



Peace Processes: An Interview with Roger Mac Ginty

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Professor Roger Mac Ginty discusses peace processes, the decline of liberal peacebuilding and the concept of "everyday peace".

Q. What is a peace process?

A peace process is an attempt to lower the costs of conflict through negotiation. It is not a peace of rainbows and unicorns. It is often a hard-headed process of trying to achieve your goals but through negotiation and a lessening of violence. Many peace processes involve political and military elites – most of whom are men – and can leave out the great majority of people.

But it is too easy to be cynical about peace processes. It can take a lot of bravery to negotiate with an enemy that you have demonised for years and believe to have committed atrocities. Elite level bargains, or even a thawing of the ice, can facilitate people-to-people activity at the grassroots level. If people feel secure enough, they can investigate inter-group contacts. Often the threat is from within one's own community. One might be seen as a traitor to the cause or somehow disloyal if you have friends or business acquaintances from 'the other side'. It is here, on-the-ground, that peace processes take life. They are embodied and enacted through everyday civility, sharing space and people simply getting on with things. For that to happen, there might have to be a peace accord signing ceremony in a capital, and the provision of security, but it is at the non-elite levels that peace takes shape.

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Q. When do peace processes begin and end?

Most peace processes begin in the midst of violent conflict. It is rational for parties to a conflict to investigate the possibility of talking to the other side. Remember Margaret Thatcher's 'We don't negotiate with terrorists' line? It was nonsense. She could pass messages to the IRA when she wanted. Some people, most notably Bill Zartman, argue that a peace process has the best chance of beginning when the parties are in a mutually hurting stalemate. In such a situation they know they cannot win and so have to investigate alternatives. But sensible parties to a conflict will have already put out feelers to the other side.

I am not sure that peace processes do actually end. There may be landmark events like the signing of a peace accord, or warring leaders shaking hands, that seem like natural conflict endpoints. But many conflicts have a long heritage, with different generations involved in different phases of the conflict. As a result, they do not just stop overnight. New political dispensations have to bed down, and communities have to get used to living side-by-side. That takes time – decades and centuries rather than the eighteen month project cycle that many peacebuilding organisations must work within.

Q. You've described liberal democratic peace as the increasingly standardised version of peace promoted by leading states, international organisations and international financial institutions. What does liberal peacebuilding normally look like and why is it so limited as an approach?

Liberal peacebuilding had its heyday in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The ambitions of liberal internationalism were punctured by the attrition of

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Afghanistan and Iraq, and by a realisation that all of the resources devoted to peacebuilding in countries from Cambodia to Sierra Leone had failed to nudge those countries up the development indicators. There has been a significant rowing back and the liberal peace has been replaced, in recent years, with more modest forms of international intervention that prioritise security. There is much less talk of human rights or democracy by international interveners. Now the talk is about order, security and stabilisation. There is no pretence that the UK and others are going to bring democracy to Libya. The aim is just to try to limit the collateral damage arising from the conflict.

The liberal peace used the language of liberalism but was actually quite illiberal in many respects – most obviously through violent regime change. But what we see now is that there is little pretence to use the language of liberalism. Instead, we see situations like Yemen, where British weapons are used, or Syria, where British special forces are believed to be on the ground, but ministers say nothing.

The international peace architecture has come under a sustained attack from leading powers who jealously guard their sovereignty and work against multilateralism. There is no serious conversation about expanding the Permanent Five of the UN Security Council to take account of a changing world. There is also the very worrying privatisation of much peacebuilding and humanitarianism whereby for-profit firms act as service providers. I think we should rightly be suspicious of their motivations.

Q. Northern Ireland is often discussed as a success story of liberal peace and liberal internationalism which offers many lessons for other peace

processes. How true is this narrative and can meaningful lessons from Northern Ireland be applied to other contexts?

There are no peace process templates and what worked in Northern Ireland may not necessarily work elsewhere. The most important lesson from Northern Ireland is that an apparently intractable conflict can change. If you predicted – in 1988 – that the violent phase of the Northern Ireland conflict would be over in 10 years, people would have thought you were mad. But change did happen. The change was difficult and involved people taking risks, but they managed to navigate a society out of violent conflict. That can serve as an inspiration for others.

The on-the-ground and everyday improvement in lives in Northern Ireland is not to be under-estimated. It was a highly securitised environment with chronic violence and division. Multiple lives have been saved and improved. Yet, in one important aspect, Northern Ireland has been a failure: there has been virtually no reconciliation. Catholic-nationalists and Protestant-unionists still lead largely separate lives. They often live, work, shop and play apart. Over 90 percent of school kids are still educated in all Catholic or all Protestant schools. The main political parties – the Democratic Unionists and Sinn Féin – have little interest in reconciliation because it would put them out of business. The lesson is that an elite level peace accord will not automatically have a trickle-down effect. Where reconciliation has occurred, it has involved brave individuals on-the-ground who built up business, social and cultural relationships with people from ‘the other side’. These are the change-makers who transform a peace accord into a living and breathing phenomenon.

Q. Are more locally-led approaches to peacebuilding more effective than elite-driven initiatives and if so, why?

They are mutually supporting. Ultimately we all lead local lives. Most of us follow familiar routes, have favourite and convenient shops and cafes, or are tied to particular places through work, school or family. So peace that is made locally matters in terms of our everyday lives. But often this local peace depends on a wider security environment that follows an elite-level accord. The key is for the local and the elite-levels to enable each other.

There is a tendency to use the term 'local' without really understanding what it means. Often organisations – even peacebuilding organisations – will use the term 'local' to mean a city, municipality or large town or village. But research from the [Everyday Peace Indicators](#) project and from other projects makes clear that the local often refers to the hyper-local or the micro-local. People are often interested in the immediate vicinity of their home, the specific routes they take to school or work, and their friendship and family networks. The task facing peacebuilders and others is to work out how peacebuilding interventions can support peace at this micro-local level.

Q. You recently [compiled a volume comparing 18 contemporary peace processes across the world](#). It seems that comparing peace processes is difficult, but were any common factors identified, particularly in the more successful cases of peacebuilding?

There is now a good deal of evidence – from this project and from others – on what works and what does not work in peace processes. The most significant factor in helping parties reach a negotiated settlement, and that settlement

sticking, is inclusion. The more actors that become stakeholders in the peace process or peace accord, then the less chance that they will be tempted to undermine the process or peace deal. Inclusion brings ethical and practical challenges, but then we don't make with our friends. As John Darby – one the first scholars to compare peace processes – noted, sometimes peace processes demand a weak smile and a hard swallow.

The other crucial factor in peace processes – according to our study - is the importance of having good neighbours. There is a GK Chesterton quote along the lines of 'You can choose your friend and enemies, but God alone chooses your neighbours'. That is largely true and we can think of places like Afghanistan, Yemen or Lebanon in which neighbours engage in spoiling behaviour as part of regional power-plays. That is why international mediation is so important – particularly its efforts to get neighbouring countries on board any peace process.

Q. You've conducted a lot of research on the idea of “everyday peace”. What is “everyday peace” and how can it be measured?

Everyday peace is the skills, stances and logics that we all use in our everyday lives to navigate through potentially awkward situations. We use it when we are queuing for a bus, waiting to speak at a seminar, or walking through a busy street. It involves civility, manners and the emotional intelligence to read a situation and react accordingly. In a deeply-divided or conflict-affected society, people will use these everyday peace skills to lower tensions and survive. Imagine being a Serb living in a majority Bosnian Muslim town. Your neighbours in your apartment block are likely to be of a different identity group, so you would deploy everyday peace mechanisms (politeness, avoiding contentious

topics of conversation, disassembling) simply to get by. It might require bravery to have inter-group friendships.

Often everyday peace occurs under-the-radar, as people who transgress 'the rules' of a deeply-divided society may not want to draw attention to themselves. As a result, it might be very difficult to measure the micro-social processes that constitute everyday peace. In the Everyday Peace Indicators project, we adapted Participatory Action Research and used a mix of focus groups and surveys to try to capture how people see peace, security and change in their own lives. We piloted the EPI system in communities in Colombia, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe and it has now been adopted by a number of INGOs and bilateral donors.

Image credit: [Keith Ewing/Flickr](#).

About the interviewee

Roger Mac Ginty is Professor at the School of Government of International Affairs, and Director of the Durham Global Security Institute, at Durham University. He edits the journal *Peacebuilding* (with Oliver Richmond) and co-founded the Everyday peace Indicators project (with Pamina Firchow). His research is on the interface between top-down and bottom-up approaches to making peace. More at rogermacginty.com and everydaypeaceindicators.org.

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