019; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Querejazu, 2016). Linking this notion of pluriversality back to the theory and practice of peacebuilding, the concept of pluriversal peacebuilding thus involves a recognition of: 1) the pluriversal meanings of 'peace' itself within and across these different worlds, and 2) the methods and broader goal of promoting peace within and between them.

Within the field of peacebuilding, for example, the notion of pluriversality reveals how prevailing approaches to international peacebuilding frequently presume the universalisability of Eurocentric modes of social, political and economic organisation. Decolonial theory explains how these systems were co-constructed along with intersecting modern/colonial hierarchies of race, gender, sexuality, territoriality, ability and so on. The assumption that these Eurocentric systems are universally experienced as peaceful can thus place the field of peacebuilding in the contradictory position of promoting visions of 'peace' that might actually be experienced as materially, epistemically and ontologically destructive by racialised and colonised communities (Azarmandi, 2018, 2023; Aikman, 2022; G. FitzGerald, 2021; 2023; Maldonado-Torres, 2020; Rodriguez Iglesias, 2019).

Beyond revealing the potential for violence latent within prevailing peacebuilding approaches, pluriversality can also inform new ethics and political praxis for promoting peace within and between the different worlds that comprise the pluriverse. Decolonial theorists indicate the importance of *pluriversal dialogue* – practices of decolonial encounter that both reflect and work to sustain the pluriverse – as a means of enabling solidarities and collaboration around decolonial projects. As noted by a number of authors, such dialogue is particularly effective when it centres around the irreducible plurality of the meanings of concepts seemingly shared across different worlds – concepts such as democracy, freedom, justice, development and perhaps peace (Dunford, 2017; Mignolo, 2011; Paulson, 2018; Querejazu, 2016).

Drawing on decolonial and critical peacebuilding literature, this entry unpacks the concept of pluriversality itself before discussing some examples of pluriversal usages of peace. The entry then indicates how peace itself might function as the grounding for practices of pluriversal dialogue, charting possible paths forward from the pluriversality of peace to new forms of pluriversal peacebuilding.

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The Pluriversality of Peace

Pluriversal conceptions of peace offer a particularly important corrective to universalising assumptions of what peace means and how it is best achieved. Ongoing debates within the field of peacebuilding themselves often obscure the fact that prevailing peacebuilding frameworks (e.g. the 'liberal peace' of the post-Cold War era) *and* many critical alternatives continue to frame Eurocentric social, political and economic orders as inherently peaceful (G. FitzGerald, 2021; Rodriguez Iglesias, 2019; Sabaratnam, 2013; Shroff, 2019). Without interrogating the racist, imperialist, and capitalist underpinnings of these understandings of peace, mainstream peace discourse and policy risk promoting forms 'peace' that the decolonial scholar Nelson Maldonado-Torres suggests might be better understood as a 'paradigm of war' that continues to promote direct and structural violences visited on racialised and colonised peoples (Maldonado-Torres, 2020).

However, the concept of peace is not exclusive to or exhausted by these associations. The existence of irreducibly plural conceptions of peace linked to diverse ways of knowing and being – and to explicitly decolonial political projects – indicates that ‘peace’ can function on decolonial registers beyond its connections to past and present colonial violences. For example, the Colombian peace process has emerged as one site of significant contestation between liberal and decolonial visions of peace. On the one hand, the 2016 peace agreement between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Colombian government has been hailed as the most comprehensive peace accord ever produced, including extensive intersectional stipulations related to gender, class and territory, as well as to ‘ethnic’ concerns related to Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities (Echavarría Alvarez et al., 2020). However, recent decolonial and other critical peacebuilding scholarship also highlights how the visions of peace maintained by many of these very communities exceed – and are indeed often in tension with – the liberal tenets of the formal peace process (Acosta et al., 2018; Cárdenas, 2023; Rodríguez Iglesias, 2019; Paarlberg-Kvam, 2021; Zulver, 2020). While aiming to protect Indigenous communities from certain forms of violence and exploitation, for example, the formal peace process cannot be viewed as working toward robust conceptualisations of decolonisation and Indigenous sovereignty. Atalia Omer’s work on decolonial interreligious peacebuilding in Kenya and the Philippines similarly shows how conflict-affected communities in the Global South sometimes engage pragmatically with liberal peacebuilding approaches as a means of harm reduction, even as they also work to protect and promote alternative forms of social and economic organisation that better reflect decolonial possibilities (Omer, 2020). A pluriversal lens helps to make sense of the divergent notions of peace operative in these cases, as well as the pragmatic nature of engagement with more formal peace processes by communities whose decolonial conceptions of peace necessarily extend beyond the term’s liberal connotations.

Another prominent example of a pluriversal usage of peace comes from the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) of Chiapas in southern Mexico; this is one of the archetypical examples of pluriversal politics discussed by decolonial theorists (Mignolo, 2011). The concept of peace recurs frequently throughout Zapatista documents and communiqués, often qualified as ‘peace with dignity’ (paz con dignidad), ‘peace with justice’ (paz con justicia) and ‘a just and dignified peace’ (una paz justa y digna). The EZLN’s six official Declarations from the Lacandon Jungle provide further context to an understanding of what the qualifiers of justice and dignity mean for the Zapatista conception of peace, which they also link to other Zapatista demands including

land, education, culture, independence, democracy, justice and freedom (*Zapatistas! Documents of the New Mexican Revolution (December 31, 1993–June 12, 1994)*, 1994). The Zapatista conception of many of these terms emerges not from the genealogy of Western political experience, but from Indigenous Mayan ontology, cosmology and associated notions of community life and collective self-governance (Brown, 2002; Nash, 1997). Decolonial theorists therefore suggest that Zapatista demands for peace and democracy cannot be adequately conceptualised or accommodated within a liberal, Westphalian understanding of the nation-state, capitalist political economies, or related notions of peace that actively endanger Zapatista lifeways (Mignolo 2011).

The EZLN's vision of peace provides another key example of the need for a pluriversal lens when navigating the challenges generated by friction between irreducibly plural definitions of the concept, especially when decolonial conceptions of peace are actively threatened by hegemonic modern-capitalist discourses and associated social, economic and political systems (Sunca, 2023). The Zapatistas' eventual decision to 'walk the road parallel to the Mexican [state]' (Mignolo, 2011, pg. 229) in accepting limited regional autonomy in exchange for an extended ceasefire after their 1994 uprising indicates the enduring tensions and ultimate incommensurabilities between their decolonial notion of peace and liberal institutionalist approaches to peacebuilding that rely on statist and capitalist assumptions hostile to the survival of Zapatista ways of knowing and being. The permanently 'frozen' status of the peace process between the Zapatistas and the Mexican state reflects this tension, with the decades since the Zapatista uprising witnessing further deterioration of the material livelihoods and associated lifeworlds of southern Mexico's Indigenous inhabitants despite broader national perceptions of improved democratisation and peace in the region (Manaut, Selee, & Arnson, 2006). Despite the persistence of a relatively stable negative peace between the Zapatistas and the Mexican government, therefore, the violences of capitalist modernity rejected by the Zapatistas' pluriversal understanding of peace continue to endanger and erode the material, epistemic and ontological security of the Zapatistas' communities.

Toward Pluriversal Peacebuilding

The concept of pluriversality thus has clear ramifications for peacebuilding theory and practice. The ontological pluriversality of peace upends conventional wisdom that the concept of peace

can be linked to any one slate of social, economic and political arrangements, including the statist and capitalist modes of development that define post-Cold War liberal peacebuilding efforts. As Janet Conway and Jakeet Singh explain, such '[universalist] discourses and globalist projects are grounded in a unitary ontology and imperialist epistemologies which assume that the world is one, that it is knowable on a global scale within single modes of thought, and is thus manageable and governable in those terms' (Conway & Singh, 2011, pg. 701). Yet it is precisely this 'singular world logic' that underpins much of the academic study and policy presumptions in the realm of international politics, including the field of international peacebuilding (Blaney & Tickner, 2017; Azarmandi, 2023; Sabaratnam, 2011). In contrast, pluriversal peacebuilding must proceed from an explicit prioritization of ways of knowing and being *otherwise*, and reflect a politics rooted in the protection of diverse lifeworlds from the exterminative tendencies of *any* universalising discourses and policy programmes – especially those that mask violent colonial continuities with the language of peace. This notion of the inherent unknowability of the pluriverse through any specific epistemological framework should be a compelling reason for the scholars and practitioners of peacebuilding to embrace a stance of epistemic humility, emphasising the situatedness and partiality of views of peace, including those promoted by 'experts' in the field (Azarmandi, 2023; G. FitzGerald, 2021; Goetze, 2016).

Even in these efforts, caution remains necessary. Recent critical interventions in peacebuilding scholarship risk inadvertently reinforcing the dominance of Eurocentric social, political and economic systems by emphasising hybrid forms of peace, governance and political economy that integrate some local sensibilities into (neo-) liberal frameworks (Mac Ginty, 2011; Richmond, 2012; Richmond & Mitchell, 2012). Meera Sabaratnam explains how scholarly emphasis on 'local' knowledge often fails to shift the epistemic locus of peacebuilding beyond Westernised academic contexts, which leads to an enduring 'paradoxical' reliance on key tenets of liberal peacebuilding (Sabaratnam, 2013). The hybridisation of liberal systems with 'local' preferences in turn presumes the continuation of structures that are experienced as materially, epistemically and ontologically destructive by various racialised and colonised communities (G. FitzGerald, 2023; Iñiguez de Heredia, 2018; Nadarajah & Rampton, 2015; Randazzo, 2016). This failure to decentre the unitary assumptions that associate liberal social, economic and political orders with 'peace' reflects the threat that the prevailing liberal peacebuilding paradigm poses to Indigenous and other lifeworlds, not least through its connections to capitalist models of economic development and associated hierarchies of race, gender, sexuality, ability and territory.

Despite the liberal peacebuilding paradigm's apparent openness to some local preferences, this inability to truly reckon with the violent past and presences of key structural commitments underscores the challenge (if not the impossibility) of achieving pluriversal peacebuilding by selectively grafting aspects of subalternised conceptions of peace onto the unitary logic of a dominant paradigm that is opposed to the flourishing of pluriversal alternatives. As Catherine Walsh and Walter Mignolo explain, 'Multiple ontologies are only possible if multiple epistemologies are possible. There cannot be multiple ontologies "recognized" by the benevolence of one universal epistemology' (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, pg. 227–28). Liberal inclusivity is not a viable alternative to decolonial pluriversality.

Peace and Pluriversal Dialogue

Given the limitations of these existing critical efforts, scholars and practitioners within the field of peacebuilding must urgently work to develop new tools for engaging across various forms of epistemic and ontological difference around the concept of peace. However, as Juliana González Villamizar notes, 'establishing dialogue with communities which have been able to preserve autochthonous knowledges in the midst of coloniality becomes a challenge for those of us who have been socialised "within" the latter' (Villamizar, 2023)

One potential tool for engaging in non-dominative ways with diverse, situated notions of peace is the practice of pluriversal dialogue, highlighted by decolonial theorists as a mode of engagement that honours both the ontological and ethico-political aspects of pluriversality. Walter Mignolo describes how pluriversal dialogue can be facilitated by the exploration of particular 'connectors' that bridge diverse ways of knowing and being. Mignolo describes these connectors as semi-analogous concepts that share a simultaneous presence and a distinct, irreducible specificity of meaning across differing epistemologies and ontologies (Delgado, Romero, & Mignolo, 2000; Mignolo, 2011). Certain concepts (especially 'democracy' and 'development') owe their status as potential connectors to the often-violent globalisation of specific Eurocentric political and economic regimes through colonialism and capitalist expansion. However, the conscious appropriation of these 'universal' terms and their application to explicitly decolonial projects (consider again Zapatista notions of democracy and peace) demonstrates how they can function beyond the dominant Eurocentric usages, and in ways that

are not themselves intended to command universal or hegemonic meanings (Dunford, 2017; Paulson, 2018).

A given connector's pluriversal usage creates a discursive terrain for dialogue grounded in the ontological aspect of pluriversality, which is again revealed through the worlds reflected in these concept's irreconcilably different meanings and the ways of knowing and being from which these meanings emerge. The use of connectors as a starting point for exploring such differences *and* as points of potential collaboration can in turn enable contingent solidarities that contribute to the ethical demands of pluriversality, as communities work to ensure the mutual survival of ways of knowing and being not their own. Examples in the decolonial literature of solidaristic engagement across Indigenous, peasant, pastoralist, fisherfolk, and Global South feminist groups show how these communities use particular connectors – including pluriversal notions of democracy, development and human rights – to 'unpick multiple, intersecting hierarchies and construct, in their place, a pluriversal world' through situated practices of pluriversal dialogue and concrete political collaboration (Dunford, 2017; Conway & Singh, 2011; Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2014). Through not without its own complications and internal power dynamics, the 'open space' of the World Social Forum has been hailed as a particularly generative site of recurring dialogue between communities seeking to preserve pluriversal futures for themselves and others (Conway, 2011; Conway & Singh, 2011; Caruso, 2017).

The established role of signifiers like democracy and development as pluriversal connectors indicates similarly pluriversal possibilities for the concept of peace itself. However, it is also important to note that concepts like peace, democracy and development do not possess any sort of *a priori* value as potential pluriversal connectors outside of this fact. As with decolonial notions of democracy and development, possibilities for conducting pluriversal dialogue around the concept of peace are revealed only by the fact that peace is already used in related-but-distinct ways by diverse communities to describe ways of being in the world (and with other worlds) that are less inherently destructive to the pluriverse than capitalist modernity. Nevertheless, with that caution in mind, preliminary engagements with decolonial literature and movements do yield ready examples of pluriversal conceptions of peace. Indeed, even the limited examples of the Zapatistas and the Colombian peace process as discussed above already reveal what Ana Isabel Rodriguez Iglesias describes as a complex plurality of 'local, situated, and particular peaces' that indicate the possibility of peace functioning as the grounds for encounter

between worlds, and for the prospect of truly pluriversal peacebuilding (Rodriguez Iglesias, 2019, 212).

Conclusion

The ability of 'peace' to act as a pluriversal connector indicates the capacity of peace as a concept to function beyond its long-standing associations with the violences of specific liberal modern/colonial social, economic and political systems (Azarmandi, 2018, 2023; Maldonado-Torres, 2020). A pluriversal approach to peacebuilding thus offers a crucial ontological and epistemological response to the limitations of existing efforts to address power and difference within the formal field of peacebuilding theory and practice. In the first instance, recognising the extant pluriversality of peace and its irreducibly plural meanings offers a novel way to bring the fact of the pluriverse into view. Apprehending peace through a pluriversal lens thus enables a reimagining of the field of peacebuilding itself as a site of convergence and divergence among different worlds, and of corresponding insights into notions of peace that emerge from the epistemologies, ontologies and cosmologies that comprise these worlds. Approaching 'peace' as a connector in turn offers one possible starting point for pursuing pluriversal politics within and between different worlds in the service of fostering pluriversal futures beyond modern/colonial violences. Pluriversal peacebuilding thus holds out the promise of helping to build 'una paz donde quepan muchas paces' – a peace in which many peaces fit.

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