Book Review:

Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention

By Séverine Autesserre

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In 2010 Séverine Autesserre, Assistant Professor at Barnard College and Columbia University, achieved remarkable notoriety for her first book, *The Trouble with the Congo: Local Violence and the Failure of International Peacebuilding.* Drawing on unparalleled original data derived from hundreds of field interviews and many years working as a post-conflict intervener, Autesserre presented a contextually radical explanation for why United Nations (UN) missions, particularly in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, have failed to end conflict and seed development. In her words, "bottom-up conflict precipitated considerable violence … and it became increasingly more influential during the transition [from pre to post-conflict status]."[1] At issue, she argued, was the United Nations' preclusion of acting on that violence and the role of organizational culture in focusing on top-down causes and solutions.

Despite two general critiques (that grassroots peacekeeping as a solution to bottom-up violence was strictly impractical, and that macro-level sources of violence are far more important),[2] it went on to be a successful book by all academic measures. Largely, unrelated to those glancing critiques, it still did not reach a level of paradigmatic change in policy. In fact, even with recent manuscripts reaching similar conclusions[3], change seems far away. Even in 2015, a major internal review of the UN peace operations included no recognizable reference to the concept of grassroots peacekeeping.[4] It appears that reaching this level of impact required increasing transposability and readership. If we take Autesserre's second book as model, this is best done by opening the geographic and substantive context.

In 2014, Autesserre returned to the subject with *Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention.* While far from a sequel, it does appear to be an attempt to deliver a more durable thesis on how individual interveners and donors approach conflict and peacekeeping. Of first note, this treatment of the subject has shifted from a primary focus on the United Nations in Congo to include the breadth of the titular "Peaceland". Peaceland is identified as the independent ethnographic space with unique "practices", "shared habits", and "dominant narratives", created and sustained by the arrival and movement of foreign peace workers throughout disparate, unfamiliar and difficult post-conflict environments.

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[1] Autesserre, Séverine. "Seven commentaries, three debates and one book: the author's response." *African Security Review* 20.2 (2011): 114-124.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Such as Holohan's *Networks of democracy: Lessons from Kosovo for Afghanistan, Iraq, and beyond* from Stanford University Press and Moore's *Peacebuilding in practice: Local experience in two Bosnian towns* from Cornell University Press.

[4] Ramos-Horta, José. "Uniting Our Strengths for Peace–Politics, Partnership and People: Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on United Nations Peace Operations." *New York: United Nations* (2015).

Autesserre frequently illustrates the relevance of Peaceland as an object of study through rich (often personal) anecdotes. Readers are treated to compelling accounts that illustrate the book's central theses: (1) the conception of problems and their solutions are heavily influenced by a "politics of knowledge" (2) interveners mutually produce a wealth of universal customs and behaviors that maintain that counter-intuitive gap between themselves and local populations. In this case, the "politics of knowledge" refers the penchant of Peaceland's constituents to construct their understanding of their host region based on internal organizational narratives, independent of their environment. The book concludes by way of a list of ready-to-implement policy recommendations informed primarily by individuals and organizations who have successfully pursued alternative approaches to their lives as interveners.

The distance between interveners and locals can be quite literal; as one case showed, Guatemalan peacekeepers enjoy more trust from locals in the Ituri District of Congo, simply for completing their patrols on foot, rather than in security vehicles.[5] Yet, interveners' distance from locals is not always spatially defined, such as the frequent rejection of local elites' input as unreliable or biased.

A particular poignant illustration flows from a section on the "bunkerization" of foreign nationals' lives and work in intervention areas. By erecting physical and procedural security barriers between interveners and the surrounding environment, local relationships suffer and actual risk may rise. Supplied examples show approaches based on fostering interaction and information flow have even led "local villagers [to mobilize] to keep [peacebuilders] safe, at great personal risk."[6] So why continue to employ ineffective, inefficient, or counterproductive practices when alternatives exist? "Ultimately, practices, habits, and narratives authorize, enable, and justify specific actions while precluding others. These actions in turn reproduce and reinforce existing practices, habits, and narratives."[7]

Over time, Autesserre argues, norms arise forming a highly inelastic realm of what is feasible and what is not, even if each of those available courses are suboptimal. Individual members of Peaceland, are ultimately are unlikely to question practices, as nearly all of their practical understanding of their environment has been defined from within Peaceland. This issue is unpacked at length, carefully contextualizing the role of narratives, donor priorities, and local responses.

The closing policy recommendations affirm that *Peaceland* has left behind institutional and political issues in the Congo as a focus, in order to pursue the ethnographic markers that currently distinguish efficacious interventions, from the inefficient, ineffective, or counterproductive. It offers nine bullet points that speak directly to the everyday lives of peacekeepers and their local counterparts flowing rather directly from each main concern raised in the book.[8] This shift in perspective has one particularly interesting implication, which is that *Peaceland*, by comparison, should benefit from higher readership among the many individuals that constitute Peaceland. In other words, it might be said that Autesserre has pursued grassroots reform approach to create grassroots interventions.

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[5] Autesserre, Séverine. *Peaceland: conflict resolution and the everyday politics of international intervention*. Cambridge University Press, 2014: 227.

[6] Ibid, 223.
[7] Ibid, 39.
[8] Autesserre, Severine. "The trouble with the Congo." *Cambridge Studies in International Relations* 115 (2010): 262.

Autesserre's commitment as a scholar to improving interventions and minimizing conflict and violence in the world has again been made evident in *Peaceland*. Returning to what is largely the very same data, she has redirected her approach towards the everyday human actions and interactions that continue to impede the creation of more agile, responsive, and effective interventions. Despite this representing a narrowing of her earlier thematic focus, it has only benefitted the durability and transferability of her conclusions and policy recommendations. Whether or not this effort will ultimately pop the expatriate bubble that defines *Peaceland* remains to be seen, but at the very least it has brought cohesion and further life into the discourse around why and when interventions fail.