A postcolonial critique of liberal peacekeeping theory

Northern Statism at the Margins: A postcolonial critique of liberal peacekeeping theory.

Today, ' humanitarian intervention' or so-called ' muscular' peacekeeping occurs in contexts known as ' complex emergencies', which combine elements of civil war, state collapse, human rights violations, ' criminality' and humanitarian crisis. Often, local agents have formed vested interests connected to external powers, which induce them to reproduce situations of emergency. Mark Duffield aptly refers to the ' security-development nexus', in which global assemblages of crisis management are connected to the local reproduction of crisis. This nexus deploys peacekeeping and peacebuilding as alternatives to recognising the impact of neoliberalism and imperialism on development (****). Duffield's analysis resonates with the idea of crisis-management in the work of Gayatri Spivak (1990: 97-8), who portrays crisis as a constant situation in a postcolonial world where the North constantly wards off the traumatic effects of colonialism. While clear from official documents, this status of responses to the South as crisis management is not apparent in the fantasmatic discourse of public pronouncements and media coverage. In this context, it becomes crucial to the critique of colonial power to simultaneously see the process of crisis management and its ideological construction to repress the colonial trauma. An examination of liberal theories of peacekeeping must show their complicity in both these processes.

This paper will pursue an approach of ' seeing together' in relation to liberal theory, by reading this theory together with the intervention in Somalia. It will thus seek to draw out the complicities between false and oppressive

assumptions in theory and colonial actions (and failures) in practice. The main purpose of this paper will be to establish that liberal and instrumentalist peacekeeping theorists share a number of colonial assumptions. While drawing on postcolonial studies, the approach will also engage with ethnography, anarchism and cultural studies as means of providing multiple angles from which to see situations. Multivocity is deployed to approximate a complex situation by viewing it from a number of different directions at once, each viewpoint being taken as an incomplete perspective. Postcolonial theory will here be shadowed firstly by Richard J. F. Day's anarchist critique of liberalism, to demonstrate the complicity and interchangeability of colonial and statist standpoints. Secondly, it will be traced through reflections on the intervention in Somalia by anthropologists and postcolonial theorists. While recognising the danger of epistemological violence in the Northern anthropologist's representation of the Other, such accounts are useful in exposing the structural gap between the theoretical framing of the situation and the situation as it appears from a more nuanced engagement. There are doubtless also gaps between the anthropologist's reconstruction and the immanent discourse of everyday life, but for the purposes of this paper it is necessary only that the anthropological account be closer to this discourse than is that of the normative theorists.

The article focuses on three related liberal theorists: Nicholas Wheeler, C. A. J. Coady and Fernando Tesón. The theorists discussed here are similar in their general frame, though varying in the degree of subtlety with which they express it. Coady offers a more subtle theory that the other authors, but his subtlety supplements rather than overriding the performative effectivity of

liberal discourse. In this article, we treat them as part of a single discourse, and trace their colonial logic through a series of five interlinked assumptions which can be traced through all the theorists discussed.

1. Northern privilege as universalism

The first problematic assumption is the view that a desituated Northern agent can assert and establish the content of a universal ethics. Most often this is constructed in opposition to a straw-man of relativism. It is not, however, the universalist stance which is most crucial to their colonial status. Rather, it is the fact that they believe universally true positions can be established by reference solely to Northern experiences and values. Their approach is thus colonial in foreclosing the need for dialogue with difference. Northern standpoints are privileged by means of a separation between marked and unmarked terms. The unmarked term of the civilised world becomes the exclusive referent for justifications of approaches to the ' uncivilised' other.   Hence, the ' civilised' world is ethically tautological: its relation to its Others is justified by its own values, which are the relevant referent because it is ' civilised, a status it possesses by virtue of its values. This reinforces the view that, despite the tenuousness of its moral realism, liberal cosmopolitanism is a paradigmatic ' royal science', seeking to give a certain Law to its readers to provide a stable basis for moral order. As Richard Day writes of Kymlicka, liberal theory produces ' an utterance that does not anticipate a rejoinder' (78).

The construction of monologism takes different forms in each theory. Wheeler rests his account of the normative force of the duty to intervene on a liberal international relations (IR) perspective which is pitted mainly against

the Realist view that states are incapable of normative concern. His main concern is thus to show that normative restrictions, even if used or formulated in self-interested ways, can still be binding on states (2004: 4, 7, 24). This sidesteps the question of how ethical positions should be reached, but has a symptomatic side-effect. This construction of international normativity thus focuses on the emergence of normative communities among states (e. g. 2004: 23, 44). Stateless societies can be the objects of intervention, but are excluded from the formation of the normative community which legitimates it, effectively relegated to terra nullius by the absence of a relevant international claimant – not empty of people as ' bare life', but empty of morally relevant agents, people who ' matter' as normative voices. Things get no better when Wheeler briefly enters the field of discussion of how positions should be reached, rendering this process the exclusive province of the ' values of... civilized societies' (2002: 303). Hence, ' civilised' societies ask themselves if they are entitled to intervene; nobody thinks to ask the recipients. In practice, this leads to a situation where the UN believed that no consent was needed to intervene in Somalia due to the absence of a state able to give such consent (Wheeler 2002: 183).

Fernando Tesón offers the most unreconstituted variant of the universalist global-local. He adopts a strongly realist moral ontology in which moral truths are absolutely independent of their origins (Tesón 2001: 12). Having asserted ontologically that such truths exist, he nevertheless provides no clear guide to the epistemological means by which they can be known. But what he does not say, he shows by his performance as speaker of ethical ' truths'. His reference is to a Northern in-group connected to the dominant

fantasy frame, as for instance when he writes of ' the shock we felt' over the Srebrenica massacre (2001: 44). The type of subject who felt shock at this juncture is of a certain type: tuned into the global media, experiencing the events of Bosnia from the outside, contained in a sphere of safety in which such events are shocking rather than horrifically quotidian and predictable. This ' we' excludes by gradations the Srebrenica victims themselves, whose emotions were likely much sharper than mere shock; the solidarity activists, Muslim and secular, who would be angry but unsurprised at the Serbian atrocity and the UN betrayal; and the other recipients of intervention, the Somalis, Rwandans and so on, whose reactions remain opaque.

Like Tesón, Coady is a moral realist who views ethics as a form of knowledge allowing universal claims and derived from human nature (2002: 13-14, 18). This position is counterposed to a simplified view of relativism (2002: 14), and again, its ontological firmness is undermined by its silence on epistemology. No method is provided for distinguishing in practice between relative and universal positions, though such judgements are most definitely made in practice (2002: 16). Again, it seems that the universal truth is established solely by Northern agents. One establishes truth through the ' courts of reason, feeling, experience and conscience', which may or may not produce an obvious answer (2002: 14). Being internal to the desituated Northern observer, these ' courts' do not require any accountability to non-Northern Others, or any kind of reflexivity.   A Northern subject-position is introduced performatively. Hence for instance, reactions of Northern media viewers are deemed facts of human nature (2002: 29, 36). Hence it is clear

that, while Others are allowed to make claims in these courts, but the judge remains resolutely Northern.

In practice, such universalism, operating as a global-local, provides space for linguistic despotism. Deleuze and Guattari have argued that the persistence of despotism after the end of absolutist states relies on the despotic functioning of transcendentalist language (Anti-Oedipus 207). In peacekeeping discourse, this transcendentalism is expressed especially in the binary between civilised and uncivilised, which creates the conditions for sovereignty and states of exception. One can thus think of peacekeeping violence in terms of law-founding violence, a suspension of ethics in the creation of a statist order. Hence, Hardt and Negri are right in arguing that '[m]odern sovereignty... does not put an end to violence and fear but rather puts an end to civil war by organizing violence and fear into a coherent and stable political order'. Peacekeeping in the dominant discourse is the violence which forms a bridge between ' anarchy' (the demonised Other) and liberal-democracy, cutting through complexity with the simplicity of brute force (Debrix 110). The effects of this discursive asymmetry are made clear in Sherene Razack's investigation of peacekeeping violence. Razack's book focuses on instances of torture and murder by Canadian peacekeepers in Somalia, and accounts for such violence as expressions of discourses of superiority (10).   Razack argues that Canadian peacekeepers in Somalia committed atrocities because of their identity as agents of a civilised nation operating in a hostile, otherworldly context. They use such categories to construct an ' affective space' of belonging (24). The identity of Canadian

peacekeepers as citizens of a civilised nation lead to the denial of personhood to Somali Others (Razack 9).

The stance as civilised outsiders leads to violence through the operation of a binary of civilised versus savage which is inherently racialised (13). The civilisers are counterposed to the ' dark corners of the earth' in a narrative which places Northern peacekeepers outside history (12).   They are assigned the task of sorting out problems of Southern others at some risk to themselves (32). ' History is evacuated and the simplest of stories remains: more civilized states have to keep less civilized states in line' (48). Sites such as Somalia thus become viewed as utterly hostile, sites of absolute evil in which anarchy blurs with terrain and climate (15, 84). Since the South is constituted as an inferior category, peacekeepers enter a space where their ability to relate to others' humanity is impeded (54, 155). Such black holes, or extraordinary spaces, become sites of exception and emergency (44). Excluded from dialogue by the myth of its absolute evil, the Other is taken to understand little but force (38-9, 93). Canadian peacekeepers involved in abuses were acting on a narrative bearing little resemblance to their actual situation in a largely peaceful town (73). They in effect went looking for enemies, scheming to lure and trap Somalis who were then assumed to fit stereotypes (79-81). The narrative of imposing order amidst chaos creates conditions in which peacekeepers initiate conflict to provide a context in which to respond overwhelmingly and brutally. Paradoxically, peacekeepers thereby often become unable even to keep the peace between themselves and their local hosts, let alone to impose it among locals.

2. State as necessary; social order

The second problematic grouping of assumptions concern the social role of the state. Liberal theorists view the state as identical with or essential to society, and as something without which a decent life is impossible. This is taken as a truism. As Richard Day argues, liberal scholars systematically ignore arguments that stateless life might be preferable to life under the state, in an intellectual doubling of the move of liberal states to ruthlessly suppress movements aspiring to stateless life. Despite their criticisms of particular state policies, liberals consistently think about social life from the standpoint of the state. As Day writes, liberalism identifies with the state by adopting its subject-position (79). This fixation on the state expresses itself normatively in the attachment of overriding significance to themes of order, security and stability. For instance, the UN resolution on Somalia called for action ' to restore peace, stability and law and order' (cited Lyons and Samatar 34). On the other side, metonymic slippage is established between terms like statelessness, lawlessness, anarchy, chaos and barbarism. This conceptual conflation combines into a single concept at least four distinct phenomena: state collapse as such, the collapse of society (such as everyday meanings and relations), the existence of a situation of civil war, and the existence of a set of ' lawless' actions similar to criminality (such as murder, torture, rape, armed robbery and extortion). This runs against the warnings of more informed empirical scholars who emphasise the need to disaggregate these phenomena (Menkhaus State Collapse 405, 407).

On an explanatory level, statist authors tend to attribute the other aspects of a complex emergency, particularly social conflict and ' lawless' actions, to

the absence of a state (or of the right kind of state). Hence, they fail to distinguish between peaceful and warring stateless societies, or between ' lawless' stateless societies and those with some degree of diffuse ' governance'.   A society such as Somalia is stateless, hence necessarily beset by civil war and social predation. As a result, it is assumed that the response to problems related to civil war and ' lawlessness' must be resolved by the restoration or construction of a proper state. An absence is taken as the explanation for various effects, with no sense of what specific forces cause these effects. The possibility that the worst problems in complex emergencies could be mitigated instead by moving towards a more peaceful and less predatory type of statelessness – a possibility at the forefront of the empirical literature on Somalia for example – is simply ruled out in advance. Also excluded from the frame is the need to establish and engage with contingent causes of intergroup conflict.

These themes can be traced through the work of the authors under discussion. Wheeler deems ' state breakdown... and a collapse of law and order' a sufficient cause for intervention (2002: 34). In referring to situations in which ' the target state... had collapsed into lawlessness and civil strife' (2002: 2), he clearly conflates statelessness, ' lawlessness' and civil war: state collapse itself means ' lawlessness and civil strife'; this is what a society becomes when a state collapses. Furthermore, ' lawlessness' and the ' breakdown of authority' are taken to be the cause of famine in Somalia (2002: 176, 206), notwithstanding the continued absence of state authority in the famine-free years since 1994. Wheeler also rather strangely refers to state-building as the removal of ' the gun' from political life (2002: 306).

States are not known for their lack of guns. Writing in 2002 – by which time Somalia had experienced a stateless peace for nearly a decade – Wheeler argues that '[d]isarming the warlords and establishing the rule of law were crucial in preventing Somalia from falling back into civil war and famine' (2002: 190). What Somalia needed, he decided, was a ' law-governed polity' (2002: 173). To this end, he advocates ' the imposition of an international protectorate that could provide a security framework for years, if not decades, to come' (2002: 306), effectively the recolonisation of the country.

In constructing criteria for the success of an intervention, Wheeler's position is again ambiguous. His exact demand is that a successful intervention establish ' a political order… hospitable to the protection of human rights' (2002: 37). Yet when he discusses Somalia, and faces the problem that humanitarian relief and state-building were contradictory goals, he takes a pro-statebuilding position (2002: 189-90). This can be interpreted to mean that he assumes that only a statist order could possibly be hospitable to human rights, notwithstanding the appalling human rights record of the previous Somali state. Yet there is no reason why local polities could not be assessed in terms of human rights (Menkhaus and Pendergast, 2).

In Tesón's account, a Hobbesian position on state collapse, including the identity of state collapse, societal collapse, ' lawlessness' and civil war, is explicitly advocated. ' Anarchy is the complete absence of social order, which inevitably leads to a Hobbesian war of all against all' (2001: 7). People are thus prevented from conducting ' meaningful life in common' (2001: 7). It is clear that state and society are so closely linked here as to be indistinguishable; it is left unclear if the ' absence of social order' means the

absence merely of the state or of other forms of social life. Given that contexts such as Somalia do not in fact involve the collapse of all social life, it must be assumed that the former is being inferred from the latter. We see once more the reproduction of the conflation of statelessness with a range of problems, in apparent ignorance of the possibility of other kinds of statelessness. The solution is taken to be pervasive imposition of liberal social forms. Humanitarian aid simply addresses ' the symptoms of anarchy and tyranny', whereas building ' democratic, rights-based institutions… addresses a central cause of the problem' and does ' the right thing' for the society (2001: 37).

As a result, situations of anarchy necessarily lead to barbaric interpersonal behaviour which is seriously unjust, causing a ' moral collapse of sovereignty' and a loss of the right to self-government (2001: 2-3). The difference between statist societies and stateless societies is not, he tersely declares, a matter of legitimate dispute. The difference is a matter of what all ' reasonable' views will accept and what they will not (2001: 13-14). This boundary reproduces the tautological ethical stance of the Northern agent. While emotively related to the extreme effects of civil war and predatory violence, this position in effect declares any stateless society to be beyond the pale regardless of whether it displays these characteristics. The gesture of Schmittian sovereignty, deciding on the exclusion of those deemed unreasonable, is particularly dangerous given that intervention happens in contexts where the majority of local agents show such characteristics. Peacekeepers primed to enter situations deemed uncondonable are doomed

to violent contact with local agents (including ' victims' who do condone

them, because their very frame is constructed to exclude engagement.

Again in Coady's work, the assumption that states exist for benevolent

purposes is prominent. States are viewed as responsible for the protection

of citizens (2002: 11-12). Intervention can legitimately be aimed at ' failed

or profoundly unstable states' (2002: 21), and has the goals of ' ensuring

political stability and enduring safety' (2002: 30), liberal code for state-

building. It is not unusual in peacekeeping theory to find a distinction drawn

between ordinary human rights (identified with concrete violations) and

extraordinary human rights (identified with the collapse of legitimate state

power), a binary which ethically voids the very concept of rights by

identifying its actualisation with a particular social order. In other varieties,

one finds it in distinctions between truly shocking and merely wrong forms of

violation, between ' extremely barbarous' and mundane abuses, or between

law and order as a primary goal of intervention and human security as a

secondary luxury (see Coady 2002: 16, 28, Tesón 2001: 37, Walzer Just and

Unjust Wars 108, Lund 2003: 28-9, 47-8, Paris 2004: 47-8). This serves to

put the denial of rights, or of the state, in the South (or rather, its crisis-

points) in an incommensurable category distinct from human rights abuses

in and by the North (and its Southern allies). With human rights deemed

impossible in a stateless society, rights-violation is excused as ' law-creating

violence', the creation of an order where rights become possible, but which

does not require prefigurative recognition of rights in the present, a position

not dissimilar to the telos of socialism in Stalinist ideology. The declaration

of justice and rights as the purpose of the state sits uncomfortably with the

kind of state likely to result in practice from statebuilding in contexts such as Somalia. Clearly, Tesón has transmuted his normative position on what states should do into an essentialist position on what states are, which leaves him with a project of building a state per se, without regard for whether the project or the resultant state serves the ascribed goals. In the meantime, the patently obvious existence of customary rights in societies such as Somalia is conveniently ignored. Presumably, as rights of the ' uncivilised', these rights do not count as fully ' human'.

In practice, the effects of such a statist frame are to disengage peacekeepers from populations they are supposed to be rescuing, constructing them as epistemologically-privileged bearers of a project of social reconstruction which is in the interests, regardless of the wishes, of the locals. This framework produces a paradigmatically colonial arrogance. Peacekeepers misperceived unfamiliar institutions as an absence of institutions, leading to racist effects. Empirical scholars have approached Somalia with a frame distorted by such statism, as when Lyons and Samatar portray the country as a ' Hobbesian world without law or institutions', divided between ' the most vulnerable' and ' the most vicious' (Lyons and Samatar 7; c. f. Makinda ****). In practice, the Somali intervention was framed by Northern insecurities about ' disorder' in the context of global neoliberalism. According to one cultural analyst, the intervention was an attempt to suture the field of global disorder, acting out a predetermined script in an attempt to create an appearance of fixed order, namely, neoliberalism as the end of history (Debrix 97-9). This suture is necessary because of the gap separating neoliberal ideology from the actuality of global disorder (107). It

was to fail because an excess of uncontrollable images arising from local difference began to disempower the global order (Debrix 126).

In Somalia, peacekeepers found themselves in a society with very different assumptions about state power. According to Menkhaus, ' there is perhaps no other issue on which the worldviews of external and internal actors are more divergent than their radically different understanding of the state' (Menkhaus State Collapse 409). ' For many Somalis, the state is an instrument of accumulation and domination, enriching and empowering those who control it and exploiting and harassing the rest of the population' (Menkhaus Governance 87).   Hence, statebuilding was misconceived as necessary for peacebuilding in a setting where it was virtually impossible. Menkhaus and Pendergast argue that the ' radical localization' of politics in Somalia is often misunderstood as disorder and crisis, when in fact it is part of the functioning of local social life.   ' The challenge to the international community… is to attempt to work with this " stateless" political reality in Somalia rather than against it.' It is a myth to see the intervention as rebuilding a state, since an effective state has never existed in Somalia (Menkhaus State Collapse 412).

Somalia has historically been resistant to the implantation of the state-form, and previous colonial and neo-colonial states, arising mainly as channels for global patronage flows, were caught between the extractive and despotic use of concentrated power by the clan which dominated the state and moves to balance against this excessive power by other clans. Even such an artificial state has been made impossible by changing conditions (Menkhaus and Pendergast 2-3). Attempts to rebuild a centralised state have

exacerbated conflict between clan militias, which compete for the ' potential spoils' of such a state (Menkhaus and Pendergast 13). With the capital viewed as the site or ' house' of state power, the battle for the state encouraged clan conflicts for control of the capital (Jan 2001: 81;) Where state-building has occurred in postwar Somalia, it has been similarly marked by strong extractive and divisive tendencies (Lewis 81-3). Hence, to favour statebuilding in Somalia is to contribute to exacerbating conflict by taking stances between diffuse forces which favour some and disempower others. In seeking local collaborators in building the state, the UN ended up favouring some clan militias against others (Rutherford 16, 23, 40-1).

On the other hand, empirical evidence does not confirm the view that peace required a strong state. Statelessness as such did not cause civil war or social problems. Until the 1980s, Somalia was extremely safe, despite or because of its weak state; the source of security was communal, not juridical (Menkhaus State Collapse 412). Similarly, Somalia rapidly returned to peace after the UN departure, with conflict infrequent between 1995 and 2006 (Menkhaus Governance 87-8). In part, this was due to the declining local influence of warlords inside their own clans. Ameen Jan analyses the post-UN scenario as a revival of processes frozen by the intervention, which were already moving national power towards clans and clan power towards civilians (2001: 53-5). Another apparent anomaly is that the de facto independent northwestern region of Somaliland successfully constructed peace and local political institutions with meagre resources, at the same time that expensive UN peace conferences were failing (Lewis ix-x). This process succeeded because it arose from the grassroots and started with

reconciliation on issues of contention, many of which were social issues such as buying off militia members and resolving land disputes (Lewis 91, 94-5; Menkhaus, Governance 91). Hence, the causes of the civil war in parts of Somalia were contingent products of circumstances which are unlikely to recur (Menkhaus and Pendergast 7, 15). Having started from the wrong premises, it is no surprise that the wrong conclusions were reached. Successful peacebuilding in Somalia would involve a transition from a violent diffuse acephalous society to a peaceful diffuse acephalous society, whereas the colonial assumptions of peacekeepers instead sought to override the entire structure of Somali society as a means to construct their preferred form of order.

In practice, this obsession with order and interpellation of otherness as disorder expresses itself in reliance on hard power. The UN and US sought to rely on technical and military power as a substitute for engagement in the context (Debrix 115, Wheeler 2002: 181, 205). This tends to reproduce the very context posited by the Northern discourse. Pieterse has argued that the emphasis on hard power in interventions reinforces or even creates rigid ethnic categories and authoritarian institutions, hence creating the conditions for humanitarian crisis. The emphasis on hard power stemming from the problematic of sovereignty effectively rendered peacebuilding impossible. While local clan reconciliation conferences were more effective in practice, the UN approach focused on militia leaders, a process which tended to entrench their power and disaggregate them from their support-base (Jan 2001: 63). This misrepresented their power through the frame of sovereignty. Clan militias, like Clastrean chiefs, did not hold stable power.

They were speculative and temporary, and subject to rapid decomposition (Lewis 80, Menkhaus and Pendergast 4-5). Lewis views the Somali militias as clan militias involved mainly in territorial conflicts (Lewis 75). Far from dominating the context, militias depended on soft power within clans to a great degree, and were unable even to implement accords among themselves due to their limited influence over their clans (Menkhaus and Pendergast 4-5).

Clastres' theory of warfare in indigenous societies, the source of the Deleuzian theory of war-machines, emphasises the role of intergroup alliances and balancing as quasi-intentional means of warding off concentrated power and transcendentalism. Intergroup feuding expresses ' the will of each community to assert its difference','[t]o assure the permanence of the dispersion, the parcelling, the atomization of the groups'. Such a situation of centrifugal forces is indeed typical of the kind of conflict settings which peacekeeping interventions target. Somalis are predominantly nomads, and form the archetypal nomadic war-machines carrying out the diffusion of social power. The frame applied from the North is, however, rather dangerous: the logic of the war-machine is misunderstood as a primal Hobbesian violence. This sets peacekeepers up for colonial warfare. The terminal crisis of the UN intervention arose from the redefinition of one of the two major alliances of clan militias as an enemy. Focused unduly on the person of General Aidid, the escalation arose following an attack on UN troops which was interpreted as a violation of transcendental sovereignty, an attack on protected bodies of exceptional value. In the local frame, however, it was reconfigured as horizontal warfare

rather than vertical enforcement, and the UN became seen as the ' sixteenth Somali faction' (Jan 2001: 72).

Hence, it seems that an incapacity to think outside a narrowly statist frame was the source both of a violently colonial intervention, and of the constitutive unrealisability of the goals of the intervention. It would seem that statism and colonialism intersect, with certain Southern societies judged as inferior for their lack of state forms. This expresses the promotion of the Northern state, in spite of its increasing authoritarianism and colonial legacy, as an unmarked term to which the world should aspire. Although it is outside the scope of this paper, it is also apparent that Southern states are typically pathologised as the wrong ' type' of state – too corrupt, too contaminated by the dirty world of social life, insufficiently able to mobilise uncontested concentrated power or authority. It is possible that the club of ' real' democracies, or ' successful' states, is actually a repetition of Fanon's club of the civilised, held up as a goal for those who are constitutively excluded from it.

3. Victims

The third set of assumptions of such theories are concentrated in the figure of the victim. The victim is a contradictory figure, for, while she is the quasi-absolute ethical referent of peacekeeping theory, the figure on whose behalf other ethical principles may be suspended, whose call is the source of an imp