A commentary on Séverine Autesserre’s *The Trouble with the Congo*

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Autesserre’s work provides an excellent introduction to the culture of peacebuilding and makes a convincing case that it is relevant for understanding the failure of the intervention in the Democratic Republic of Congo. But she misses an opportunity to fully dissect the broad nature of this expatriate produced cultural space by ignoring its social aspects and focusing instead on the history of the Congo wars. In addition, a focus on micro-level factors cannot fully explain the profound suspicion that continues to shape the relationship between Congolese civilians and international interveners. For that, an understanding of the broader geopolitical context of UN interventions remains necessary.
A commentary on Séverine Autesserre’s *The trouble with the Congo*

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In 1960, shortly after becoming the first prime minister of the independent Democratic Republic of Congo, Patrice Lumumba was beset by multiple crises. Most dramatically, the mineral-rich Katanga province declared its independence just ten weeks after his ascension. The secessionists were led by Moïse Tshombe, a Congolese businessman with close ties to the Belgian government (and by most accounts operating under the direction of Brussels with Washington’s blessing) and sought to divide the newly independent nation. Soon after, a UN peacekeeping force was brought in, but its actions were widely perceived as biased against the youthful prime minister. Indeed, after being captured by the forces of Joseph-Désiré Mobutu on the banks of the Sankuru River, Lumumba appealed to the UN mission to save him. But by order of the UN headquarters in New York, he was purposely left to his fate and was eventually murdered by a firing squad and dismembered in the presence of Belgian officers. Such is the ignominious first chapter in the long relationship between the Congo and the international body.

Details of the Congo’s first peacekeeping effort are well known to most Africa observers, and of course, to the Congolese themselves. It is a tragic tale of colonialism, greed, racism and international intrigue. It is worth repeating here as we consider Séverine Autesserre’s scathing critique of the latest international intervention in the Congo.

What is the trouble with the Congo? For Autesserre, the source of the Congo’s dysfunction is both internal and external. This in itself is not a profound observation. But Autesserre’s book takes on the difficult task of moving beyond simple caricatures of corrupt and racist international interveners to instead demonstrate how racial ‘frames’ regarding the Congo’s supposed pathologies were translated into an ineffective peacebuilding strategy. She shows how a ‘peacebuilding culture’, infused with stereotypes of Africa and the Congo in particular, contributed to a failure to address the real source of violence, namely land issues and micro-level tensions between local communities in the Kivus.
In the aftermath of a humanitarian catastrophe, a massive transnational apparatus comprising several different categories of international actors – international and regional organisations, aid groups, relief agencies and multinational corporations – usually descends upon the scene. Rapidly coalescing through the proliferation of both physical and social structures, a complex set of practices defines the interactions between these transnational peacebuilders and the pre-existing local configurations of power. In her work Autesserre provides an intimate view of this world, arguing correctly that it constitutes its own social and political category worthy of analysis.

At core, Autesserre’s book takes on the basic question of what is the source of dysfunction for international peacebuilding efforts. Much of the literature in both policy and academic circles emphasises the design and function of international institutions and the corresponding effects it has on the behaviour of individual actors. The prevailing wisdom is that the failure of a specific peacebuilding effort stems from the design of the intervention, or equally commonly, the implementation of the peacebuilding model. But Autesserre departs from this approach by identifying and critiquing a cultural source of dysfunction.

Her agenda is straightforward. Despite the scale of the efforts, international interveners repeatedly failed to resolve the persistent violence in the eastern part of the country. By focusing their attention solely on national and regional level dynamics, peacebuilders ignored the local factors driving the violence in the east. The question is why this happened. For Autesserre, the culture of peacebuilders themselves is to blame: ‘Ultimately, the peacebuilding culture oriented foreign actors towards an intervention strategy that permitted, and at times even exacerbated, fighting, massacres, and massive human rights violations’ (p 125).

But can peacebuilders be thought of as constituting a ‘culture’? Autesserre answers this question by showing that peacebuilders shared a worldview which contained multiple faulty assumptions about the nature of Congolese violence. Key among these was the perception that local violence in the Congo was endemic, perpetual and impossible to resolve. This went hand in hand with the tendency to view the conflict as driven by national actors or neighbouring states, itself an assumption that removed agency from Congolese civilians living within the war zone. As a result, few efforts were made to address local sources of violence.
There is much in this formulation with which I can sympathise. Positing cultural forces as being responsible for the failure to address local violence is a provocative and appealing thesis. The more common explanation of the persistence of violence concerns the mandate of the intervention itself – which insisted that the UN work with insurgent forces at the national level and essentially forgave them their crimes in the regions where peacekeepers operated. As a former MONUC staffer in the Kivus explained to me, the UN’s mandate required peacekeepers to work with armed groups that were bifurcated between a political core in Kinshasa and the more militaristic elements in the Kivus itself. This cleavage played out in many contexts, and tensions between commanders in the east and political leaders in the capital were a constant source of tension in itself. In this view, the real issue was not an unwillingness to confront local issues, but rather a structural concern, in that the mandate for the peacekeeping mission required MONUC to operate in support of the broader diplomatic efforts. The schizophrenic outcome was to force UN personnel to work alongside insurgent leaders in Kinshasa while battling their cadre in the Kivus.

Although it would seem to be the easy way out to say that both structural and cultural concerns explain the problems of the intervention in the Congo, the truth is that both did play important roles. Autesserre does not reject this possibility, but insists that the UN had the capacity to address both local and national concerns, positing that it was culture that made peacekeepers ignore local issues. From my own interviews with MONUC personnel, I am not fully convinced this was always the case. But Autesserre does an excellent job making her arguments regarding the importance of the peacebuilding culture and the corresponding blind spots it created.

More problematically, in certain cases, the persistent violence in the east really was a product of national and regional machinations, and had little to do with local concerns. Take for example the crises triggered by Laurent Nkunda and the Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple (National Congress for the Defence of the People, CNDP) between 2006 and 2009. What is most striking about the movement is that though Nkunda was a Tutsi who initially fought for the rights of his ndugu (cousins or ethnic kin), he was able to recruit a large number of Hutu to join his cause. Though they in the past had lived in harmony, Congolese Hutu and Tutsi increasingly moved apart as a result of the earlier conflicts in which Hutu leaders sought to align the community with other autochthonous groups in the Kivus, and distanced themselves from their Rwandophone counterparts. By most accounts,
this was an attempt to preserve their social position from the widespread anti-Tutsi backlash spreading through the region by the mid-1990s.

What then accounts for their decision to embrace a Tutsi movement almost a decade after the war began? The CNDP, initially allied with the Kigali regime and supported by Kivutien elites, was a well-funded movement that could pay its cadre a small but meaningful salary. As a result, Hutus and individuals from other autochthonous groups were willing to side with Nkunda, in direct contrast to what an understanding of local issues might have predicted, namely that widespread anti-Tutsi sentiment would prevent a Tutsi-led movement from gaining popular support. (Granted, Autesserre’s work does not extend to this period, but if her framework is correct, the same logic should have applied.)

But my main concern with this excellent book is that much of the central chapters presenting the author’s interpretation of the events in the Congo rehash old arguments made in the works by Mahmood Mamdani, Koen Vlassenroot and Frank van Acker, among others, who have been writing extensively on the local dynamics that fuelled the conflict for much of the past decade. While duly credited and presented in a lucid and cohesive manner, for those familiar with the situation in the eastern Congo, there is little original material here.

It might have led to a more productive and insightful book if Autesserre had dug deeper into the ‘international peacebuilding culture’ she so probeingly analyses and critiques in earlier chapters. Indeed, the author’s decision to limit her understanding of culture to merely its organisational and ideological aspects is a puzzling one. Early on she provides an inclusive definition of culture which explicitly refers to rituals as an important component of a cultural analysis. But beyond this initial definition, and a casual reference to the importance of ‘afterwork drinks, parties’ (p 67) in diffusing cultural norms, she does not treat culture as an encompassing phenomenon. By ignoring many other aspects of the peacebuilding culture – most notably, the social customs and rituals of peacebuilders – she fails to exploit the full potential of her argument.

For example, visitors to war zones anywhere in the world are inevitably struck by the massive expatriate social world that comes into being in the context of a prolonged humanitarian response. The Congo, like its neighbour to the north, Sudan, epitomises the massive scale that this world can sometimes reach. Visitors to Bukavu in the early to mid-
2000s would have seen a robust party scene of mostly white North Americans and Europeans in decaying mansions overlooking the stunning Lake Kivu. On my first visit to Ituri in 2004, at the height of a localised conflict, I was struck, perhaps naively, by the robust expatriate social scene unfurling at a bar. As gunshots and heavier weaponry echoed in the background, expats working for international agencies, aid organisations and private corporations from around the world tossed back drink after drink, frequently with Congolese or other Africans accompanying them in complex though noticeably subservient roles.

More prominently, the UN was embarrassed multiple times by the involvement of MONUC peacekeepers in prostitution rings and other sexual abuse scandals. Attempts to investigate these crimes by the UN were hindered by the actions of the peacekeepers involved, who used their positions to intimidate witnesses and prevent them from testifying. This was not simply a matter of ill-disciplined troops from the developing world behaving badly, but also involved higher-level personnel. For example, a senior official from New Zealand was dismissed from his position after being seen cavorting with Congolese prostitutes during the investigation.¹ The fact that many of these prostitutes were underage or orphans in penury only deepened the mistrust between the Congolese population and the international peacekeepers in the country.

I do not know what these social aspects of the putative peacebuilding culture have to do with the Congolese war, but my impression is that Autesserre does, although she only briefly refers to it in her text. The cultural dynamics which were displayed – which intersected with racial, gender and class dimensions – encapsulated much of the distaste that humanitarian interventions evoke among both locals and others outside the peacebuilding community. But they are to a large extent not addressed in this work and one is left with the feeling that Autesserre may not have wanted to sever ties with the peacebuilding community in the Congo completely – certainly an understandable concern. But that raises the question about the degree to which the author’s embeddedness in the same peacebuilding culture she critiques, affected her analysis. (She addresses this issue briefly in chapter 1, but does not return to the subject of her own position in the rest of the

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Note

text.) It would be very interesting to hear her view on the social aspects of the peacebuilding culture.

Autesserre’s interpretation of events in Congo has wide academic appeal and direct policy implications. She recommends devising and implementing local peacebuilding efforts to accompany efforts being made at the national and regional levels. But of greater concern to me is the real fear of mission-creep in such locally focused interventions. Autesserre does an excellent job of convincing the reader that, in many ways, international peacebuilders lacked the basic skills, such as knowledge of local power dynamics, linguistic skills, etc, necessary to resolve conflicts at the local level. In addition, the casual racist attitudes of international peacebuilders she describes (though does not name) towards Africans and the Congolese in particular regarding their imagined comfort with violence raises concerns about the broader enterprise of international interventions in Africa. But by insisting that even greater resources be allocated to international peacebuilders to resolve local level disputes, Autesserre places her faith in the very same set of actors she accuses of blowing it at the national and regional levels in their quixotic pursuit of elections, without explaining why they would be better situated to engage in these types of efforts at the local level.

On a different note, it also strikes me that in order for the UN to engage in a broad local level peacebuilding effort, it would first require the international body to overcome the deep levels of mistrust that most Congolese continue to harbour towards international actors – certainly no easy task. At an event on the Congo held in Harlem a few months ago, a Congolese diaspora member angrily denounced the suggestion by several well-meaning panellists that local actors must take charge of the recovery process going forward. Contrary to a discourse of local empowerment, she felt that by emphasising local level issues, the international community was trying to abdicate its responsibility for helping the Congo to recover from the conflicts. She could not see why a war that began with an external invasion and was fuelled by the interests of international corporations and foreign governments should now be passed back to local actors for a solution. Her stance, which was applauded by many Congolese in the audience, could easily be dismissed as evidence of the disconnection between the diaspora and those who remain in the Congo. But it also resonates with long-standing suspicions by the Congolese about the motives of international interveners, even those with the best of intentions. Unless international interveners begin to build the trust with local communities in the Congo which has been fractured after so many
decades of international meddling, it is hard to see how the outcome could have been any different.

Furthermore, I was not convinced of Autesserre’s dismissal of the geopolitical machinations that shaped the international intervention in the country, the source of much Congolese suspicion of MONUC’s (and now MONUSCO’s) agenda. Many observers felt that the structure of the UN intervention was biased in favour of powerful actors in the international community. Should we not consider the possibility that peacebuilding efforts were never intended to protect the interests of the Congolese, a realist interpretation that Autesserre dismisses early on? Just because individuals on the ground were well meaning does not imply that realpolitik has no place in explaining the failure of the intervention. For example, nobody doubts Rwanda’s nefarious impact on the violence in the eastern Congo. Can the passive attitude to Rwandan involvement – documented in multiple Security Council reports – really be disaggregated from its position as a favoured ally of the United States? Or its role in providing peacekeepers to the sensitive UN mission in Sudan?

To return to the opening anecdote, is it really so easy to dismiss the idea that the states that supported UN interventions were not interested in building peace and were rather preserving their own interests? As it was during the colonial period, under Lumumba’s brief reign, and certainly during Mobutu, the Congo has always suffered from cold geopolitical calculations. As long as this remains the case, it is hard to imagine that the international community could ever play a positive role in the Congo, regardless of the type of peacebuilding strategy the UN may pursue.