Can There Be a "Kindered" Peace?

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There are more resources now devoted to the pursuit of peace than at any time in the history of the international system. The participating cast of actors—international, regional, state, and nonstate—seek to create a peace that is essentially Kantian in spirit, and thus heavily dependent upon the maintenance of an international liberal order through international governmental organizations, such as the United Nations. The resultant peace-building strategies are then often justified in terms of the promotion of human rights, democratization, and "human security"—concepts that together form the cornerstone of what has come to be termed the "liberal peace." Evidence increasingly suggests, however, that the mechanisms used to achieve such a peace typically fail to secure a *sustainable* peace, and in particular that they may not adequately take into account those actors whose claims for peace may prove especially intransigent—such as those with ethnic and identity claims, and those, ironically, for whom the achievement of human security is particularly pertinent.

This impasse encourages an emerging critique regarding the ability of the dominant actors in the prevailing liberal peace approach: first, to adapt to the wide diversity of actors currently making claims for rights; and second, and related to this, to listen to those whose generational, racial, sexual, and even moral language may differ from their own. This is not to say that the aims of the liberal peace are not appropriate. Indeed, the establishment of democratic institutions and an accompanying rule of law is crucial to the promotion of human rights—including children's rights—in any postconflict environment. However, the liberal peace framework fails to live up to its lofty principles because, despite rhetoric to the contrary, it remains rooted in an institutional rather than "human" prescription.

The place of children in this morass is particularly pertinent.[1] Arguably, children as a group are among those most affected by contemporary models of conflict. The plight of children, however, is little discussed when it comes to agreeing

on the minutiae of a peace proposal, despite the fact that children are widely recognized—even from within the institutions of the liberal peace itself—as significant to the sustainability of peace. Yet rather than concentrating upon this specific group as a potential conduit for long-term conflict resolution, those attempting to secure peace tend to assume that a program of postconflict recovery requires only the redressing of general systemic wrongs that will eventually "trickle down" to benefit youth along with the rest of the population.

As a result, most approaches to building peace marginalize issues surrounding children: they are little discussed in peace-building policies, seldom asked to participate in peace-building projects, and peace-building strategies are rarely informed by knowledge regarding either their wartime experiences or their postconflict needs. Yet given that they are disproportionately affected by conflict, children should be placed center stage, not only as a motivation for a sustainable settlement, but as actors for peace themselves. Not doing so undermines the potential for successful settlement over the long term and indeed the liberal peace agenda itself. With this in mind, this essay argues for a "kindering" of peace such that children are recognized as one of the "fault-lines of the human condition," which Johan Galtung has argued are so critical to debates regarding the nature of peace.

Children and Conflict, Children and Peace

The advent of so-called "new wars," in which the victims are overwhelmingly civilian, has increased child casualties such that a significant number of all those now killed in conflict are under eighteen. Children are affected by conflict in a variety of ways. Sometimes they become victims simply because they are in the wrong place at the wrong time, but children may also be deliberately targeted, either because they are representative of the continuity of a particular ethnic and/or religious identity or because they have taken part in hostilities and are thus viewed as justifiable objects of attack. In the aftermath of war, children are the group most likely to suffer the long-term consequences of, among other things, inadequate health care and insufficient access to education. They are also affected by the loss of family members or friends and by forced dislocation. Estimates suggest that there are today some nine million children who have had to leave their homes as a result of war and are currently living either as refugees or as internally displaced persons.[2]

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Children may also, of course, be soldiers themselves. According to the most common estimates there are currently around 300,000 children taking part in some thirty conflicts worldwide, although this number can fluctuate. While the phenomenon of "child soldiers" is not new, an increase in the proliferation of small arms has undoubtedly expanded their numbers. Further, children often play a variety of other roles that amount to logistical support for the war process. These roles could include ferrying supplies, delivering messages, and providing domestic and sexual services. Finally, children may also, more generally, form part of a war effort within a given society, such as when the United States and the United Kingdom called on children during World War II to tend victory gardens and to support other domestic elements of the war effort.

Despite this variety of roles that children play, our perceptions of conflict—and indeed of international politics more widely—consign children to a mere footnote, leaving them without sufficient attention or representation in formulations of peace. Certainly, policy-makers talk a great deal about creating peace in children's name. For example, Tony Blair, at the climax of his remarks on the declaration made a year after the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland, spoke of "offering the children . . . the future they deserve, which is now coming within their grasp." But the only mention of children in the text of the agreement is in its recognition that "young people from areas affected by the troubles face particular difficulties" and its promise to "support the development of special community-based initiatives based on international best practice."

Equally telling is the omission of any mention of the child, children, youth, or young people in some of the most crucial negotiations between Israel and Palestine. In the statements made at the signing ceremony for the 1998 Wye River talks, U.S. President Bill Clinton, Vice President Al Gore, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat, and King Hussein of Jordan all referred to children as a reason for peace. However, in the actual text of the Wye River Memorandum there was no mention of children whatsoever. In fact, no peace treaty has officially considered specific children's rights issues as they relate to a particular conflict. Partly this is a result of ignorance: policy-makers often do not realize the extent of the conflict's impact upon children. Partly, too, it stems from the fact that the parties to treaties seldom consider the knowledge and advice of those who advocate on behalf of children, such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Rather, NGOs are expected to support already agreed to postconflict strategies.

The exclusion of children from the peace agreement process is also related to the fact that children are easily conceptualized as victims, but very much marginalized as agents. The common view that children lack agency, however, is not necessarily accurate—as has been recognized in other social science discourses. In reality, children may be able to take an active role in creating peace and in ensuring its sustainability. Take, for example, the case of the Children's Peace Movement in Colombia. By the mid-1990s a series of peace negotiations had begun, spearheaded by a Conciliation Commission that was made up of prominent civic and religious leaders. Although, as a civil society effort, it was much more successful than anything that the government had managed to achieve, the Colombian peace movement as a whole remained weak and fragmented—until the creation of the Children's Movement for Peace. Beginning with a number of young people working in isolation, the movement evolved, without a formal structure, into a significant social force whose contributions to the peace process were recognized in its nomination for a Nobel Peace Prize.

Children can of course also disrupt peace if inadequate attention is given to their needs. Peace agreements represent only the beginning of the postconflict process. The solutions to some of the most pressing and long-term issues that postconflict societies face depend crucially on children and young populations. Those children who have actively taken part in hostilities, for example, must, in the aftermath of war, be reintegrated into their home communities. What, however, is their status? They may be children under international law, but they may be criminals, too. Like any other soldier, they face the societal impact of reintegration; but whereas most postconflict policies provide demobilized adult soldiers with a package of benefits designed to aid such integration, there is no such clear-cut policy for child soldiers, and particularly not for older children. For example, former combatants in Sierra Leone do not receive adequate funding for their reintegration, something that was recognized by Kofi Annan in his report prior to Resolution 1389 on the U.N. Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL). In some instances, job creation may simply not be a priority for either donors or the presiding government.

Children are also at a disadvantage in terms of land rights in postconflict societies—a significant issue for those children returning to their homes who find themselves orphaned and perhaps the heads of households. This has been a particular issue in Rwanda, where orphans have been an important class of land

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claimant and disputant. In general, national legal systems are not yet able to cope with children making such claims, and the result is even more children without a sustainable economic future, something that itself can threaten an already fragile peace. As one recent World Bank study has noted, there is "robust support for the hypothesis that youth bulges increase the risk of domestic armed conflict, and especially so under conditions of economic stagnation. . . . [This is] bad news for regions that currently exhibit both features, often in coexistence with intermediary and unstable political regimes, in particular Sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab World."[3] In Kosovo young people (between the ages of fifteen and twenty) were identified as the greatest potential source of civil unrest. A report by the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children argues that young people should be viewed as critical to the foundation of development and a sustainable peace in Kosovo, although in actuality they were denied a place in reconstruction efforts.[4]

A Life Beyond Childhood

The current liberal peace approach puts in place a set of norms when negotiating settlement and its aftermath that are very much dependant upon states, NGOs, and international organizations for their realization. These include the encouragement of a democratic political system and the rule of law alongside a liberal market system as a means of achieving economic development. These are very much "top-down" approaches, however; they require that the necessary institutions and mechanisms are already in place to ensure that such norms can be achieved. Arguably, a more comprehensive solution would encourage the promotion of human rights and human security by fully taking into account grassroots concerns. Recognizing children as agents in their own right would thus become inherent to a successful strategy of conflict resolution, where the root causes of conflict are addressed, all aspects of human security are taken into consideration, and the process of negotiation becomes an inclusive one. The question remains, however, as to how this might occur, and in this there are some fundamental difficulties.

We could, for example, argue for far more representation of the interests of children when concluding the terms of peaceful settlement. This could take place in a couple of obvious ways. NGOs advocating for children could consistently be asked their views at the time of the negotiations toward peaceful settlement,

rather than it being assumed that their role is important only as administrators of the welfare programs that are instituted in postconflict zones. This would require policy-makers to consider the effect of the settlement upon children's lives, rather than treat it simply as an afterthought. In addition, children themselves could be consulted regarding the nature of the peace, and of their requirements in it. One problem with involving children in decision-making processes, however, is in the framing of the boundary between childhood and adulthood. The question of children's agency has become a significant site of negotiation between those who interpret children as fully competent social actors, able to make legitimate claims for the realization of their rights, and those who interpret children as "still developing" social actors for whom rights claims can only be realized by adult actors on their behalf. Onora O'Neill has even questioned the use of the language of rights when approaching ethical issues as they relate to the child, arguing that a focus on obligations may be more relevant. Because children are dependent (unlike other "oppressed social groups" in a plea for rights) and vulnerable, she argues that the focus should change from the rights of children to the obligations that adults have to them. This is not an uncommon view; indeed, it characterizes much of the language of those measures that have been designed to address the "rights" of the child within the international system, such as the U.N. Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Nevertheless, O'Neill concedes that the boundary between childhood and adulthood is blurry. The variety of experiences that children under the age of eighteen may have means that some children, notably those O'Neill terms "mature minors," may find themselves as a group in a position partly analogous to that of other oppressed social groups.

Childhood, as much as it is a social construct, presents conceptual and practical challenges for policy-makers attempting to negotiate a sustainable settlement. The experiences of children affected by conflict do not constitute the ideal that appears to be fundamental to the Western liberal model. These are not children who have been under parental behest until the age of eighteen, who have had the chance to play, to develop a network of friends, to feel safe within a secure local environment, to plan for their education. These are children who may have been heads of their households from the age of twelve, who may have had to journey far to achieve their version of safety, who may have been forced to take part in the worst forms of child labor to secure some sort of income, and who may have had to kill as a way to survive. Giving them back an ideal childhood is not an

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option, and so they cannot be treated as if they will revert to being children once peace has been achieved. Rather, children should be seen in the aftermath of war as actors whose opinions are necessary when deciding upon how the reconstruction of the postconflict society is going to take place, especially over the long term. Moreover, in many societies children are charged with significant roles at a local level. They may be homemakers, landowners, breadwinners, and peace brokers. Yet, similar to other marginalized groups, their specific interests are not represented at the international level. Moving away from the bias of the "powerful" toward a consideration of the "knowledgeable" may thus lead to a more rounded consideration of standard security discourses.

Consider the variety of Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs for child soldiers that are in existence in Africa. In Uganda, for example, former members of the Lord's Resistance Army are sent to a reintegration center for an average of three to six weeks before they are reunited with their families. They may then receive follow-up visits within the community, which monitor their progress. Such efforts are laudable, and necessary, but they need to be carefully examined as to their efficacy. The U.N. Department of Peacekeeping Operations noted in a 1999 report that what was required for the success of DDR programs was for children to be consulted at various stages of the process;[5] the same arguments apply for children involved in conflict more generally. They too should be consulted as a source of knowledge—whether cultural or generational—that would be of use in a postconflict setting. Instead, however, the marginalization of children in government policy in postconflict zones around the world results in inadequate care and, in turn, to an increased likelihood of social breakdown and, possibly, the resumption of conflict.

Ignoring the specific needs of children when attempting to build peace actually flies in the face of the liberal peace-building agenda. The point is not to change the wording of a peace settlement so that "and children" can be inserted at the relevant points, but rather to understand that ignoring children makes it impossible to address crucial elements of conflict resolution. This essay has already mentioned the centrality of the notion of human rights to the liberal peace discourse; it must be seen, too, that children are central to contemporary conceptions of human rights. The UNCRC—adopted in 1989 and since ratified by almost every country in the world (apart from the United States and Somalia)—is the most widely accepted international rights document in history. This should place children center stage in the quest for the universal application of

human rights, and as such at the heart of the liberal peace project itself. Peace negotiations should not be reserved to those who can speak in the language of the "liberal club." They should be open to those who can provide an alternative—and potentially more fruitful—narrative.

NOTES

[1] The U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child defines as a child everyone under the age of eighteen.
[2] UNHCR, "What Is a Refugee?"; available at www.ninemillion.org/facts/facts.cfm.
[3] Henrik Urdal, "The Devil in the Demographics: The Effect of Youth Bulges on Domestic Armed Conflict, 1950–2000," World Bank Social Development Paper No. 14, July 2004; available at lnweb 18. worldbank.org/ESSD/sdvext.nsf/67ByDocName/TheDevilintheDemographicsTheEffectofYouthBulgeson DomesticArmedConflict1950-2000/$FILE/WP14_Web.pdf.
[4] Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, "Making the Choice for a Better Life: Promoting the Protection and Capacity of Kosovo's Youth," January 2001; available at www.womens commission.org/pdf/yu_adol.pdf.
[5] United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations, "Disarmament, Demobilization and Re-integration of Ex-Combatants in a Peacekeeping Environment: Principles and Guidelines," December 1999; available at www.un.org/Depts/dpko/lessons/DD&R.pdf.

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