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Between ‘the paradox of liberalism’ and ‘the paradox of decoloniality’: education for peacebuilding in conflict settings

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ABSTRACT

This article extends current debates in Education for Peacebuilding (EfP) in conflict settings. It presents and discusses two paradoxes I have observed when examining EfP literature and engaging in conversations with EfP scholars: ‘the paradox of liberalism’ and ‘the paradox of decoloniality’. I unpack these two paradoxes by engaging in conceptual synthesis and analysis and stitching together scholarly arguments in EfP, the larger field of peacebuilding, and decolonial thinking. I argue that by assuming liberal norms of conflict management, EfP scholarship is increasingly divorced from the complex material ontologies of contemporary conflicts. I caution against appropriative invocations of decolonial work in EfP, and I draw on actual examples to discuss their manifestations. I highlight tendencies to prioritise the onto-epistemological concerns of decoloniality over the political ones and to overlook the immediate needs of Southern populations. The article offers theoretically informed reflections and questions to stimulate further conversation.

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Introduction

As the call for papers in this special issue noted: ‘carrying out research in conflict-affected contexts inevitably requires entering and negotiating within local and global fields of power’ (Barakat, Bellino, and Paulson 2021). Understanding the multiple levels constitutive of these fields of power necessitates a recognition of how the ideas and theories underpinning research designs and praxis play a significant role in determining the terms of the conversation: What constitutes valid knowledge? Who speaks? What ideas to engage with? What thoughts to silence? What contexts to focus on, and what to marginalise? What research proposal to accept? And what is an undesirable project? Therefore, interrogating the interdependence of existing knowledge with education research and practice in conflict settings is vital if we want to restructure social relations at the epistemic level that underpins the work.

In this article, I focus on Education for Peacebuilding (henceforth EfP), a thematic area that has developed in the field of Education and Conflict as a challenge to liberal peace with its security agenda and its neglect of social services, such as health and education (see Novelli et al. 2014). I discuss complexities and tensions I have observed when navigating through the theories and ideas that permeate EfP literature and when having conversations with scholars in the field. I examine two core paradoxes I grappled with: the ‘paradox of liberalism’ and what I refer to as ‘the paradox of decoloniality’.

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‘The paradox of liberalism’ is a term introduced by Sabaratnam (2013, 263) to describe situations where ‘Western liberalism is seen as a source of oppression but also implicitly understood as the only true source of emancipation’. Sabaratnam discusses how this paradox is born directly out of Eurocentrism that takes Western ideas as the only serious site of politics. In this article, I use Sabaratnam’s ‘paradox of liberalism’ to refer to how despite the anti-liberal peace roots of the EfP, the ‘liberal social contract’ is often invoked in its scholarship. I argue that due to its bias toward liberal epistemology and Northern perspectives of peace, EfP scholarship is increasingly divorced from the complex material ontologies of contemporary conflicts. The meaning and implications of ‘education for peacebuilding’ in conflict contexts with complex illiberal forms of governance remain rather vague and underdeveloped. Reflecting on the ‘paradox of liberalism’ in EfP, this article encourages EfP scholars to pay attention to where the politics of the programming and intervention is located, and to seek out new forms of knowledge that explore what is possible to do amidst contextual constraints instead of indulging in idealistic interventions.

This article also introduces the notion of the ‘paradox of decoloniality’ to discuss some aspects of appropriative decolonial sentiments in EfP. I invoke some actual examples to problematise a tendency of some EfP scholars to focus on the onto-epistemological dimension of decolonial work at the expense of political engagement with transnational solidarities, praxis and struggle. I argue that EfP scholarship must remain mindful that our commitment to the longer-term transformative project of peacebuilding and decolonisation should not entail sacrificing the immediate needs of struggling populations. Reflecting on the paradox of decoloniality, I offer some theoretical insights that I hope might help advance more critical decolonial engagements in EfP.

At the core of this article’s contribution is a call to interrogate Eurocentric limits of thought and to decolonise EfP critically. Theoretically, the paper is informed by decolonial thinking, particularly the body of work of Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2018). For Santos, a decolonial project involves theoretical and methodological work that engages in a deconstructive unveiling of the Eurocentric roots of the modern social sciences and in constructing alternative and transformative knowledge. It is imperative then that a serious effort is made to expose not just the old versions of Eurocentrism but the new ways in which they re-manifest themselves (Sabaratnam 2013, 2017). Inspired by Santos (2018, 126), who calls on scholars to engage in epistemological imagination that seeks out novel ideas and perspectives, I hope that this article will be received both negatively as ‘a moment of interruption’ and positively as a catalyst for dialogue and conversations with the readers and hopefully future EfP authors. I emphasise that I am not without blind spots and flaws in my work, and the theoretical reflections I offer in this paper are not meant to prescribe solutions. Ultimately, there is no easy answer to the nuanced challenges presented by the complexity of EfP in conflict settings.

The paper is structured as follows. First, in response to the focus of this special issue on researchers’ reflexivity, relationships and complicity, I start by positioning myself personally and professionally within the field. Then, I provide a brief account of EfP and situate this thematic area of study with the larger field of Education and Conflict. After that, I unpack geopolitical shifts in managing conflict and introduce the ‘paradox of liberalism’ followed by a reflection on ideas that might be helpful in negotiating this paradox. Following that, I introduce and discuss the ‘paradox of decoloniality’ followed by another reflection on some theoretical insights that could be relevant when grappling with this paradox. I end each main section with a set of questions to invite ongoing dialogue, and I conclude the paper by summarising presented ideas and re-stating implications. I turn now to modelling some reflexivity and providing background information on my positionality. I hope this might help you see how I arrived at writing this article.

Notes on author’s positionality

Following the forced dispossession of Palestinians in 1948 (or what is known as Nakba), my family moved from Haifa, in historical Palestine, to Syria. Before moving, 13 members of my family, amongst them children, were killed when Zionist militia attacked their house at night and burned it down. I was

born and raised as a Palestinian refugee in Syria. I experienced the Syrian war and a forced internal displacement in 2013 before leaving the country for the UK to pursue my master's and doctoral studies. In Syria, I was involved in educational programming, evaluation, and delivery for internally displaced children and youths. I thus approach the field of Education and Conflict as a practitioner, a scholar, and above all, as a member of two communities affected by conflict: Palestinians and Syrians.

I draw largely on post-colonial and decolonial thinking, engage in reflexivity about dynamics of power and marginalisation and promote a greater interdisciplinary collaboration so that the multi-dimensionality of human embodied experience and its interrelationship with oppressive structures can be adequately understood and addressed (Brooks and Hajir 2020; Hajir and Kester, 2020; Cremin et al., 2021; Hajir, Habibi and Kurian 2022). My lived experience, coupled with the fact that my family and loved ones are still in Syria, makes me particularly interested in practice-relevant applicability and the effects of EfP knowledge. One question that guides my thinking in the field is: How can EfP remain attentive to local and international regimes of power that exclude, violate and discriminate without deflecting attention away from the need to alleviate lived struggles, relieve the suffering of those at the receiving end of violence, and assist them to live a life with liveable circumstances? Overall, I am interested in the challenging character of both EfP work and post(de)colonial thinking and how they can be complex and counterproductive if done without caution and reflexivity. I feel particularly concerned (Hajir 2020; Hajir, Kurian and McInerney 2021) by patterns of neo-orientalism¹ and post(de)colonial opportunism that seem to increasingly permeate post(de)colonial engagements in academic circles.

Philosophically speaking, I believe in the significance of a critical realist (CR) lens to avoid the risks of the expanding rise of relationalism in the field (see Joseph 2018). I also agree with Alderson (2019) on the value of this lens for Education, Conflict and Peace-building research. I am drawn to the ontological and epistemological orientations of CR for their consistency with critical-emancipatory social science traditions (Buch-Hansen and Nielsen 2020), their alignment with 'subaltern studies, decolonial studies, and other counter-hegemonic projects' (Tinsley 2022, 237) and for what I see as their potential to advance more critical nuanced engagements in these theories. I turn now to offer a brief overview of Education, Conflict and Peacebuilding.

Education, conflict and peacebuilding

Scholars in the field of Education and Conflict critiqued what they saw as a mismatch between the transformative potential of education and its narrow framing within the global agendas of international organisations committed to the liberal peace model (Novelli et al. 2014). Prioritising security, democracy promotion and market reforms at the expense of social services such as health and education were seen as insufficient and misguided, especially if our goal is working for long-term transformations and sustainable peacebuilding (McCandless 2011; Novelli and Smith 2011). Calls for balancing security concerns with investments in a more socially just education system paved the way for the expansion of an important thematic area in the field of Education and Conflict; an area that focuses on the role of education in transforming societies through processes of peacebuilding (Davies 2004; Smith 2007; Paulson 2011; Pherali 2016).

Education for Peacebuilding (EfP) explores how education can support the peacebuilding process (Novelli and Smith 2011). Scholarly engagements in this area call for reforming and reconstructing education systems (resource allocation, governance structures, curricular revisions and language policies etc.) to address education inequalities and promote peace and social transformation (Novelli, Lopes Cardozo, and Smith 2015, 2017, 2019; Lopes Cardozo and Shah 2016, 2021; Novelli and Higgins 2017). As captured by Novelli and Smith (2011, 14), EfP entails 'the need for structural and institutional changes that involve changes to existing power relations within society'. In essence, then, EfP foregrounds the political role of education. It is about how education can play a role in moving toward the notion of positive peace: the presence of social justice and the absence of structural and cultural violence (Galtung, 1976).

An increasingly employed conceptual framework that explores how education might contribute to goals of social transformation and peacebuilding is the 4Rs framework (Novelli, Lopes Cardozo, and Smith 2015). Combining social justice and transitional justice thinking, the 4Rs framework seeks to recognise multiple dimensions of inequality that often trigger conflicts and to address the legacies of these conflicts in and through education (Novelli, Lopes Cardozo, and Smith 2015). As expressed by Novelli, Lopes Cardozo, and Smith (2019), the framework's central position is that inequalities and injustice (including within the education system) are essential for understanding the reasons for the outbreak of civil wars (the drivers of conflict) and that addressing inequalities (including in education) is necessary to bring about sustainable peace and overcome the legacies of conflict (Novelli, Lopes Cardozo, and Smith 2017).

Scholarly work on EfP has so far been illuminating as a critical imaginary for understanding the structures and practices of education systems and how they could perpetuate a conflict or play a positive transformative role in peace. However, in what follows, I argue that as manifestations of 'authoritarian' or 'illiberal' peace (Lewis, Heathershaw, and Megoran 2018; Owen et al. 2018) are rapidly on the rise, EfP scholarship largely anchored in liberal principles and worldviews for how education can play a role in addressing conflicts can no longer ignore the mounting challenges it faces. I start by providing a brief overview of the geopolitical shifts in managing and resolving conflicts before discussing the paradox of liberalism in EfP.

Geopolitical shifts in managing and resolving conflicts

The common mode of terminating civil wars through internationally negotiated settlements has largely declined in the 2000s² (Lewis, Heathershaw, and Megoran 2018). Instead, wars are increasingly resolved through military victories, oppressive power and illegal military occupation (Kovacs and Svensson 2013; Alayan 2018). This shift towards authoritarian mechanisms of conflict management can be observed in conflicts in Xinjiang, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Chechnya, Sri Lanka, Eastern Turkey, Ethiopia, South Asia, Libya, Palestine, and other conflict-affected states (Lewis 2017; Heathershaw and Owen 2019; Smith et al. 2020; Abboud 2021). The version of 'peace' produced in such contexts disregards principles of social justice and the rule of law. It consolidates instead an alternative framework for conflict resolution based on authoritarian settlement (Costantini and Hanau Santini 2022).

With this rise of illiberal peacebuilding and authoritarian forms of conflict management, Lewis, Heathershaw, and Megoran (2018) developed a new conceptual framework called Authoritarian Conflict Management (ACM). ACM represents a mode of conflict management marked by militaristic, state-centric approaches that reassert state authority over resources and territory and achieves a collective state of political compliance through various means of control: discursive, spatial, and political-economic practices. Keen (2021) conducted a quantitative study of 39 violent intrastate conflicts in the Middle East and Central Asia to test the assumptions undergirding ACM. One of the main concerns of Keen's study was to examine the overall prevalence of ACM practices (discursive, spatial and political-economic practices). Keen's findings in relation to the discursive pillar (blocking information, controlling knowledge, disseminating one narrative that rejects to recognise or redress opposition's grievances) are of particular interest to the educational focus of this article. Keen (2021) found that discursive control was deployed by regimes in 85 per cent of all studied conflicts. Overall, then, as expressed by Cheung (2019), present-day scholarship has not yet recognised the political reality that authoritarian peacebuilding cases around the world have upheld themselves for so long that they qualify as post-conflict governance.

Revisiting existing EfP debates as illustrated earlier in the paper while keeping the above picture in mind, it is difficult to ignore the dissonance between the liberal epistemology that guides EfP frameworks and discourses and the illiberal conflict materialities emerging on the ground.

The paradox of liberalism³

To a significant extent, EfP scholarship remains fundamentally anchored by liberal ideas that seek to transition to peace by implementing systemic reforms, policies and curricular changes that address the grievances of conflicting parties. The 4R framework, for example, draws on Western critical thinking (Fraser, Galtung, Lederach and others) and offers four conceptual constructs that attempt to articulate solutions to address the root causes and legacy of conflicts. Santos (2018) encourages us to question the epistemological foundations of these theories, which, while ‘truly magnificent and brilliant’ (viii), speak little to contemporary complex political realities. Epistemologically speaking, the current mode of thinking in EfP can only have practical political currency in contexts where ‘democracy’ and ‘liberalism’ – two main pillars of proper governance according to liberal theory – are in place. By not accounting for contemporary and recent geopolitical shifts in ‘resolving’ conflicts, this thinking ‘seems impossible or, if not impossible, self-defeating’ (Santos 2018, viii). It obscures the inherently tumultuous, ‘muddled and complex’ (Kester et al. 2022) nature of working for structural change in educational systems in on the ground.

Recently, there has been a recognition in the field that oppressive power structures are unlikely to be transformed through liberal policy prescriptions (Hajir 2019; Pherali 2021). In his study of the Southern Thailand context, Pherali (2021) argues that while the 4Rs framework usefully exposes underlying structural tensions in education, it does little to enable change or to show avenues for challenging power imbalances in contexts ‘where authoritarian regimes monopolise power and resources’ (14). Pherali suggests that the 4R framework focuses little on how education interacts with conflict processes, patterns and outcomes. Pherali’s critique speaks strongly to the complexities I encountered when considering the 4R framework in relation to the Syrian context. With its primary focus on liberal power, the 4R framework is of less use in contexts where illiberal forms of governance materialise [for example, see Abboud (2021) for a description of the challenges faced when considering a concept like ‘reconciliation’ in the Syrian context]. Echoing and enhancing reflections offered by Abboud (2021, 544), I found that ‘the illiberal conflict ontology’ of the Syrian conflict sits in tension with the existing EfP knowledge.

Overall, building on burgeoning scholarship in the field of peacebuilding around ACM and cases of illiberal peace worldwide, it seems that existing EfP scholarship is extensively invested in analysing cases representing a small fraction of global conflict. With its optimistic assumptions of liberal norms of conflict management and its ongoing epistemic alignment with liberal principles and lines of thinking, existing conceptualisations and frameworks are ‘trapped in the European gaze’ (Heathershaw and Owen 2019, 270). They work for the intervention and programming market while reducing complexity in ‘a pathologising way’ (Koddenbrock 2014, 674; cited in Lewis 2017). They have also, so far, avoided grappling with important questions:

- How do we understand EfP when post-conflict authorities are authoritarian, illiberal and oppressive⁴?
- Can education be used tactically and pragmatically as a force for peacebuilding without reinforcing the authority of the powerful? If yes, where should we place ontological priority?
- How can we work for peacebuilding through education amidst continuing violence?

To clarify my position, I am not against liberal ideas around social justice guiding and informing EfP scholarship. In a world where these ideas are applicable, I would employ them and actively seek to operationalise them. However, the paradox I raise in this paper shows that these ideas, albeit tempting, are increasingly detached and unhelpful. Therefore, my argument here is not an ideological one against or with ‘liberalism’. It is a practical action-oriented one that stresses the need to ‘foster future-oriented concepts and politics for educational justice that attend squarely to our ‘non-ideal’ world’ (Sriprakash 2022, 3). It seems crucial to ask: What set of ideas might we turn to?

Beyond 'de-populated' politics: resistance, active, and passive struggle

Trying to navigate through the paradox of liberalism, and when seeking ideas to guide my thinking in relation to complex and illiberal contexts, I resorted to arguments informed by decolonial thinking. For example, Sabaratnam (2013, 2017) suggests that to decolonise peacebuilding, it is crucial to think about where the politics of the programming and intervention is located. As illustrated above, EfP scholarship tends to focus on systems, policies and governance structures. This is patently not sufficient for the politics of programming in complex contexts.

In some cases, local/ indigenous claims might challenge the assumptions that underlie current EfP scholarship. As Cruz (2021) maintains, indigenous communities have their understanding of peace and peacebuilding based on 'the historical accumulation of their own resistance' (279). Their resistance, he asserts, 'is a pedagogical way to make known the struggles and knowledge' (280). Making a similar point when imagining horizons of freedom for Palestinians beyond the state, Noura Erakat (2019) argues that there are immense possibilities for a better understanding of the conditions of unfreedom. She notes the value of a resistance spirit for envisioning different ways of understanding 'what it means to exist with dignity in an excess of sovereignty' (240). Thus, local/indigenous populations might reject reconciliation with what they see as structures of ongoing settler-colonial violence (Randazzo 2016), and they might perceive calls for 'participation' and 'representation' as complicit in perpetuating foundational injustices and inequalities. In situations like this, challenging the paradox of liberalism in EfP requires that we delve deeper into exploring the understandings, interpretations and claims of those at the receiving end of violence (Kester 2021) and those whom 'liberal' actors usually silence for not passing the 'scientific peace matrix' (Cruz 2021, 280). It requires that we remain open to the possibility of deconstructing the meaning of EfP in terms of the locus of the intervention, the level of analysis and where we place ontological priority.

In authoritarian contexts, different stakeholders at education institutions (policymakers, educators and students) find themselves in what Honig (2013, 8) calls a political 'condition of impossibility' with no 'path to action in times of confinement, constraint, or catastrophe' (cited in Bose 2021). In the face of this daunting reality, we either abandon EfP work to avoid the ethical dilemmas of working for peacebuilding apolitically and risk reinforcing the authority of the powerful, or we try 'to re-ontologize knowledge within lived experience, geographical/conceptual space, and personal practice' (Kester 2022, 5) as a strategy toward a 'legitimate theorisation from the everyday' (Cruz 2021, 281). This second option is not about abandoning politics. It is about avoiding 'depopulated'⁵ politics. It is about uncovering what we might not perceive as political because of our liberal conditioning. By complicating politics, this second option rejects reifying mainstream notions of EfP. Instead, it 'recognises struggles for peace as grounded, as embodied, as struggles for everyday existence' (Berents, 2015, 195), and poses questions around how education systems can practically strengthen these struggles.

Bonaventura de Sousa Santos (2018) enhances this position when he distinguished between three different times that social groups go through in the life of their struggle: 'active confrontational struggle', 'passive non-confrontational struggles', and a time when passive or silent struggles prepare for active struggle. Ultimately, the kinds of 'silent struggles' that might be exhibited by people living under oppressive authoritarian rule are supported by valuable experiential lived knowledge⁶ that is worth uncovering and that could be the ontological focus on EfP research methodologies in such contexts. The envisioned role of EfP in such situations might not be directly political (as per own liberal understanding of the term). However, it could still be essential for enhancing silent struggle in preparation for its other phases, and it could yield fruitful progressive political possibilities in the long term.

The reflections above expose the need for EfP scholarship for new forms of knowledge that explore 'what is possible to do' given contextual constraints rather than indulging in idealistic interventions (Moe and Stepputat 2018). They advance a call for decolonising EfP research

methodologies, employing methods that engage the body, lived experiences and struggles and involving research participants – students, parents, and teachers – in producing their needs and aspirations for how education can play a role in peacebuilding. We must also ensure that we ground these visions and aspirations within their historical and geopolitical specificity (Said 2001). Without doing this, we risk delegitimising lived experiences and knowledge as well as closing down alternative possibilities mainly for not corresponding with our discursive frameworks, liberal epistemological foundations, or political commitments. Thinking decolonially, however, is not without its risks and dangers.

The paradox of decoloniality

In a previously published work with colleagues (Hajir, Kurian and McInerney 2021), we unpacked the challenging character of decolonial thinking in education and how it can be complex and counterproductive if done without nuance, caution, reflexivity and criticality. We argued that well-intentioned uncritical work could reinforce binary thinking and cultural essentialism, contribute to historical erasure, and perpetuate damaging forms of relativism. In this section, I introduce the notion of the ‘paradox of decoloniality’ to (1) denote that a focus on the onto-epistemological at the expense of the political by EfP Western scholarship is ethically problematic and (2) to emphasise that the tension between short-term needs and long-term goals in EfP work informed by the decolonial turn is a serious one that is yet to be addressed. I start by examining two actual examples I encountered when interacting with scholars working in the field. I hope that reflecting on concrete examples responds to what Connell (2007, cited in Andreotti 2014) refers to as ‘dirty theory – that is, theorising that is mixed up with specific situations’ (207). The purpose of dirty theory is to clarify and illuminate a situation in its concreteness (*ibid.*).

My discussion of the ‘paradox of liberalism’ indicated the need to draw insights from decolonial thinking. However, it is crucial to remain mindful of the complexities, contradictions and limitations that prevail uncritical use of these theories in the field. We only need to note the impact the decolonial turn is having on how EfP scholars approach research projects and proposals. In one instance, I was involved in a conversation where a Western peacebuilding scholar opposed a research proposal to enhance digitalisation in higher education in Palestine. In another scenario, another scholar raised questions and criticism of an EfP researcher whose work explores how to promote the employability of Syrian university youths in Jordan. Their arguments were along the following lines: ‘Instead of investing in expanding modernity, we should aim to dismantle the system. We should invest in valorising other ways of being and knowing’.

To clarify, I am not mentioning these examples to disavow decolonial politics. My intention is to counter some appropriations that could be dangerous for their capacity to further marginalise already disenfranchised populations. In this regard, I suggest that some valuable insights could be drawn from Santos’s (2018) call for ‘ecologies of knowledge’, where he encourages researchers to evaluate knowledge based on its consequences rather than its sources and to do that in ‘light of social struggles in which the relevant epistemic community is involved.’ (Santos 2018, 38). Santos’s approach is illuminating because it suggests that the onto-epistemic and the political dimensions of decolonial work are inextricably linked. Before criticising a research proposal or intervention on onto-epistemological grounds, we need to assess the political meaning of this initiative. At a time when Palestinian intellectuals are stressing the need for raising new Palestinian generations who can think in global terms and can connect, coordinate and organise with social movements around the world (Erakat, 2019), enhancing digitalisation at HE institutions in Palestine is politically meaningful towards peacebuilding and decolonisation in this context.

As for the second example about promoting the employability of university-level Syrian youths in Jordan, it seems important to ask: How ethical is it to refuse to improve economic opportunities for marginalised refugee Syrian youths, contending with the ramifications of a globalised war, for fear of perpetuating a problematic capitalist economic system? Cannot ‘employability’ be promoted

‘within the bounds of ethical action’ (McCowan 2015)? Can judgments not be made based on the coherence and complementarity of different, not necessarily mutually exclusive, moral stances and political principles and considerations? (McCowan 2015). We do not want to reinforce a consumer model, but we have a moral responsibility to relieve the immediate suffering of youths. These youths are seeking employability to survive, not to thrive. Is the de-colonial project not ultimately about placing ‘human lives and life in general first’? (Mignolo, 2009, 178).

When I encounter examples like these, I sometimes contemplate how grateful I am that these scholars did not have a say in the education I received when I was a child. I wonder how ethical it is to seek to find a remedy for multidimensional socio-economic crises brought upon the world by western hegemonic neoliberal capitalism by imposing Western scholars’ appropriative invocations of the decolonial option on Southern youths and children. Are we not, by taking these stances, risking excluding marginalised societies whose embodied everyday lives are tied up with modern social orders? Are we not perpetuating the existence of Southern societies locally while continuing to be globalised? Are we not unintentionally causing suffering and reproducing violence precisely when we are trying to move beyond the violence of modernity?

Therefore, the ‘paradox of decoloniality’ refers, in part, to the increasing inclination of Western scholarship to foreground the onto-epistemic concerns of decolonial work while conveniently ignoring its political dimension, praxis and struggle (Fúnez-Flores 2020, 2021, 2022a, 2022b). Instead of engaging in concrete action and solidarity movements that amplify the political aspirations of oppressed social groups, privileged intellectuals restrict their work to embarking on an unguaranteed journey of search for alternative ways of living and being. While it is indeed essential to actively seek ‘sociologies of emergences’ (Santos 2018) and to look for ‘alter-politics’ (Hage 2015), sitting in well-lit, well-heated offices and passing reckless simplistic judgments on research proposals and projects that could improve the lives of generations of Southern populations for perceiving them as extending modernity is morally irresponsible. Much more work is needed towards critical decolonial engagements that are attentive to the positionality of who is doing what, and the level the work is focused on (political, onto-epistemological). It is also important to consider the possible tension between the short-term needs/ risks and the long-term goals of the work.

Two questions are key here:

- How can we constructively engage in decolonial work in the field of EfP while remaining attentive to the threats embedded in some appropriative discourses to the immediate needs of Southern people?
- How can we ensure that our decolonial scholarly work is not complicit in locking in global inequalities, further excluding marginalised societies whose embodied everyday lives are tied up with modern social orders, and perpetuating the existence of Southern societies locally while continuing to be globalised?

These are complex, albeit crucial, questions. I do not claim to have answers. I am still navigating my way through them. Below, I offer some theoretical insights I found relevant. I hope they might help contribute to this ongoing conversation.

Critical decolonial work: ‘diatopical identity’, ‘double consciousness’, and trans-scalar politics

In this section, I introduce two theoretical notions, ‘diatopical identities’ (Santos 2018) and ‘double consciousness’ (Du Bois 1903). I hope these two notions will help me clarify that my frustration with the stances of Western scholarship mentioned above is not resulting from me wanting my

people to follow the footsteps of Western countries and repeat the same mistakes that brought upon us the existential crises we are facing today. Instead, my frustration resulted from my belief in the necessity of ensuring that EfP work that is oriented toward the decolonial vision of alternative futures must acknowledge the material domain and must be entangled with global trans-scalar analysis. In other words, it must work across scales and spread ‘risks, vulnerabilities, and sacrifices more evenly’ (Andreotti 2014, 385).

Santos’s (2018) concept of ‘diatopical identity’ yields valuable insights when we engage in decolonial work in institutions and places that are interrelated with modern social orders. Santos explains the meaning of ‘diatopical’ identity as ‘keeping one foot in existing institutions with a view to changing them, and the other in new institutions of their own creation’ (250). In other words, it is an invitation to think of ‘polycentric ways and sites of learning and unlearning’ (296). By ‘polycentric’, Santos entails that the decolonial project infers responsibilities and actions to be articulated and undertaken across scales (both North and South/colonisers and colonised). He says:

The epistemologies of the South assume a diatopical identity: one foot in the macro, another in the micro; one foot in the world, another in the neighbourhood; one foot in the future, another in the here and now (Santos 2018, 251).

By encouraging us to ‘keep one foot in the world’ and another ‘in the neighbourhood’, we are invited to consider both the short-term interests of affected actors/ targeted populations and the long-term goals of the transformative de-colonial project. Put differently, diatopical identity is a call not to ignore the material domain that we inhabit. This notion reveals the inherent incoherence in and the dangerous character of EfP scholarly stances that choose to cut off Southern populations from ‘modernity’ because they want to dismantle the system.

Another helpful notion is Du Bois’s double consciousness⁷ (1903). The political value of this notion to EfP and the decolonial project more broadly lies in capturing what is disillusioned and misguided about a simplistic approach to epistemic de-linking by demonstrating that structures from higher scales limit political options available to Southern people. ‘Double consciousness’ offers an alternative framework to the dialectic between ‘modernity’ and ‘local ways of being and knowing’ by focusing instead on the encounter between the two (Gordon 2007). It highlights the value of the border-like quality of scholarly engagements informed by double-positionality and engaging in critiques in both directions (Alcoff 2008). Du Bois’s double consciousness enables you to see why a scholar like me is unable to construct modernity and local ways of being/ knowing as epistemic antitheses but as two ‘mutually-sustaining conditions of being in whose agonistic embrace lies a quite different story of political evolution’ (Cooppan 2005, 300).

The theoretical insights I present here have important implications for EfP work. They entail that EfP work should not separate the epistemic from the political and the material. It should not be confined within the boundaries of the conflicted contexts and must pay attention to global trans-scalar connections. In other words, it must be connected with and have implications for EfP in global contexts of relative peace. Working for peacebuilding in Palestine, for example, could better benefit from EfP in the US, which continues to provide Israel with \$3.3 billion dollars annually in the form of weapon grants funded by tax dollars. The conceptual shift I suggest here will open up ‘possibilities for connections and solidarities between the West and the non-West’ (Sabaratnam 2013, 262). This is crucial if we are genuinely interested in working for peacebuilding through education decolonially.

Concluding thoughts

Much of the work in the field of EfP has been rich and an essential contribution to a critical imaginary for understanding the structures and practices of education systems and how they could

perpetuate a conflict or play a positive transformative role in peace. However, this article highlights two paradoxes in scholarly engagements in the field: the paradox of liberalism and the paradox of decoloniality. It unpacked their manifestations and offered reflections and theoretical insights that could be helpful when grappling with them.

I argued that dominant EfP scholarship embraces assumptions of liberal norms of conflict management and liberal worldviews for how education can play a role in addressing conflicts. This mode of thinking is increasingly divorced from the complex, messy and illiberal realities of most contemporary conflicts. By ignoring recent geopolitical shifts in how conflicts are being managed and ‘resolved’, EfP scholarship risks peripheralising ‘the actual conduct of the war and its materialisation as a lived reality for millions of people (Abboud 2021, 545).

Having suggested the need for drawing insights from decolonial thinking, I cautioned against what I refer to as ‘the paradox of decoloniality’. I problematised scholarly engagements that prioritise the onto-epistemological concerns of decoloniality over the political ones. I also emphasised that the tension between the short-term needs of Southern youths and the long-term goals of decolonial work is a serious one that is yet to be addressed. I called for critical decolonial engagements that recognise that interrupting and dismantling systemic violence necessitates trans-scalar work that spreads ‘risks, vulnerabilities, and sacrifices more evenly’ (Andreotti 2014, 385). I proposed Santos’s ‘diatopical identity’ (Santos 2018) and de Bois’s ‘double consciousness’ (1903) as two notions that could be useful when grappling with the paradox of decoloniality in EfP.

Finally, instead of prematurely imbuing peacebuilding frameworks with liberal constructs drawn from Western critical theory or adopting appropriative decolonial stances that endanger the immediate needs and interests of Southern populations, this article invites EfP scholars to develop a clear vision of the crisis we face today, and to foster new tools and theories that attend to the illiberal realities that govern most contemporary (post)conflict settings. In places where the route for progressive politics is not pre-figured (or does not even exist), venturing into paving it requires a commitment to centre our gaze upon the people affected by violence, ask different questions, think differently about ‘politics’ and ‘peacebuilding’, and ‘identify new avenues of hope and change’ (Pherali 2022, 181). ‘Hopefulness’, in this sense, is not avoidance or a cynical view of pragmatism. It is rather a mode of re-orienting ‘politics’ towards theorising viable practical avenues that occupy a space ‘between idealism and realism’ (Hajir 2019), and that grounds thinking in reality, while never ceases to envision transformative possibilities.

Notes

1. Rey Chow (1993) coined the term ‘Neo-orientalist anxiety’ to express her suspicions of the sincerity of some appropriative post(de)colonial pursuits. She wonders if longing for the pure East/ South is nothing but an attempt to preserve it lest it becomes contaminated by the west and accordingly ‘unOtherable’.
2. I focus in this part on the emergence and consolidation of dictatorial regimes as an example that calls into question the scope of frameworks anchored in concepts related to liberal peace.
3. I use the word ‘liberalism’ here in its classical sense (see Fukuyama 2022, 3–4) to refer to when institutions are governed by the rule of law; a system of formal rules that limit executive power
4. This question is influenced by the work of Abboud (2021), who poses a similar question in relation to the local turn in the larger field of peacebuilding.
5. The term is used by Kelly Grotke (2014) in an article he wrote for the Humanity Journal. It can be accessed here: <http://humanityjournal.org/blog/what-gets-lost-reflection/>
6. Examples of this knowledge, as proposed by Santos are the awareness of injustice and the arbitrariness of power, choosing how to concretely resist based on a critical analysis of the situation, and pushing opposition to the limit without direct confrontation—learning from past situations and anticipating what might happen. This requires complex, experienced, lived knowledge closely linked to the struggle of these populations, without which they might not survive.
7. Du Bois (1903) first introduced the concept of ‘double consciousness’ to denote the feeling of ‘twoness’ that a black American feel as both an American and a person belonging to the black community. He discusses this as having “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (Du Bois 1903, 2).

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