



# The (Dis)Order of Things and the Perception of History

ARTICLE

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## ABSTRACT

Re-reading *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping* in its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary is revealing of how history keeps reinventing itself and coming back to haunt us in its different forms and appearances, but it also offers us an opportunity to challenge our linear perceptions of temporality. In many ways, the book was ahead of its time and remained relevant as an exploration of ‘disciplinary liberalism’ as the dominant ideological formation of post-cold war international politics propagated through all sorts of simulations and performances aimed at hiding the formal emptiness, or lack of meaning, of institutions and the ideals they represented. Peacekeeping, as one of those performances of an order, has been constantly re-envisioned and reconfigured throughout the years in desperate attempts to discipline a certain ‘vision’ of the future while avoiding the truth about its impossibility of being. This essay examines some continuities and transformations in the liberal order explored by François Debrix two decades ago while also questioning the quest for order in the world, which will be always limited by a perception of history shaped by events inevitably filtered through our cognition and linguistic structures.

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Re-reading *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping* in its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary is revealing of how history keeps reinventing itself and coming back to haunt us in its different forms and appearances. But it also offers us an opportunity to challenge our linear perceptions of temporality. Debrix's book emerged at a time when Derrida was conjuring specters of Marx in response to the new "gospel of politico-economic liberalism"<sup>1</sup> manifested in the announced victory of the liberal ideology after the end of the Cold War. The dominant diagnosis challenged by Derrida was "not only the end of societies constructed on the Marxist model but the end of the whole Marxist tradition [...] not to say the end of history."<sup>2</sup> The apparent sudden loss of the "sacrificial specter of communism"<sup>3</sup> by the U.S. and its foreign policy is identified by Debrix as a cause for a "ritualistic crisis in American society"<sup>4</sup> that exposed a vulnerable and unstable American (liberal) ideology whose coherence depended on the invention of new violent encounters with otherness provided by peacekeeping interventions. Over the past two decades, the post-cold war renewed hope in the UN and peacekeeping as credible projections of a pretense of 'international liberal order' has given way to new encounters and new forms of interventionism that function both as ongoing simulations propagating 'disciplinary liberalism' but also as evidence of the emptiness of ideology and the undecidability of history.

Disciplinary liberalism is defined as "an ideology that promises individual freedom and welfare in society through the implementation of disciplinary modalities of power,"<sup>5</sup> imposed as the "only metaphysical and organizational horizon of humankind after the collapse of communism."<sup>6</sup> Many moves towards the conciliation of discipline and ideology described in *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping* have intensified since the book's publication. In 1999, when the book was published, the United Nations was deploying one of its most robust and multidimensional missions, the UNTAET (United Nations Transitional Administration of East Timor). In contrast to Bosnia or Kosovo, analyzed in the book, East Timor was a non-self-governing territory that had to be "invented."<sup>7</sup> It was considered by scholars and analysts a "test case"<sup>8</sup> for the new generation of 'post-conflict peacebuilding' operations defined in a supplement added to the Agenda for Peace in 1994 and geared towards the establishment of liberal democracies in post-conflict societies according to western standards for social-political and economic regimes and institutions. In this context, the classification of the UN missions in the country (UNAMET, UNTAET, UNMISSET, UNOTIL) as successful after 2012 illustrated clearly the disconnection between the simulation of the 'liberal democratic peace' and the field of experience grounded in the materiality of social relations. The imagination and visual projection of an ideal peaceful state onto East Timor and other territories did not correspond to the effects of that projection felt by local societies, thus confirming Debrix's evaluation of the hegemonic structures created by UN peacekeeping as inevitably starting to undo themselves.

Operating in the realm of appearances, we find in the book definitions of peacekeeping as an "ideological enterprise"<sup>9</sup> or a "visual projection."<sup>10</sup> In the absence of an obvious or visible enemy, the United Nations simulated 'international security' by taking on the role of not only ending intra-state conflicts, but also of restructuring and rebuilding post-conflict societies. Throughout the 1990s and the 2000s, the UN's visual strategy kept distracting the world from the fact that the problem was never in the ineffective implementation of the liberal democratic model, but in the lack of referentiality in reality for the model or order being simulated. In many ways, the book was ahead of its time and remains relevant as an exploration of 'disciplinary liberalism' as

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1 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Kamuf Peggy (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 78.

2 Ibid., 69.

3 François Debrix, *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping: The United Nations and the Mobilization of Ideology* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 163.

4 Ibid., 163.

5 Ibid., 24.

6 Ibid., 211.

7 James Traub, "Inventing East Timor," *Foreign Affairs* 79, no. 4 (2000): 74–89.

8 Astri Suhrke, "Peacekeepers as Nation-Builders: Dilemmas of the UN in East Timor," *International Peacekeeping* 8, no. 4 (2001): 1–20.

9 Debrix, *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping*, 22.

10 Ibid., 21.

the dominant ideological formation of post-cold war international politics propagated through all sorts of simulations and performances aimed at hiding the formal emptiness, or lack of meaning, of institutions and the ideals they represent(ed).

In 2021, there are 13 active UN Peacekeeping Operations and they are as “undetermined, imprecise, and unreal”<sup>11</sup> as Debrix described them in 1999. There have been many attempts to define the United Nations’ role in conflict and post-conflict situations. After the Agenda for Peace in 1992, we had the Brahimi Report in 2000, the adoption of the principle of the Responsibility to Protect in 2005, the publication of the ‘Capstone Doctrine’ in 2008, the New Horizon Process starting in 2009, and other high-level panels to discuss it. More recently, in 2017, the new UN Secretary-General António Guterres launched the A4P (Action for Peacekeeping) to discuss new parameters for as well as the future of interventions. What has been expressed through these different efforts to reform peacekeeping is that the world is changing and peacekeeping needs to change with it too to remain an effective tool for international peace. In certain ways, peacekeeping has been constantly re-envisioned and reconfigured throughout the years in desperate attempts to discipline a certain ‘vision’ of the future while avoiding the truth about its impossibility of being.

Despite the lack of referentiality or reality for peacekeeping’s projection of peace and security around the world, the effects of the projection have been felt as very real. The constant efforts to reform or ‘re-envision peacekeeping’ are also pushed by a sense of failure and/or by the clashes in the field between an ideology and what the practices enacted by this ideology do to people. In most cases, ‘reality’ fights back, forcing a reimagining and reimagining of the projection. The proliferation of concepts such as “local ownership”<sup>12</sup> or “hybrid peace”<sup>13</sup> is an example of the ongoing dispute over the hegemonic narrative justifying the appropriateness of international interventions. The literature advocating for a peacebuilding process led by local communities lost some momentum in the 2000s, possibly due to the reappropriation and incorporation of these terms by the United Nations in its mandates and reports. As Debrix demonstrates in his examination of the intervention in Somalia, the ‘hegemonic fiction’ may or may not be rewritten and reappropriated when put to test.

Developments in the field of peace operations have opened up a space for scholars to consider the possibility that we are now shifting towards a post-liberal order. On the one hand, Oliver Richmond<sup>14</sup> and others have emphasized the power of local resistance to Western disciplinary tools and defined the post-liberal order as an emancipation from liberalism as a model and ideology imposed upon societies around the world. On the other hand, a different view of a post-liberal order has been associated both with an increasing ineffectiveness of the simulation of a liberal order through peace operations and with the redirection of efforts in the name of freedom and order towards different interventionist and violent rituals since 2001, particularly in relation to counterterrorism. Interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq were at least initially modeled after the notion of a ‘light footprint’. One might say that they are no longer shaped by the same disciplinary tools of past peacebuilding interventions, but predominantly concerned with the targeting and elimination of the ‘enemy’.<sup>15</sup> In a visit to American troops in Afghanistan at the end of 2017, Donald Trump declared that US troops are no longer building nations, but *killing terrorists*.<sup>16</sup> Would the more assertive posture and aggressive narratives from populist nationalists today be a sign that disciplinary liberalism is being gradually replaced by a different ideology or that multilateral institutions, as simulated heroes of the liberal order, had to die as they no longer were able to perform their heroic functions? Has *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping* come full circle after 20 years? As we face diagnoses like these then and now, we must ask: if critique is not about mourning a greater sense of certainty or the thicker boundaries granted by

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11 Ibid., 215.

12 Sarah B. K. Von Billerbeck, *Whose Peace?: Local Ownership and United Nations Peacekeeping* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

13 Oliver P. Richmond and Audra Mitchell, eds., *Hybrid Forms of Peace: From Everyday Agency to Post-Liberalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

14 Oliver P. Richmond, *A Post-Liberal Peace* (London: Routledge, 2011).

15 John Karlsrud, “From Liberal Peacebuilding to Stabilization and Counterterrorism,” *International Peacekeeping* 26, no. 1 (2019): 1–21.

16 “Trump: Not Nation Building, Killing Terrorists,” *Associated Press NEWS*, August 22, 2017, <https://apnews.com/article/6cbc34665c65414f80f73e96b37c83fa>.

contrast that anchors meaning, what is the role of critique and what is critique actually saying about the order/disorder of things?

The role of international institutions in carrying on activities and agendas simulating the coherence and stability of a hegemonic liberal order since the construction of the Bretton Woods system and more intensely after the end of the cold war has clearly not been easily sustainable over the decades. Resistance and the exposure of contradictions and tensions within the system do not only come from the field of military intervention. The ‘international liberal order’ has been challenged both by direct confrontation, particularly since the 1999 Seattle protests (the ‘Battle of Seattle’) at the World Trade Organization (WTO) Ministerial Meeting, and by analyses and scholarships that have highlighted the disciplinary and pervasive qualities of an ideology that pretends to be about freedom and liberation. History has apparently not reached its end with liberalism, and Francis Fukuyama himself affirmed in an interview recently that socialism “ought to come back,”<sup>17</sup> at least in the form of redistributive programs that could redress the big imbalances that started with Reagan’s and Thatcher’s 1980s neoliberal policies.

On the one hand, the concerns with the colonization of international realities by the force of the virtual and the imposition of ‘sameness’ expressed in *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping* are confirmed as we are all living very drastic consequences of globalizing market forces and ideologies imposed through various simulations. The absence of meaning or of a ‘rationality’ according to which we are able to make judgments between plural and diverse experiences in real and virtual worlds has ironically never been so apparent. The multiplication and expansion of the means through which images now circulate and are mobilized and consumed have given rise to a whole new dimension of ‘virtual reality’. In that sense, this may indeed be a time “when meaning and intent no longer matter since appearance and pretense (always already) prevail.”<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, it is time to reflect on the possibilities that uncertainty opens up to imagination. Perhaps we are finally giving up trying to be modern, and as John Gray asserts, “the flaw in the modern myth is that it tethers us to a hope of unity, when we should be learning to live with conflict.”<sup>19</sup>

It is not a matter of denying the relevance of looking and exploring patterns and ruptures in international affairs, such as the shift from realist binaries or modern certainties to the uncertainty of a postmodern simulated reality, but rather of questioning the grounds upon which we are able to make affirmations about continuities and discontinuities and about the course of history and visions of global order. Our capacity to engage the debate on the (dis) order of the world and temporal directions and misdirections beyond an account of dominant narratives and practices associated with what we called here ‘disciplinary liberalism’ is limited by our current (in)capacity to see otherwise or read beyond the boundaries of known discourses – the boundaries of intelligibility. Learning to live with conflict while avoiding the modern trap of duality is perhaps the way to remain open to and to cultivate an anti-imperialist spirit necessary for such a destabilizing enterprise that François Debrix invites us to engage in *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping*.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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