

## **A decolonial critique of the liberal peace: Insights from peace practices of ethnic people in Colombia**

### **Una crítica descolonial de la paz liberal: percepciones de las prácticas de paz de los pueblos étnicos en Colombia**

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#### **Abstract**

This article develops a decolonial theoretical framework of peace by conducting a decolonial analysis of the hegemonic liberal peace in order to explain the power relations at play in peacebuilding in post-colonial nation-states, and also among different alternative local/ethnic peace views. It argues that the hegemonic discourse of peace is fruit of the modern/colonial system, and therefore the liberal peace has been conceptualized as a universal phenomenon based on particular Western and modern ideologies. Thus, the promotion and importation of this model into the periphery, that is in post-colonial states, implies the reproduction of the coloniality of power/knowledge/being by keeping the bases and ideology of the modern/colonial system that establishes profound abyssal lines between those that fit into the hegemonic standard and those that not. A decolonial perspective, thus, serves to understand how alterities underlying the war-peace dynamics do also reproduce the colonial difference that establishes an ethnic-racial hierarchical classification of the population in the postcolonial periphery. As a result, liberal peace is studied as a discourse that does not overcome the coloniality of power and the exclusion of the others, but instead tries to control the alterities by coopting them, reinforces the legitimacy of the nation-state by securing the centrality of the nation-state (despite any multicultural openness), and extends its sovereignty to the peripheries. This argument is explored through the case of resistance of ethnic peoples in Colombia.

*Key words: liberal peace, (de)coloniality, emptied signifier, colonial difference, resistance, pluriversity, counterhegemony*

#### **Resumen**

Este artículo desarrolla un marco teórico decolonial de la paz mediante la realización de un análisis decolonial de la paz liberal hegemónica para explicar las relaciones de poder en juego en la construcción de la paz en los estados-nación poscoloniales, y también entre diferentes puntos de vista alternativos de paz local/étnica. Se sostiene que el discurso hegemónico de la paz es fruto del sistema moderno / colonial y, por lo tanto, la paz liberal ha sido conceptualizada como un fenómeno universal basado en ideologías particulares occidentales y modernas. Por lo tanto, la promoción e importación de este modelo en la periferia, es decir, en los estados poscoloniales, implica la reproducción de la colonialidad del poder/saber/ser al mantener las bases y la ideología del sistema moderno/colonial que establece líneas abismales profundas entre los que encajan en el estándar hegemónico y los que no. Una perspectiva decolonial, por lo tanto, sirve para comprender cómo las alteridades subyacentes a la dinámica de guerra-paz también reproducen la diferencia colonial que establece una clasificación jerárquica étnico-racial de la población en la periferia poscolonial. Como

resultado, la paz liberal se estudia como un discurso que no supera la colonialidad del poder y la exclusión de los demás, sino que trata de controlar las alteridades cooptándolas, refuerza la legitimidad del estado-nación asegurando la centralidad del estado-nación (a pesar de cualquier apertura multicultural), y extiende su soberanía a las periferias. Este argumento se explora a través del caso de resistencia de los pueblos étnicos en Colombia.

*Palabras clave: paz liberal, (de)colonialidad, significante vacío, diferencia colonial, resistencia, pluriversidad, contrahegemonía*

## 1. Introduction

The concept of 'peace' has been subject of multiple studies, analyses and discussions about its ontology, epistemology and methodology. In this new study, I approach the concept of peace from its political praxis and its performative dimensions, operationalized in the (re)production of identities. I contend peace is a discursive and relational phenomenon of the field of "politics" and, in turn, an expression of the articulation of "the political" (antagonisms) (Mouffe, 2013; Shinko, 2008; Castro Gómez, 2015). This analysis will be done based on a combination of poststructuralist and decolonial studies in order to first question the universality of peace and introduce the variety of understandings of peace, and second to explore how subaltern actors challenge and re-accommodate hegemonic discourses and practices of peace. In the first part of the article I introduce the main tenets of these two schools of thought and put forward how they both relate. In the second part, I address the concept of liberal peace as a modern/colonial product and discuss how different discourses of security, democracy, and political economy have been attached to the practice of liberal peacebuilding and reproduce the idea that these liberal discourses favor the consolidation of peaceful societies. Liberal peace is also studied as a performative discourse that articulates alterities/identities by reproducing the colonial difference, that is the difference established in colonial times by the colonizers over the colonized people creating the latter as the non-existent, but in turn a necessary exteriority. Finally I explore how subalterns resist the liberal peace, particularly paying attention to how they confront the colonial discourses that produce hierarchies of subjectivities that have been reified and reproduce until the present and that liberal

peace once again reinserts. The theoretical reflection developed in this article is fruit of my fieldwork with several black and indigenous organizations and communities in Colombia through participatory action research, based on the analysis of their resistance struggles against the internal armed conflict, the coloniality of power embedded in the modern nation-state, the capitalist modern/colonial global world-system, and more recently against the liberal peace policies that reproduce the economic model and liberal values.

## 2. Reading the world through a poststructuralist ethos

The appeal to poststructuralism to explore the multiplicity of meanings of peace responds to its anti-essentialist and anti-foundational position. It rejects that there is an ultimate foundation or core that grounds reality; rather any grounding is always undecidable and that instability opens the door to different possibilities, including changes and discontinuities in how social dynamics take place. This conceptualization draws from semiotics and linguistics incorporating from them two premises: first, the Derridean linguistic notion that "social meaning is constructed discursively through language" (Richmond, 2008: 137) and second, the Saussurean notion of the non-essentialist character of reality, in the sense that the attachment between the signifier (word, text, image, or sound) and the signified (meaning) is contingent and arbitrary (Belsey, 2002: 11; Soledad Montero, 2012: 10-11). Hence the signifier is not a direct representation of that reality (Belsey, 2002: 10). Rather the material world out there is always subject to interpretations, and those interpretations form part of our socialization. This means that the

relation of the subject to the object is not an objective one through which the subject can neutrally study the object. On the contrary, that relationship is always mediatized by the existent interpretations of that reality. Those interpretations are inter-subjective in the sense that we provide meaning to it collectively, sharing and reproducing discourses. According to poststructuralism language is never private; it produces meaning through the sharing of a particular grammar and rules by a group. With time those discourses tend to be reified as natural, common-sense, straightforward and even morally correct.

Within International Relations, poststructuralism questions the truths, the narratives, and the laws of nature contained in the discipline as universal, uncontestable, and static. It contends that these narratives, classifications, divisions, and categories developed by the discipline to make sense of the world and structure state relations tend to reproduce a hegemonic Western and modern view of the social reality that hierarchizes the European/US discourses and practices as naturally superior to those situated beyond the core. Thus, it is a critique that it was born at the core of Europe itself to question the project of modernity, the Enlightenment, liberalism, emancipation, and other grand narratives that keep that hierarchy between the centre and the periphery. It is, therefore, a meta-theory that deals with the margins, with the changes that occur in the limits, understanding the limits not as divisive lines but as open dimensions that allow for discontinuities. The ethos of this approach resides in the commitment to explore what has been hidden, marginalized, suppressed, or silenced by the hegemonic discourses or narratives and in turn reveal what interests were behind those naturalizations. In a sense, its endeavor is to de-subjugate other knowledges, truth and meanings. The interest

is not on the causes of the phenomena since it rejects any kind of causal relationship or determinism —such as the historical materialism— but to look for the conditions for radical novelty and openness (Williams 2005: 13).

### 2.1. Meaning-making and changing: Discourse theory as an explanation

Taking into account the plurality of interpretations of a reality, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe developed the discourse theory or theory of hegemony in their study of the concept and the practice of populism in Argentina to describe how some particular meanings get a hegemonic position in the public debate and others are relegated or even silenced (Laclau, 1990, 1996, 2005, 2005; Laclau & Mouffe, 2014). According to discourse theory (DT), social reality is constructed through discourses and because there is an impossibility of final ground or fixation of meanings, there is also a necessity of partial fixation in order to make social life and communication possible.

A *discourse*, according to DT, is the articulation of a web of meanings, an attempt to fix them, and this exercise implies the “exclusion of other meanings, and can be seen, therefore, as an exercise of power” (Rear & Jones, 2013: 21). In other words, a discourse is “a system of meaningful practices that form the identities of subjects and objects” (Howarth, Norval, & Stavrakakis, 2000), whose meaning is constantly negotiated and constructed. Discourse is both seen as language and practice; being practices both “significant and signifying in the reproduction of discourses” (Müller, 2008: 324).

They also introduce the concept of *empty signifier* or *nodal points* to refer to the signifiers that occupy a privileged position

within discourses (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001: 99). Empty signifiers refer to those signifiers that gather multiple particular demands and represent them in a universal or hegemonic way. Hence, the particular assumes a universal role that “can only be precarious and unsaturated” (Kaplan, 2010: 257; Laclau, 1996: 15). Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2015) adds that the signifier is not empty but rather has been emptied by hegemonic powers that aimed at imposing a univocal one.

The imposition of one meaning and the exclusion of others through articulation is considered a hegemonic practice (in the Gramscian sense), through which discourses then become naturalized as being part of the ‘common sense’, as it happened with liberal peace. The hegemonic operation implies the articulation of many subject positions under the same imaginary or common horizon (Howarth, Norval, & Stavrakakis, 2000). *Hegemony* is therefore an operation through which a particularity, or many, assumes a precarious universal position. The fixation of meanings within discourses is always temporal and subject to change, and that is what, from a political point of view, explains why and how political change happens.

Approaching the concept of peace through DT allows to question the universality associated with it, particularly the hegemonic views of liberal peace, by highlighting the instability of those discourses and the violence or repression implicit in the hegemonic operations. DT underscores relations of power and resistance in place, and how these get transformed by the same dynamic.

### **3. Decolonial studies and situated knowledge**

Decolonial and postcolonial studies deal with how colonialism pervades social, political,

economic relations after the period of historical colonialism, as it is assumed as ‘normal reality’, ‘natural’ or ‘common sense’. This happens because the colonial though based on Eurocentrism keeps a hegemonic position that reproduces the logic of the interests, views and practices of particular groups that occupy the elitist segment of society (the privileges of the white male European man). The difference between these two schools of thought resides in that postcolonial studies was developed in British academy by Indian scholars such as Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak and Ranahit Guha that question the idea that with the political independence of the India, colonialism has finished, as well as the anticolonial and nationalist narratives of the Indian elites that reproduce the same modern values of the colonizers and silence or omit the voices of heterogenous subaltern subjects. Decolonialism situates the critique of persisting colonialism in the Latin American context, where former Spanish colonies gained independence from Spain in the nineteenth century, and “the resulting postcolonial nation-states were ruled predominantly by white criollos who developed internal colonial regimes with respect to the Indians, the slaves of African descent, the mestizo or mulatto peasantry, and the nascent proletariats” (Latin American Subaltern Studies Group, 1994).

Coloniality is understood as a “colonial matrix of power” (Mignolo and Tlostanova, 2012) that was established during the historical colonial period and continues to operate in the post-colonial states, affecting the constitution of subjectivities, the production of knowledges, the habitus of the colonial subjects, as well as their ways of doing (see Mignolo, 2007, 2006, Martínez-Andrade, 2008; Palermo, 2010; Castro-Gómez, 2000 and 2007; Quijano, 2007 and 2000b; Maldonado-Torres, 2007). The coloniality of power is

based on the hierarchical stratification of the population, established in terms of humanity, in order to govern them; thus, Europeans were placed at the top of the ladder, and those living in the conquered land and those brought from Africa as enslaved people were seen as the 'other' at the bottom.

The *colonial difference* precisely refers to the practice of *otherness* that created marks of difference between the 'so perceived' white elite originally from Spain or Spanish-descendants and those 'tainted by the earth' whose blood was deemed not pure (Castro-Gómez, 2005b). Quijano (2007, 2000a) has thoroughly explained the process of formation of 'race' as the structural column that sustains the colonial/modern system. In turn, that racial classification translated into the production of knowledges that reified such colonial difference. Thus, the Eurocentric and modern scientific knowledge was seen as superior and more advanced than that of the considered 'primitive, uncivilized and barbarian' colonial subjects. As a result, the coloniality of power/knowledge was naturalized to the point that many colonial subjects internalized – as well as instrumentalized – the modern imaginary in their beings, for instance, aspiring to whitening by scaling up in the social ladder, rejecting their languages, knowledges, cultures and practices, and accommodating to the dispositive of power established during the colony and reproduced after independence. In Republican times the colonial difference has been reproduced through politics of identity controlled by the nation-state – that do not affect the national identity – under the discourse of integrating those racialized and marginalized subalterns (Wade, 2010).

Thus by coloniality of power/knowledge/being in this text, I refer to the colonial matrix of power that established a racial classification that traversed all dimensions of social life,

including the political, economic, and cultural relations, and that also was enmeshed in the bodies and minds of the people (both racialized and non-racialized subjects) in post-colonial times. By decoloniality therefore is understood the process that tries to erode and surpass those power structures and opens room for alternative ways of living/knowing/being.

#### 4. Poststructuralism and decolonial studies in dialogue

In this study, poststructuralist and decolonial thought are conflated in order to explain how discourses and practices of peace (and war) reproduce certain subjectivities that were first imposed during colonial times and later reproduce and naturalized. In order to do that, I conflate the precepts of discourse theory to explain the openness of meanings and how they get closed in particular junctures of time through hegemonic articulations. And, in addition, I draw from decolonial studies to explore how subaltern actors defy those hegemonic discourses and make room for alternative modes of making and building peace. Poststructuralism is also helpful to explain how the (re)production of identities happens and decolonial studies offers a framework to understand the world-system in which certain identities are produced to keep some hierarchies and the status quo that privileges the elites. As both schools deal with the margins and the livings and experiences in the interstices, they both are useful to analyze not only the dynamics of power at the macro level (dependence theory between center-periphery, exploitation, conquest, dispossession) but also the *meso* level (governmentality of the state over the population to make it fit in a particular modern standard of being) and at the micro level (embodiment of the colonial habitus).



In this line, when we look to the promotion of peace in the periphery of the modern/colonial system, peace acts as an *emptied signifier*, whose negativity has been filled by the hegemonic discourse of the liberal peace after the end of the Cold War. The openness of the ontological dimension of peace is related to the lack of a grounding essence. Drawing from poststructuralism, the essentialist view of an ultimate and universal peace, whether this is obtained through democracy, institutions, free-trade, international law, social justice, or emancipation, is questioned (Richmond, 2008). Likewise, the metanarrative of the ‘inevitability of war’ is also put into question: war is seen as a product of power relations, challenging the essentialism of war as a given (Foucault, 1997; Jabri, 2006, 1996). Both meanings and discourses of peace and war are the result of social constructions, constituted by relational processes and hegemonic dynamics. Thus, to understand the plurality of peaces, we need to consider that there are as many peaces as there are peoples, cultures, and contexts.

In this line, the combination of poststructuralism with decolonialism allow us to focus on the power dynamics involved in the many definitions of peace: thus, those with the ability and means to secure a critical mass of support temporarily fix a particular meaning of peace, in a particular context, from a particular class and gender perspective, and in a particular geographical area. The hegemonic movement has implications in practice, such as in the implementation of policies, the definition of peace agreements, the peacebuilding process and so forth, and implies the neglect of a plurality of alternative peaces,

that are produced as non-existent.<sup>1</sup> In turn, the openness of meanings allows space to counter-hegemonic movements and practices. The decolonial approach allows us to explore how the coloniality of power/knowledge/being become first hegemonic and has been resisted from the bottom. In addition, and contrary to poststructuralism, the decolonial approach opens room to explore new possibilities of co-existence of a plurality of worldviews, peace dynamics, ways of being and feeling.

## 5. Liberal peace as a modern/colonial product

The recent influence of liberal peace is found on the idea of positive peace introduced by Johan Galtung (1964, 1969) as peace that addresses structural, cultural, and physical violence involved in a conflict. The notion of positive peace was then coopted and articulated by the United Nations and multilateral organizations based on the idea that “a market democracy, that is, a liberal democratic polity and a market-oriented economy” is the best support for the building and sustainability of peace (Paris, 1997: 56). *The Agenda for Peace* that the General Secretary of the United Nations Boutros Ghali introduced in 1992 retook these ideas and developed an agenda for peacebuilding in war-torn countries that would take into account economic inequalities, social injustice and political oppression (Benavides Vanegas, 2010). The foreign interventions worked under conditionalities and impose a one-size fits all paradigm. Yet, the liberal peace approach misses the fact that the blueprint of colonialism very often underlies the roots of the conflict, including the coloniality of power/knowledge/being that traverses the ongoing

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<sup>1</sup> According to Santos, non-existence is produced when an entity is disqualified and considered invisible, non-comprehensible, and disposable (Santos, 2010: 22).

nation-state building process, the antagonisms of identities/alterities, the division of labor force and the control of means and modes of production.

A decolonial reading and deconstruction of the ideology of the liberal peace reveals the matrix of power that sustains it. The global discursive articulation of liberal peace as hegemonic appeared after the Cold War, but it has its roots in the constitution of the modernity/coloniality paradigm. Liberal peace is seen as a hegemonic articulation that reproduces the coloniality of power that is still present in the global Western-modern system, and that currently essentializes capitalism, neoliberalism, and security of the nation-state as its trident. Defined as a top-down intervention, mainly imposed by liberal institutions of the international system, liberal peace is based on the idea that liberal democracy, economic development, individual human rights, global governance, rule of law, and neoliberal free markets ensure social progress, stability, and security as part of the matrix of peace (Richmond, 2008: 8-14). The naturalization of this discourse is understood as part of the liberal project which draws from modern and colonial thought, and praises individualism, rationality, equality, free trade, international treaties, and institutions as its core values (Duffield, 2007; Mac Ginty, 2010; MacGinty and Richmond, 2009; Paris, 2002; Pugh, 2005).

The promotion and importation of this model into the periphery, that is in post-

colonial states, implies the reproduction of the coloniality of power/knowledge/being by keeping the bases and ideology of the modern/colonial system that establishes profound abyssal lines<sup>2</sup> between those that fit into the hegemonic standard and those that not. The modern project of liberal peacebuilding has also been used by national elites to perpetuate a political, economic, and social status quo against the racialized other.

## 6. Democracy, security, and development as floating signifiers of peace

Through decolonial thought and discourse theory, I now turn to deconstruct some of the core elements of the liberal peace to show its particularism, instability, and colonial matrix. The term *floating signifiers*, from DT, allow us to explore how discourses of liberal peace articulate and naturalize several other meanings/discourses around itself. Thus, liberal peace is a nodal point in the discourse that gives meaning to other signifiers, called *floating signifiers*, that are articulated in the same discourse. Floating signifiers are considered signifiers which gain different meanings in different contexts (or discourses). For instance, signifiers such as democracy, security, and development, among others, are overdetermined meanings, in the sense that they have many different understandings depending on the context they are used or how they are mobilized; yet, that over-

<sup>2</sup> The concept 'abyssal line' has been developed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos and multiple decolonial thinkers to refer to the "system of visible and invisible distinctions, the latter constituting the foundation of the former. The invisible distinctions are established through radical lines that divide social reality into two universes: the universe 'on this side of the line' and the universe on the 'other side of the line'. The division is such that the other side of the line disappears, becomes non-existent, and in fact is produced as 'non-existent'. Non-existent means "not existing in any relevant or understandable way of being." (Santos, 2014: 21).



determination gets restricted when attached to a particular nodal point. For instance, development is interpreted as economic growth when attached to a discourse of liberal peace but could be seen as the means to secure particular forms of living when referring to a particular local peace.

### **6.1. Deconstructing the perpetual democratic peace**

The hegemonic discourse of liberal peace rests on the assumption that the democratization of war-torn societies would bring stability, respect for human rights, rule of law, and an efficient market economy. The goodness of democracy is taken for granted and exported as the solution to the periphery (Iraq and Afghanistan, recently) under the promise of a perpetual peace (Mignolo, 2008). From an international point of view, the expansion of democracy is expected to also bring stability at the international level by preventing the wage of war between alike systems of government (hypothesis of the democratic peace theory). The articulation of the hypothesis draws from modern Kantian ideal of a 'perpetual peace', which would be achieved among democratic states, republics, that share the same values and norms, and submit cooperatively to international treaties. Peace is seen hence as the modern phenomenon that overcomes war and the irrational (Jabri, 2010: 67).

This hegemonic metanarrative precludes the contingent, historical, and normative aspects related to its configuration. The historicizing of the concepts included in the democratic peace theory, those of war and democracy, allows to see that the democratic peace theory takes democracy and war as trans-historical concepts, neglecting their different meanings and variation across time and place,

the contexts in which these concepts gained meaning, and how it has evolved (Barkawi and Laffey, 1999). For instance, globalization has worked as a historical process that helped to expand the democratic values. Likewise, "global processes of colonization and decolonization had a direct impact in the development of democracy as a form of social and political organization" (Barkawi and Laffey, 1999: 409). Precisely in Latin-America, the notion of democracy and democratizations processes have been attached to the modernization project (Dussel, 2006; Mignolo, 2008, and Quijano, 2001). Not only global processes have set the conditions for the expansion of democracy and war, but also the internal realities of each country.

In addition, the democratic peace theory reproduces the modern/colonial project of the nation-state. The state seems to be the articulator of democracy and peace, which implies a top-down perspective, neglecting the alternative voices building or promoting peace and democracy at the regional, local or community levels. In particular, those models of democracy and peace tend to follow the standards of democracy "set by a comparison with the United States and Europe as democracies *par excellence*" (Morozov, 2013: 9). The Western hegemonic view of democracy based on good governance is another hegemonic articulation that excludes the plurality of democratic models (demodiversity, as coined by Santos and Mendes, 2017) and the deepening of democracy through more civil participation, and less exclusion of minorities. For instance, plurinational approaches such as the one of Ecuador and Bolivia represent a challenge to the univocal, and sometimes repressive, nation-state that tends to assimilate but not recognize other nations, peoples, and cultures (see Santos, 2010). Thus, from a decolonial point of view, the binary

democratic/non-democratic states are another discourse of control of the periphery according to the modern/colonial project.

## 6.2. Deconstructing the Political Economy of Peace

Along with the democratic system, one of the floating signifiers that is articulated around liberal peace and in turn gets signified by it, is the idea of development and economic growth associated with the post-conflict era. The premise is that the lack of violence would attract more private investments, open room for new businesses, and the costs of operations in terms of security would go down rendering wider margins of profits. Yet, there are always actors that profit from conflict and even try to spoil peace process in order to keep the status quo of war that favors their interests.

This metanarrative about the economic effects of peace and also on the belief that neoliberal policies such as open economies and markets will bring about economic growth tends to neglect the structural violence embedded in the capitalist system that privileges economic growth over the reduction of inequality. In addition, many economic reforms promoted in the peacebuilding phase are linked to economic interests from the North, thus creating more dependency of the periphery (Pugh, 2005; Pugh, Cooper & Turner, 2008). In addition, many times the economic reforms are put in place without taking into account the local economies and alternative development projects. As a result, these local initiatives do not receive any resources and get suffocated by the hegemonic economic model. In addition, the resurgence of violence in the post-conflict period many times is related to the process of accumulation and rapid economic growth (Ahearne, 2009; Selby, 2008). Also, the arrival of peace can ease the

security conditions for multinational companies to invest in territories of peasants, indigenous, and black people, that during the war were preserved.

In this sense and in line with post-development theory, the articulation of discourses linking peace and development hide the interests of the elites and changes the modern/colonial discourse of ‘civilized/uncivilized’ to that of ‘developed/underdeveloped’, reinforcing the coloniality of the being. Development is another modern/Western social construction that serves the political and economic power to keep their dominant role at the expense of the invented subject, “the underdeveloped”, usually equated with the colonial and racialized subject, be it indigenous, black, or peasants, in the Americas (Escobar, 2012). The rational logic of progress is imbricated in the discourse of development and it implies that the modern and scientific reason has “a fundamental role in the improvement of human existence in almost all its dimensions” (Escobar, 2000: 43). As a result, all alternative development initiatives are downgraded and rejected by the hegemonic view of the capitalist system.

Both decolonial thought and post-development analysis uncover the interests behind the knowledges that subjugate the colonized and underdeveloped people and keep a system based on asymmetrical power relations through coloniality of power (Omar, 2012; Sharp & Briggs, 2006). Of particular importance for the discourse analysis of peace and development is the epistemological gap that exists between those in power positions and outside of it, because when subalterns try to talk about their development with the neoliberal institutions or actors, they do not use the same scientific frameworks (Leckev, 2014), and the lack of intercultural translation between epistemic constructions or

knowledges impedes a horizontal dialogue (Santos, 2002, 2007). In this vein, liberal peace assimilates the ‘other’ rather than understanding it and establishing an intercultural dialogue.

### 6.3. Deconstructing the securitization of peace

Discourses of development have also been interlinked with those of security and peace. The mantra “you cannot have development without security or security without development” has become a truism of the post-Cold War period” (Duffield, 2010: 66). This liberal premise has shaped one of the core foundations of liberal peace: the nexus development-security (Dillon and Reid, 2009), which was consolidated in the 1990s when the narrow economic dimension of development restricted to economic growth was widened by the United Nations Development Program (1994) taking a people-centered approach, as it did the concept of security, which adopted the adjective ‘human’ security to include many other dimensions (UN Trust Fund for Human Security, 2003).

Yet, the discourse of the nexus security-development is not a new pattern; since colonial times, the ‘uncivilized’ and ‘barbarians’ were seen as a menace to the security of the patterns of accumulation of the colony, and therefore they were disciplined through behavioral manuals, evangelization, and forced work (Castro-Gómez, 2000; Segato, 2007; Martínez-Andrade, 2008). More recently, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the US launched the anti-poverty strategy called “Alliance for Progress” in the 1960s, aiming at tackling poverty in Latin America as it was perceived to be the hotbed of communism (Meyer, 2016). Seen as a focus of insecurity, poverty has been treated as a threat to be securitized by

governments (Hadiwinata, 2004). Hence, development has been attached to security while underdevelopment has been equated with insecurity (Duffield, 2001). The link between poverty, security and development is also present in many other security phenomena such as terrorism, organized crime, drug trafficking, and migration.

In many of these cases discourses of security render themselves in insecurity performances – meaning practices that bring about insecurity for civilians (Echavarría, 2013: 4). Many times, civil peace is derived from practices of war to control and administrate life and death, and the population in general. In this regard, the waging of war and peace have been interpreted as biopolitical governmentalities, deeming that the liberal way of war works as *necropolitics*, implying that the liberal modern state determines what life means and what type of life should live (Dillon and Reid, 2001) and die (Mbembé and Meintjes, 2003). Thus, liberal power pursues security through a series of techniques derived from war that penetrate and organize liberal subjects (Reid, 2004). The underlying critique is that liberal war is justified as a mechanism to bring about liberal peace, and many times it ends up deploying a perpetual war.

From a decolonial point of view, the referent objects of security had to be widened and include other non-state actors and place the individual, and also the community, as the minimum unit of analysis, as critical theorists of security have done (Booth, 2004; Fierke, 2007; Smith, 1999; Buzan, Wæver, & Wilde, 1998: 3-14; Hansen, 2006, 1997); but must also incorporate the local people as performers and thinkers of security, rather than only as unit of analysis. Plus, a decolonial take on peace implies that the colonial subjects are re-signified as non-security problems, and taken to be part of the solution.

## 7. Resisting the colonial difference of the liberal peace

Through the colonality of power/knowledge/being of the liberal peace, discourses of peace, security, development, and democracy (re)produce certain identities and alterities, reinserting the colonial footprint through the subjects and their bodies. This means that peace as a discourse is relational and performative. Indeed, both discourses of peace and war are intimately constitutive and constituted of/by discourses of the self and the other. In this section, I address how subalterns resist the reification/reproduction of the colonial difference that is embedded in the liberal peace.

The production of subjectivities emanates from two sources of power: the hegemonic power of the modern worldview (including the liberal peace) that classifies people between developed/underdeveloped, civilized/uncivilized, ethnic/white, threat/ally, etc.; and the disciplinary power that, in line with the hegemonic ideology, imprints the subjects and bodies through the production of knowledges and the exercise of practices in order to make them fit in the dualistic and standardized worldview. In this context, local peoples have resisted the hegemonic liberal peace, through the development of alternative daily practices (McGee, 2017; Barreto, 2013), different knowledges, and ontological policies (Escobar 2015, 2012) that challenge the disciplinary power of the liberal peace. However, I try to go beyond those studies that reify or romanticize local peaces as contained realities that can be articulated in total coexistence within a pluriverse, for not considering the matrix of colonial power that traverses them and their interrelations with the hegemonic practice of peace. In a sense, these approaches may depoliticize the dynamics of

peace by neglecting the power relations at play among different interpretations of peace, even when they can coexist or get along. Many of these particulars develop their notion of peace in contrast to or in opposition to that of the neoliberal state and, therefore, the particular perspective can only be understood by considering the other, and that both are co-constitutive.

## 8. Subjectivation through peace and war discourses

Discourses of peace and war are intimately related to discourses about us and them. Such discourses affect, shape, produce, and reproduce identities about ‘the Self(ves)’ and ‘the other(s).’ In turn, those discursive identities have the agency and capacity to affect, shape, produce, and reproduce narratives of war and peace. The subject is exposed to multiple discourses and has the capacity to reproduce, embody, but also transform and change them in totally different ways. The ability to transform subjectivities is linked to their performative character that implies the repetition or *iterability* – in Derridean terms – of a particular discourse (Butler, 1990: xxv; Edkins and Pin-Fat, 1999: 8). The subject performs or reproduces over time particular practices associated with discourses of identities; the need for continuous repetition shows that there is not an inherent identity that is expressed but rather a person needs to reproduce those practices in an ongoing basis to reaffirm a particular identity. In that repetition, there is space for creativity, for exploring new ways, new forms, new practices: there is space for agency, for “re-embodiment of the subjectivating norm” (Butler, 1997b:100; 1990, 1997a; Butler and Athanasiou, 2013; Kelz, 2015).

In a way, identities are practices of signification open to resignification and re-contextualization. The bodies are not seen as inert masses but as fields of power, interconnected to their minds, and “invested by power relations” (Shawn and Shapiro, 2011: 32); and at the same time as enablers of sites of resistance (Shinko: 2012). The embodiment of resistance refers to the body as a space of confrontation to the infliction of power and for the enactment of power as well. The dynamics of resistance, as a result, produce new subject-positions within subjectivities, which evolve and are open to modifications.

In addition, the relational character of identities implies that are constructed in opposition to other subjects/objects. In discourses of war, the construction of the Other is often positioned as “a radically threatening Other,” creating as a result divisive or abyssal lines between the self and the other (Connolly, 1991). A common political practice is to conceal the hegemonic and exclusionary operation behind the abyssal lines in order to present those lines as natural. Therefore, the process that naturalizes the construction of identities and differences is political and always reversible. In addition, the idea of a unique radical Otherness is also a construction; the fact is that “identity construction involves not a single Other-Self dichotomy but a series of related yet slightly different juxtapositions” (Hansen, 2006: 33). Thus, there is the possibility of a variety of non-selves, in addition to the extreme Other, seen as the most different one.

Discourses about us/them tend to be naturalized in times of war in order to create loyalties, as well as justifications for waging war and protracting it. The counter-hegemonic or resistance discourses are then portrayed “as deviant or unnatural” (Torfing, 1999: 123). The same happens in times of peace, and those who

oppose the hegemonic view are considered a threat. This play of labels to identify and represent the other in peace and war discourses is enmeshed in a dynamic of power and resistance common to hegemonic practices of articulation. Drawing from Foucault, as Butler states, the subject is produced by power relations and in turn productive of power relations (Butler, 1997b: 10).

Both the meanings of peace (and war) and identities are constantly renegotiated in a related process. Those constructions or perceptions of the ‘Other’ get a meaning or another depending on the power relations at play to articulate a dominant discourse. Foucault’s genealogy of the liberal war shows how race has been used to separate society into two categories, locating the Western, civilized race as intrinsically superior to the other, considered as an enemy or adversary. While Foucault situated the beginning of the control of subjectivity in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, from his European situated knowledge, Latin American decolonial works locate it in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Castro, 2005: 57-58). The conquest of the ‘Western Indies’ represented not only the dispossession of land but also the dispossession of identities of both native peoples and people brought from Africa as slaves. The liberal peace, aiming to imprint the modernity project in the periphery (of the world system and at the interior of a postcolonial country), thus, reproduces the colonial difference of the racialized subject. This liberal project aims at expanding the legitimacy of the government and the sovereignty of the nation-state to the confines of the national territory by reproducing the exclusionary patterns of a univocal nation-state.



## 9. Pluriversal and counter-hegemonic resisting peaces

Since colonial times, the articulation of hegemonic worldviews and its constitutive side of coloniality of power/knowledge/being have faced a multiplicity of resisting practices, knowledges, as well as ontologies or ways of being. Likewise, a plurality of alternative, local, situated, and particular peaces have emerged in opposition to liberal peace discourses and practices. Given the shortcomings and failures of many liberal peace interventions, the international organizations started to put emphasis on the engagement of the locals.

However, those attempts to include local people most of the times remained symbolic gestures and implied cooption strategies. In general, the international-supported peace operations tend to impose Western methods that limit “the space for alternative approaches to peace-making and that, rather than a co-existence of both forms of peace-making, we are more likely to see the co-option of indigenous and traditional approaches by Western approaches” (Mac Ginty, 2008: 139). The involvement of the local may become a checklist point but there is not a deep reflection on what are the different views in place (epistemologies) and which could be the points of rapprochement (intercultural translation) and/or co-existence (pluriversality). Yet, as Richmond (2015, 2011) points out, liberal peace is always contested and accommodated at the local level, bringing about hybrid forms of peace that intertwine the international model of peace and the grassroots understandings of peace.

During the peacebuilding phase, the involvement of social sectors is seen as a way to increase peacebuilding effectiveness, and also boost decentralization and local capacity

and ownership (Leonardsson and Rudd, 2015). From a more critical perspective, rather than technical, the involvement of civilians could also represent a “means of emancipation and inclusion of local agency” (Leonardsson and Rudd, 2015: 825). Yet, given the risk of romanticizing or reifying emancipatory metanarratives around ‘indigenous’ and ‘traditional’ peacemaking/building, it should not be neglected that at the local level there are also dynamics of power-resistance underlying the communities’ dynamics (Richmond, 2009b, 2011; Mac Ginty, 2010, 2008). The problem is that these approaches tend to see locals as a homogenous group that share a common understanding of peace (and war, democracy, security, and development) and consequently prioritize the dialogue with some leaders of the communities. Thus, there is a risk of reproducing a dichotomist view of peace, divided into the national and the local elites, hence suppressing the variety of peaces and the scale of greys between both the top and the bottom perspectives.

The decoloniality of peace would imply the rethinking of the nation-state, given that postcolonial states tend to constitute and reproduce themselves through violent apparatus of exclusion and cooption, based on race, as well as class and gender hierarchies. For the case of Latin America, the project of nation-state building was based on the exclusionary discourse of *mestizaje* (mixed-race) that made invisible all those social groups that did not fit the standard pattern of European-descendants. In line with that, the political, economic, and cultural system was designed in the image and likeness of the modern and western world. Thus, many other contesting projects have arisen from the bottom-up to subvert the status quo and gain a space within the nation-state through identity,



multicultural, or intercultural projects;<sup>3</sup> or rather have aligned a chain of demands (logic of equivalence, according to DT)<sup>4</sup> at the local level from many different sectors and social groups in order to challenge and revert the given model of nation-state, as took place in Bolivia and Ecuador, introducing the concept of plurinationality (Santos, 2010).

In many cases, alternative forms of peacemaking/building come to light under the structure and systems of the (postcolonial) nation-state, and therefore, more than alternatives, are constitutive parts when observed from a relational perspective. Most of the times, local initiatives do not gather enough support to request a national dialogue about nation-building, and their resistance takes a low profile within the established system, eroding it from the interior through daily practices of civil resistance and non-violence, such as non-cooperation or the establishment of zones or communities of peace (Masullo, 2016; Mitchell and Hanock, 2012).

These counter-hegemonic peaces do not necessarily attempt to revert the hegemony, but seek pluriversality, as the Zapatistas put it, “a world where many worlds fit” (*un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos*) (Escobar,

2012; Mignolo, 2007). Pluriversality encompasses a plurality of ontologies, worldviews, *saberes*, and practices. It is a decolonial project because it redistributes power among different social sectors and goes beyond the precepts of the universality of modernity and its civilizing discourse (Grosfoguel, 2011, 2007). Yet, the aim of pluriversality is still a desideratum in many cases, given the endurance of universalist modern projects, and also due to the own power relations at the local level, and their inter-local conflicts. Pluriversality is thus more of a utopia than a reality; it is a project whose aim is to question such universal worldview and open the space for new others, although there is tension in the process.

Avoiding the perils of romanticization of local narratives, it is important to remark that local knowledge is not essentially a superior epistemology; rather the decolonial take tries to reveal other significations of peace and development, rejecting the one-world view as universal and opening the space to different alternatives that are not dichotomized or subordinated to the privileged (western) one.

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<sup>3</sup> In the 1990 decade, a variety of countries in Latin America constitutionally recognized the identity and cultural rights of indigenous peoples and black communities (Benavides Vanegas, 2010; Yashar, 1999, 1998; Wade, 2010, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> In order to explain the power-resistance dynamics, Discourse Theory uses the concepts of logic of equivalence to refer to the process through which different subject positions (particularities) can be articulated in a chain of equivalence (made of particular demands with a final common goal) dividing the society in two poles – at least – by establishing a political frontier (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). That political frontier creates social antagonisms (Torfing, 1999: 129), which in turn explain the impossibility of society to be a totality (Laclau, 1990). This divisive line is materialized by showing that what is inside a chain of equivalence is constituted as such in opposition to what is outside. Social antagonisms are ever present in society as there is an endless struggle for hegemony over meaning, but the political frontiers dividing two sides are always unstable and subject to modification. Those potential modifications reveal that although social antagonism is constant in societies, the antagonisms change over time.

### 9.1. Ethnic peace in Colombia as a decolonial project?

In the case of Colombia, in the last twenty years, local peace initiatives have proliferated (González, 2010). Massive demonstrations for peace, civilian peace mandates, communities of peace, rural peasant reserve zones (ZRC, for its Spanish acronym, *Zonas de Reserva Campesina*), Peace Labs, indigenous *mingas*, among others, are only some of the civilians' peacebuilding practices sparked from the bottom-up. That multiplicity of local initiatives of peace is only a reflection of the ongoing re-articulation of meanings of peace in the country. The signature of the Peace Agreement between the government and the guerrilla group FARC-EP in 2016 and the implementation phase since then has also widened the margins for the discussion of the understanding of peace and peacebuilding in the country.

In particular, multiple ethnic-territorial organizations of indigenous and black people managed to include an Ethnic Chapter in the Peace Agreement in the last months of the

negotiation (Rodríguez Iglesias, 2018a, 2018b). Its inclusion was a historical benchmark in the long history of resistance against the established and hegemonic powers and the armed conflict in their territories.<sup>5</sup> Through their practices of resistance, survival, and peacebuilding, they have aimed to decolonize not only the oppressed people, but also society as a whole, changing the power structures and the hegemonic imaginary about Afro and indigenous communities. Their agency to do it was the result of many lessons learned, their capacity to self-organize and join forces among different marginalized groups, by establishing a common horizon among subalterns. Their ultimate goal was to ensure that the Peace Agreement and the implementation phase respected their territorial and ethnic rights, and the peace policies were as inclusive as possible and had an ethnic focus.

Building peace, for them, has never meant just the end of the armed conflict, but the end of the exclusion, discrimination, oppression, and violence that have suffered since the establishment of a racial, classist and

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<sup>5</sup> There is a long list of decolonial practices (of resistance and resilience) that they have been conducting since colonial times: we can mention the runaway slaves (*cimarronismo*) that established their own communities and self-government far from the colonial power; the appropriation of the figure of *resguardo* as a way to resist the colony and keep their languages, costumes, and cultures intact; the fight to recover their ancestral lands since the 1930s; the organization of ethnic-territorial organizations to protect their territories, lives, and culture; the recovery of their colonial memories and the nurture of their oral traditions from generation to generation; the establishment of peace communities – those that have declared their neutrality before the conflict and rejected to collaborate with any armed group – to 'stay put' against the armed groups (Masullo, 2015), whether it was the army, the paramilitaries or different guerrilla groups; the development of indigenous guards, as a non-armed self-protection mechanism for their communities and territories; the organization of civil strikes and *mingas* to demand the satisfaction of basic needs; the establishment of alliances with the Church, NGOs, and international organizations to strengthen their ability to defend their territories and rights; and even negotiating directly with the armed groups, such as the *nasas* did with the FARC in the 1990s in the Tolima region.

gendered stratification of society. As members of the Black Communities Process (*Proceso de Comunidades Negras*) put it:

*The political-epistemological commitment of peace is for us an opportunity for a true intercultural nation, a true multi-ethnic nation, a new perspective of social-ecological-economic integration that takes sufficient distance from capitalist development. [...] our hopes are not in a more benevolent and modernizing capital. [...] An economy for good living, frugal life and life care is an economy that can make war not to return to our territories* (PCN, 2000: 6, quoted in Escobar, 2015).

The bottom line of their peace claims is the decoloniality of being: to remove those abyssal lines that impede interculturality, respect and co-existence of a plurality of cultures, ways of living and being, talking, and developing. They want to be treated and recognized as equal citizens, and not as enemies of the nation or, even worse, as non-existent. As Escobar (2015, 2012) argues, ethnic people are leading ontological resistances to survive the modern project. As ethnic people put it, they are not against development, rather they want to benefit from development according to their ways of life:<sup>6</sup>

*Social organizations are not against development, this is how the FARC and*

*the government have seen us, and it is not that, but we want it to be a development according to our realities. When our approaches are not taken into account, the projects fail because it is not the will of the community. It is not the same when it is the community that demands and asks, because that is how they identify with that project.*<sup>7</sup>

As an adviser of ONIC, the largest indigenous organization of Colombia, told me: ‘When we refer to life plans or ethno-development plans, they [elites] say that we do not want hospitals or roads.’<sup>8</sup> This narrative of indigenous and blacks as obstacles for development has been nourished for centuries, and suggests that these communities live in poverty and scarce conditions because they reject development. On the contrary, they have been asking for a good health, education and communication systems to a State that treats their regions as empty of people and has unattended them for centuries. Many ethnic communities do reject development projects that mean extractivism from their territories, and thus, they have developed ethno-development plans for Afro and *planes de vida and salvaguarda*<sup>9</sup> (safeguard and life plans) for indigenous peoples that go in line with the concept of *buen vivir* (living well), a term that refers to a totally different understanding of development and that is used mainly by ethnic, rural, and peasant communities in Latin America.

<sup>6</sup> See chapter 1 for the discussion on how contested the word development is.

<sup>7</sup> Interview, Alexis Rodríguez, representative of COCOMACIA, black community council of the Middle Atrato River; Quibdó, 24 January 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Declaration in the seminar ‘Peace Studies, a decolonial look’ organized by the Javeriana University; Bogotá, September 27, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Social and administrative agreements that establish actions, recommendations and guidelines to guarantee the cultural heritage of indigenous people as well as their existence.

The signifier *buen vivir* questions the linear growth, progress, extractive models and other forms of accumulation, and introduces a different world view that values food sovereignty, self-governance, autonomy, harmony with nature and the territory, and defense of the land of the peoples. The resisting narrative of *buen vivir* means the defense of the territory against the extractive multinationals that cause violence, displacement of people from their territories, pollution of territory and water, and jeopardizes food sovereignty of the communities.

Along with this alternative development, their seek for peace it is not only a matter of putting end to the armed conflict but also the fact that the survival of ethnic peoples and their territories is at stake. They have been dispossessed not only from their territories, but also from their beings, from what they are, and what they think.<sup>10</sup> Peace, for ethnic people, means also truth, and they have recently launched an Inter-Ethnic Commission of Peace, in the framework of the recent peace process, that not only addresses the narratives of the conflict but also goes back to the colonial wounds, to show the country how slavery and serfdom of blacks and indigenous have marked what they are today. “That is why the Truth Commission must make a decolonial process. We have to recognize that the history of Colombia has not been told yet. We do not know all that has happened in this country. And above all, it should be interpreted through the difference”.<sup>11</sup> In the same vein, the historical Afro leader of CNOA (National conference of Afro-Colombian organizations) Emigdio Cuesta contends:<sup>12</sup>

*[...] for the Afro-descendant people, peace means the recognition of their rights, of healing through history, through the recognition of the contribution we have made to this country and with an adequate inclusion of Afro people in all the country's developments. They must negotiate with us, meet our needs, create tools that allow us to be but in a dignified way. I am not talking about giving them abundance, as the Gospel says, but until now the only abundant thing is death.*

The decoloniality of being through peace is then a way to overcome the violence that has been a continuum in the subjectivation of black and indigenous communities in the last 500 years. For indigenous and blacks, war and peace can only be understood as a continuum of violence that started in colonial times. The internal armed conflict and the neoliberal economic model are other manifestations of violence through which ethnic communities continue to be massacred, displaced, and abused. Local and daily peace initiatives, processes and practices are just another path to decolonize the imaginaries that have relegated these populations to the exteriority of the nation-state. Peace is then not an ideal end, but a means to break that continuum and create spaces to redefine and resituate their own subjectivities, as ongoing practices of identification.

<sup>10</sup> Interview, Alejandra Llano, ONIC delegate; Bogotá, 16 March 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Idem.

<sup>12</sup> Interview, Emigdio Cuesta, Secretary CNOA; Bogotá, 5 March 2018.

## 10. Conclusions

This article has set a decolonial theoretical framework to the liberal peace. Liberal peace was analyzed as a product of the modern-Western global project based on capitalism, liberalism, and the security of the nation-state. The Western international community has promoted and exported this model to the periphery of the system, seen as failed states, barbarian civilizations, and inferior cultures. The liberal peace, thus, aims to portray the model of the nation-state building of the center as the *sine qua non condition* for the world stability and prosperity. Liberal peace discourses additionally rest on a liberal understanding of democracy, development, and security, that go hand in hand with liberal peace interventions. This approach reproduces the coloniality of power/knowledge/being embedded in the modernity project through the exclusion of the other, be it inferiorized by race, class or gender. That matrix of coloniality was established during the colonial times, and reproduce after the independence of the countries through the nation-state building projects that kept the elites, their worldviews, and knowledges as superior to all the rest.

This hegemonic discourse of the liberal peace, however, has been subject of multiple counter-hegemonic decolonial practices, discourses, and actions from the global South/

external periphery. These resisting and alternative peaces challenge the universality of the coloniality of power by surfacing daily peace practices, initiatives, and knowledge others that put into question a one-world perspective. From their local realities and knowledges, these local people embody the suffering of the war and the coloniality associated, and re-signify it by conceptualizing another model of nation-state that is inclusive and as far as possible pluriversal. The aim is to achieve the coexistence of the plurality of beings and their worldviews, but it cannot be neglected that even at the local level, the power dynamics are at play and sometimes different models clash with each other. Thus, intercultural translation is also needed at the bottom level in order to align interests versus the hegemonic exclusionary system.

In the case of Colombia, different ethnic-territorial organizations have worked for peace as the process by which, not only peace puts an end to the armed conflict, but also the fact that ethnic people, both indigenous and black communities, overcome the long-standing oppression and exclusion that started with the colony back in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and lasted to the present in different forms including the internal armed-conflict and the structural violence of the neoliberal economic model in place.

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