

Modernising Timor-Leste: Moving beyond ideology

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The context for the foreign presence discussed in this essay is the intervention in Timor-Leste beginning in 1999, marking the shift from a contested nationalism to one of independent sovereignty and as such, a new nation-state. The definition of an intervention here is broadly framed, moving beyond the emphasis on military-led efforts to incorporate the fuller gamut of activities employed to transform societies; state-, peace- and nation-building, development and human security. In the context of Timor-Leste, the intervention that began in 1999 has moved through various phases; a security and humanitarian focus, shifting on to development and state-building, with a renewed emphasis on security in response to the socio-political crisis from 2006 to 2008. The term ‘intervention’ is therefore used here to describe the process of attempted social transformation undertaken in the wake of mass conflict by a range of non-government organisations, security agencies and state institutions, businesses, consultants, volunteers and so forth. For all the differences between these institutional forms, a common basis to their operations is the intent to change the fabric of East Timorese society so as to ensure a sustainable modernity comes to the fore. The reasons for doing so might differ dramatically; such actions may be motivated by humanitarianism while others are in an attempt to integrate Timor-Leste into a global market and nation-state system. Either way, the foreign presence tends to be framed by a compulsion to ensure a modern transformation of society is achieved.

The military-humanitarian interventions that we have witnessed since the end of the Cold War—in part a response to the changing nature of warfare—have given rise to some highly sophisticated critiques. Authors such as Oliver Richmond, Mark Duffield, Michael Humphrey and David Chandler have in different ways worked to counter the projection of interventions as necessarily benign, rather demonstrating that interventions are embedded in power relations between the intervener and the intervened and that these can in turn result in unsustainable and conflict-driven societies (Duffield 2001 and 2007; Humphrey 2009; Chandler 2010; Richmond 2008a and 2011).

As part of this debate, one of the most established critiques is that of ‘liberal interventionism’ or a ‘liberal peace’, in effect the idea that interventions use the opportunity presented by conflicts in order to re-write societies through constructing a system that mirrors an idealised version of the political norms and systems of Western liberal societies. The critiques themselves differ substantially, in terms of emphasis, logic as well as theoretical framing, though it is perhaps not an undue generalisation to say that they share a view that the “principal aim of peace operations thus becomes not so much about creating spaces for negotiated conflict resolution between states but about actively contributing to the construction of liberal politics, economies and societies” (Bellamy and Williams 2008, 4-5).

While each of these theorists could be discussed in turn with regards to this article, the work of Oliver Richmond will suffice in this instance to demonstrate how the critical literature, as well as practice, needs to move beyond ideology so as to consider ontology as a way of better ensuring a post-conflict peace. Coming from a critical theory perspective, Richmond focuses much of his work on the way in which a ‘liberal peace’ is established through particular forms of institutions which sit in distinction to the political domain of a local population. Speaking of peace as implemented in a period of intense globalization, Richmond writes that:

Essentially, what arises from this ‘hegemonic discourse’ of peace is what Mandelbaum refers to as the ‘Wilsonian triad’ which, because of its liberal intentions, is based upon a universalist understanding of peace as an objective of intervention (Mandelbaum 2002, 6). Consequently, this legitimates a broad swath of contested means deployed directly and indirectly in the process of intervention. This works on

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the logic that democratization, free market reform, human rights protection, and development, will ultimately create peace in post-conflict societies. This is exactly what the ‘peacebuilding consensus’ implies (Richmond 2004, 140).

Thinkers such as David Chandler have criticised the approaches made by Richmond and others, suggesting that the liberal rhetoric of state-building efforts have been taken too literally and do not represent the actual nature of the interventions on the ground (Chandler 2010, Chapter Two). In the case of Timor-Leste however, it is argued here that the whole process of intervention has been both rhetorically *and* materially framed by efforts to entrench the institutional and social infrastructure of a liberal hegemony. Democracy and constitutionalism have not only framed the national systems of governance, but elections have been extended into the most localised communities where once they were not required. Similarly, much development in Timor-Leste simply assumes a market economy is the natural eventuality, and as such everything from micro-finance schemes through to changing agricultural practices are based on the assumption of capital accrual and capitalist modes of exchange. Across both governance and development sectors, there are constant discursive demands for ‘transparency’ (contra patrimony), ‘participation’ (contra patriarchy) and ‘universal human rights’ (contra the narrowness of customary culture) which have each come as part of the attempted liberal transformation of East Timorese society.

Richmond argues that this attempt at liberal transformation in Timor-Leste has been highly problematic. He suggests firstly that it has failed to establish a meaningful social contract between society and the governing institutions and has also not responded adequately to the every-day needs of the population (Richmond 2011). The first point here, the failure in generating political legitimacy, is of primary interest as it is seen to originate in the gap that is created when local political forms are a mismatch with the demands of a competitive party based democracy and an independent bureaucracy. Going further, Roland Paris—along with Richmond when writing on Timor-Leste—has warned that building a democratic politics, especially in terms of elections, can be politically dangerous when the local political culture has had little if any experience with democratic systems of governance (Richmond 2011; Paris 2004). From this position it is difficult to locate a clear solution; to either go ahead is to risk social upheaval and the failure to transform a society, but to not pursue these goals is essentially to impugn that the local population is incapable. A tendency then, as David Chandler suggests by quoting Roland Paris and Timothy Sisk, is that “in dealing with the non-liberal other, the issues are so complex and dilemma-laden that pragmatic ‘muddling through’ is the only solution” (Chandler 2010, 37).

The approach to the problem of political legitimacy and the appropriate form of governance becomes difficult to resolve as it is set within parameters where the measure of the East Timorese has become their ability to conform to a political ideal based on European traditions. Faced with these problems of legitimacy, too few non-Timorese seem to ask the question of whether the political form being built is in effect appropriate or not? Certainly this is a question that is debated amongst East Timorese², and by some foreigners, but by and large this discourse remains marginalised through the sheer dominance of the ‘non-reflexive modernity’ of those who come to Timor-Leste to ‘help’.

Furthermore, the question of control of the process is still weighted towards the expectations of the interveners who supposedly know when the local population is suitably ready for elections. Yet what is needed to understand the problem of a lack of political legitimacy, not just of governing structures but also within development and other aspects of the attempts to transform East Timorese society since 1999, is an extension of critique from an ideological category of analysis to an ontological level. To do this, it is important to very briefly outline three different categories of social integration so as to in turn show how the critiques of liberalism remain too limited in terms of finding a sustainable peace.

In contrast to the typical mapping of socio-cultural difference across a modern and pre-modern axis, the argument here is for three major patterns of social integration (which are referred to as ontological formations): the customary, the traditional and the modern (James 1996 and 2006; Grenfell 2008). There are various ways in which to explain these categories, though as a very brief overview the mode of social

² See for instance the forthcoming special edition on Timor-Leste of the journal *Local Global: Identity, Security, Community* on customary culture in the context of nation-formation.

organisation (here in the form of authority) will be used to help delineate social difference across these three forms.

The 'customary' is taken here to mean a pattern of social integration where social order is determined by genealogy and kinship, and life is constituted in face-to-face relations. In Timor-Leste this is most often seen with the authority of the *lia-na'in* (literally 'owner of the words', one form of customary leadership) and the conflation between the living, ancestral, spirit and natural world, instantiated particularly through *lulik* (sacred) objects and *adat* (customary law). In such instances, social life is typically framed by particularity, firstly to the family through the *uma lulik* and *adat* practices, and then through mythology to an ethno-linguistic grouping.

In contrast, the mode of organisation within a traditional pattern of social integration is exemplified by the sacred authority of the priest. Within the 'traditional', the priest is no longer given authority through a genealogical connection but rather from an extended cosmological claim to a universalised 'god'. In this understanding, the cosmology universalises a person's relationship to the world rather than to more immediate genealogically or kinship related groups (and by this understanding, the statue of Jesus standing on a globe in front of the Motael church in Dili would be an impossible claim to make within customary society).

The 'modern' can be described as a system of social integration characterised by highly abstracted social relations constituted predominantly through disembodied relations (as opposed to 'face-to-face' relations). Social integration in this context tends to identify the scientific and the secular as sources of authority (rather than the cosmological), meaning that bureaucrats who rely on logic and officials elected on merit come to the fore in terms of social organisation. It is across the modern that we see the notion of citizenship and social contract emerge, a way of trying to hold together individuals and localised groups of people within larger and abstracted systems of governance.

As the above examples of each social formation demonstrate, Timor-Leste incorporates all of these elements which layer and roughly intersect at some points, contradict and work in tension at others, and often enough seem to sit in ambiguous yet sustainable relationship with one another.³ People and community live across these, and for instance it is possible to see how a person may engage in a modern mode of production (working in a NGO as a policy advisor), continue performing traditional ceremonies of faith (attending mass) and still engage fully in customary culture (for instance at the burial of a person).

What tends to occur in daily life however is a dominance of a particular form, and no matter the differences between Dili and rural villages, the argument here is that *most often* the dominant pattern of social integration—the stitching that allows people to mutually understand and identify with one another—is very much located at an ethical-political level in the customary. This therefore means that East Timorese may engage across the traditional and the modern, but the basis for social orientation is very much located at the customary level: the family, the *uma-lulik*, the binding of mythological origin and destiny.

Of course there are exceptions, and one possible grouping that could be seen as situated as neither customary nor modern in these terms could be nuns, priests and so forth who are clearly confronted by the secularism of modernity at the same time often at best cautiously respectful of the customary. In terms of those located within ontological modernity, there is an indigenous urban elite found across the spectrum of state, business and civil society in Timor-Leste. Many of these lived in exile for the duration of the Indonesian occupation and have returned post-independence to occupy elite positions, though even here their own position in relation to modernity is worth reflecting on. In many senses, the social power of this group has come about because they are in the best position to work as intermediaries between foreign workers and local communities, able to speak across the 'divide' and also provide the interveners with a claim to local legitimacy.

³ This schema does not seek to reify social practice, but rather to sensitize the researcher (and others) to qualitatively different patterns of social integration. Such sensitization enables an investigation of the complexity and nuances of social life rather than the reductionism that occurs when the 'other than modern' is either written 'in' or 'out' of consideration.

If it is accepted that in Timor-Leste the customary is a significant pattern of social integration, and equally that foreign workers—diplomats, youth ambassadors, aid workers, military personnel, international volunteers, UN professionals, advisors, consultants and academic researchers—are in dominance constituted at the modern, then we can see where the potential for a gap as Richmond suggest has occurred in Timor-Leste might eventuate from. In order to close this gap between a population that identifies primarily with one form of political authority while a system of governance is being built on the basis of another, Richmond suggests that it is possible to re-calibrate the production of peace by taking better account of local political cultures.

The technical requirements of promoting democratization, the rule of law, civil society and development require far more than merely a technical and institutional intervention, and there is an enormous gap between conception and expectation. Achieving these objectives requires long-term commitment on the part of internationals and a deep sensitivity to the bottom-up nature of the social contract, rather than merely to its top-down requirements engendered in the panopticon regime of liberal governance (Richmond and Franks 2008, 198).

Here the methods of intervention are varied, deepened, at times turned upside down, and spread out over time. However, as different as the process might be, the outcome doesn't seem that much different. It might be more sustainable than the current state of affairs, yet it is still a "liberal project but in a hybridized form" (Richmond 2008, 198). The work of Richmond and others stand as fine contributions to understanding the ideological assumptions that underpin the broad array of practices and processes of interventions, and in more recent works there has been a shift towards a focus on the intersection of relations between the foreign and the local (and notably an emerging language of ontology). However, this is still underpinned by an expectation of a particular kind of political community emerging;

A detailed understanding (rather than cooption or 'tolerance' of) of local culture, traditions, and ontology; and acceptance of peacebuilding as an empathetic, emancipatory process, focused on everyday care, human security, and a social contract between society and the polity, which acts as a provider of care rather than merely security (Richmond 2009, 578).

Even while we are seeing a move towards a hybridized 'post-liberal peace', if we think on the ontological categories above (of the customary, traditional and modern) and on how Richmond is drawing together the liberal and the customary, there are several significant problems that come to the fore in trying to secure peace this way.

Firstly, the notion of a hybridized peace suggests a pluralized, open and contestable space between foreigners and locals. However, the framing of the quote above places the foreign as the determining power in the process, not least as locals are being 'understood' to ensure an effective pathway to negotiating what appears like a preconceived result. There seems to be no right of refusal or even a radical re-orientation of that order. This kind of 'imbalanced hybridity' is likely to be repeated in practice in the wake of mass destruction given the disparity of the resources available to the interveners in contrast to locals. In the wake of 1999 for instance, so absolute was the devastation and so scarce local resources, it is hard to imagine how the dominant ideology of an international conglomerate of NGOs, aid agencies, and military forces could not have resulted in anything but their worldviews absolutely dominating decisions over the patterns of social transformation.

Secondly, by essentially accepting the liberal character of the interveners as Richmond seems to have done, then liberalism is projected as if it is modernity *per se*. However, modernity could in effect bring to the fore many possibilities of which liberalism is but one example, and yet elections, and the market, constitutional republicanism and universal human rights are presented as if there are no other possibilities. At an ideological level, this narrows the prospects for other possible experiences of modernity to infuse the 'post-liberal' peace, such as a post-feminism or a post-Marxism. In effect, the form of modernity that the customary is to be negotiated with so as to create a hybridized peace has already been set.

In thinking again on the distinctions between the three patterns of social integration, namely the customary, traditional and the modern, it is possible to see that the coupling of liberalism and the customary in order to negotiate a hybridised peace presents an erroneous conflation of different analytical categories. The problem here is that liberalism is an ideology—one possible way of understanding the world from within modernity— while the ‘customary’ is an ontology, a way of being in the world. The possibility of a hybridity of this kind, and in turn of a ‘post-liberal peace’, is then forged on a false axis and where the power of the intervener is maintained in practice by not having to interrogate their own ontological foundations in the same way as a local population is. On the one hand East Timorese are being asked to transform foundational ways of being in the world in order to reach a ‘hybridized’ peace, but foreigners in effect only have to reflect at most on their ideological assumptions. Little is being asked of the intervener, as the ontological basis for that particular expression of ideology is left preserved—such as that history is progressive, that the human is rational, that the individual is pre-eminent and that secularism and logic are key to the human condition—and yet at the customary and even traditional level, these are the very ontological foundations of society that are the subject for change for the Timorese. This dynamic is key to understanding the sense of inequity held by locals with regards to foreign involvement in the intervention, one that goes well beyond a differentiated access to resources.

In response to all of this, interventions need to be transformed at the level of ontological reflexivity of the intervener, an exercise that does two things. Firstly, the modernity of the foreign intervention comes to be contextualised rather than taken as being the natural and appropriate position that all of reality should ascribe to. And within that, it sensitizes the participant to the way modernity can take multiple forms, not just that of liberalism. Secondly, and importantly, it allows for different social systems to be examined in effect on a par—argued for here as being the customary, traditional and the modern— and seeing them for their differences without the intervener having to enforce them. The likelihood of a hybridized version of peace (or development, security or governance for that matter) is unlikely to be anything more than exceptional until there is a shift in the culture of power by those undertaking the intervention. What is the guarantee that working ethnographically, or in slow discourse, or over a long-time will actually create meaningful difference if there is no reflection back onto how ‘being in the world’ can be so fundamentally different for the intervener? If a foreign worker sees their own modernity as *the* natural state of being human then they will continue to be bewildered as to why their projects, programs and strategies are sometimes contested or met with indifference. ‘Muddling through’ in effect is good statement, it suggests people in constant negotiation, tension and recreation. However, this can’t be done between liberal and non-liberal categories of understanding, as to do so is to only treat the ‘other’ from within modernity which, simply put, is not enough.

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