The Post-Conflict Environment

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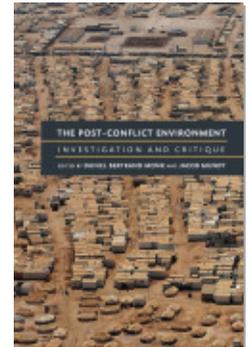Published by University of Michigan Press

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Conclusion

Aftermath
A Speculative Conclusion

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THE ESSAYS ASSEMBLED in this volume seek to lay bare a set of common practices by means of which stakeholders in international peacebuilding effectively construe the same environment they aspire to repair. For this reason, and in a very precise sense, these studies are not only reviews of the "imaginative geography" of a peacebuilding technocracy; no less important, they are also critical ethnographies of the interventionist "habitus" that attends it. Each of the essays lays out in detail how a new technocracy's rationalizations of self-interest attain the standing of pragmatic knowledge—that is, a species of self-evidence. In the sum of these case studies, the volume negates any complete distinction between ideology and best practices in the identification and management of the post-conflict environment.

The key finding of this work is that the post-conflict environment that is ruminated and acted upon by the policy community and war intellectuals is a reification. In this collection's discrete analyses of transitional justice, governance, refugee management, and aid and redevelopment, a single constellated image emerges: the imputed object of attentions is one that stakeholders themselves constitute a priori as a site of action and intervention. To put matters very bluntly: the post-conflict environment is, first and foremost, the site of liberal peacebuilding's own "shock doctrine."[1]

To suggest that the post-conflict environment of the policy intellectuals' imagination attains a species of "phantom objectivity" is necessarily to raise important epistemological questions, the elaboration of which is the principal aim of this conclusion.[2] The contributors to this project are confirmed in

their suspicion that the post-conflict environment is a reification of the so-cial relations between those the term *itself* construes and sanctions respec-tively as subjects and objects of action. At the same time, they reject any con-ception of reification as a "veil" over the real—that is, that reifications amount to a matter of flawed perspectives that might be adjusted and sharp-ened incrementally without questioning the historical status of the appara-tus of viewing/framing in toto. The post-conflict environment is indeed a phantom object, but its reification is a reality whose career needs to be ex-plored and documented.

If the "ersatz" immediacy of the post-conflict environment cannot be substituted by a more authentic image of it, how is one to assess that same career?[3] How, in other words, is one to understand the actuality of reifica-tion—of universal mediation—and its political effects? Particularly, when formal political thought has largely reduced the question of mediation to that of an impediment to proper model building rather than as an irreduc-ible *fait social* to be modeled.[4] The chapters in this collection tentatively point to one possible approach. Catherine Goetze suggests that stakeholders in transitional governance define and treat the post-conflict environment as an absolute value against which political reality falls short. In that process, she argues, a post-conflict technocracy is at the same time "enabling reper-toires of action, and assigning roles to international and local actors." These roles are, in turn, consistent with what Andrew Herscher refers to as "ritual-ized post-conflict practices" whereby stakeholders "stage themselves" in ways that displace attention from "the conflicts that emerge and intensif[y] *during* post-conflict reconstruction" (emphasis added). Together, these es-says begin to describe a performative order that is similarly corroborated in Keeler's analysis of peacebuilding regimes in Iraqi Kurdistan, where political grievances must be *enacted* as medical disorders (and more specifically, as trauma) before they can be acknowledged by a post-conflict technocracy at all. Mundy's assessment of present and absent transitional justice frame-works similarly describes a condition in which advocates of normative na-tional reconciliation models (truth commissions, primarily) engage in a "de-nial or repudiation of alternative models" and in so doing, "performatively co-constitute the key terrain of operation." If Sanyal's assessment of refugee management and Hourani's analysis of post-conflict reconstruction do not highlight a performative reification of the post-conflict environment di-rectly, they nevertheless confirm it strongly in chilling examples of the way that Palestinian refugees found themselves compelled to build permanent

dwelling behind tent-flaps of emergency housing (to stay in line with the proper "staging" of UNRWA-sponsored aid); and, in accounts of the way that IFI's "foreground how . . . [a] simple drama of pre-war free market prosperity, war-induced dislocation and the promise of neoliberal recovery . . . [frames] the further construction of the post-conflict environment to follow."

So, if it is possible to understand this volume's chapters as "ethnographies of the interventionist habitus" they are at the same time contemporary histories of a dramaturgical order. In them, the post-conflict environment presents itself to view as something that is performed *in*, and *as*, a relation between habitus and reification—between apparent (best) practices, on one hand, and mediating structures, on the other. No one should be surprised by this turn of events. Sociology, in particular, has long understood that the dramaturgy underpins the relational dimensions of conflict, and so has described both the "dynamics of contention" and "strategic interaction" as performances of the political.[5] Similarly, students of strategy have sought to codify the "rules" governing such performances in their efforts to work through the logic of deterrence, most typically by eliding the very notion of dramaturgy with the concept of "coordination games."[6]

The contributors to this volume approach the dramaturgical constitution of a reified post-conflict environment obliquely, and to some degree intuitively. But the implications of their insights may be addressed directly in this conclusion. First, to see the post-conflict environment as something that is dramaturgically constituted is to do away with the agentic bias. In the scenarios presented, both the subjects and objects of intervention—stakeholders and the inhabitants of the post-conflict environment—are repeatedly confirmed to be actors rather than self-proximate agents.[7] (To some degree, this comes with the "territory," inasmuch as the post-conflict environment is a region defined by stark decisions about giving and taking. And wherever means-testing is an issue, as Goffman and others have noted, performances usually follow.)[8] These forms of coping notwithstanding, the key finding, here, is clear: while participants in and observers of intervention regimes may have some leeway in playing their own roles and imposing certain roles on others, they are nonetheless compelled to *assume* roles if they are to "qualify" as actors in (staging) the post-conflict arena to begin with.

Second, to understand the post-conflict environment as a dramaturgical order is to begin to approach its normative content. As a reification that is tautologically constituted as "immediate" by the mediating routines of those who perform it, the post-conflict environment advances what The-

odor Adorno once described as a broader "theodicy of conflict"— that is, a perverse and paradoxical belief that human life "could only have been perpetuated by means of conflict" but which treats conflict as an exceptional condition.[9] The post-conflict environment, in other words, is a stage on which we collectively confer a palliative meaning on violence by showing how what follows somehow makes all that has happened exceptional, just like in Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* where the progeny of Holocaust survivors happily run through wheat fields, inadvertently stamping an affirmative interpretation upon horror.

In sum, the post-conflict environment is the scenario for a "metaphysics of death," whereby the assertion of meaning reverts to "mere ideology."[10] That it has not been previously examined as such—as we have tried to suggest—is partly due to the fact that the normative descriptions of the post-conflict environment in policy and other literatures have not attracted the significant attention of a critical theory of conflict. But there is another reason as well: if a reified post-conflict environment only "appears" in stylized conventions of liberal peacebuilding—that is, in a performance of the political already assessed in sociological and political studies—it also differs from them in a significant sense. Where the former scrutinize how the interactions between players tacitly define the social situation in which they are bound—establish a common "frame," in Goffman's language—here, the interaction is effectively between players and the frame itself—that is, between, stakeholders in intervention regimes and the post-conflict environment they make.

And, because one of the actors in this drama is presumed to be "inert"— the post-conflict environment "itself"—a different and unexamined conception of dramaturgy necessarily emerges out of the cases assembled here. If, for students of strategic interaction, the best analogy for the reified social world is a stage, in reviewing the dramaturgical constitution of a reified post-conflict environment we encounter something far closer to the analogy of people's behavior before a camera. This implies a search beyond Social Science. For example, the connection between post-war conditions and their framing has featured prominently in the analysis of so-called rubble movies of Italian neorealist cinema and German *Trümmerfilme* of the same period.[11] But for affirmation of the deeper findings of this volume one would have to turn to the genres of crime scene photography and photojournalism. There, finally, one regularly encounters seemingly unscripted performances whose

unstated purpose is to re-inscribe the social condition of violence within the sociological "frame" of its exceptionalization. This is where our speculation abounds, but the proto-argument is that in the visual realm of the photographic image, the practices of dramaturgy and reification, leading to the production of an a priori frame, become visible.

Photographs of violence "after the fact" do possess a forensic character. But not in the sense usually ascribed to things like conventional crime scene photography. What aftermath photography documents and effects at once is not the occurrence of death, but its social re-inscription. This is what makes the so-called Naked City photography of Arthur Fellig (better known as "Weegee") so critically important to any interpretation of a reified post-conflict environment.[12] In works such as his famed "Drowning Victim," Weegee's portrayal of efforts to resuscitate a drowned man at a New York beach actually elicited poses (and even smiles) for the camera by the victim's girlfriend and bystanders. Similarly, in the body horror genre of photos like "Their First Murder," "Human Head Cake Box Murder," and "Balcony Seats at a Murder," one begins to understand that what Weegee's camera brought into the open at Coney Island is far from unique.[13] The photographs themselves, rather than Weegee or his subjects, point to and are part of a new reality in which the social afterlife of death eclipses the fact of dying. It is in this sense of a reification of death that "Horror is beyond the reach of Psychology."

In contemporary photographic visualizations of violence, Weegee's legacy continues because the historical conditions that made his work relevant have not gone away. Arguably, they have only intensified. By way of example: The Aftermath Project—founded and run by Sara Terry, who spent ten years producing a visual essay on post-war Bosnia—publishes an annual volume of picture essays produced by photographers who have received new production grants from the Project. Entitled *War Is Only Half the Story*, the fifth of these volumes contained a number of photographs that could have been taken straight from a Weegee album. See, for example, Miquel Dewever-Plana's images of the urban violence rife in Guatemala as a consequence of its thirty-six years of armed conflict and genocide. A harshly lit photograph shows the bodies of four unnamed young men strewn on the ground in front of a local shop with the numbered tags of investigators marking the presence of evidence around them.[14] Indeed, there is now a recognizable visual genre called "the late photography of war" that is represented in the work of Angus Boulton, Luc Delahaye, Joel Meyerowitz, Richard Mosse, Simon Norfolk, Sophie Ristelhueber, Paul Seawright, and others.[15] As one observer has astutely

observed, what characterizes this genre of image making—as something quite distinct from the heroic allure of combat photography—is that it is "utterly lacking in epic qualities."[16]

Clearly, "aftermath photography" favors the plebeian over the heroic as it attempts to challenge facile distinctions between war and what follows it. As Sara Terry details, the purpose of the entire Aftermath Project itself is to challenge traditional depictions of conflict by disputing the idea that the end of violence necessarily corresponds with the inauguration of peace.[17] However, in favoring the mundane and the everyday as metonyms for quasi-enduring conflict and semi-absent peace, aftermath photography inadvertently surrenders itself to the same theodicy of war under discussion here. In the performances of bathos that it elicits and favors, such photography presents the contours of the "new normalcy" of life under constant threat.[18] Because of this, aftermath photography is perversely palliative. It harmonizes suffering with the inevitability of a new, and violent, status quo.

Assimilating the intolerable as normal, aftermath photography still disaggregates war from the realm of daily existence of political violence. In so doing, it effects a difference without much of a distinction. And this is the precise labor of reification that the aftermath genre shares with all productions of the post-conflict environment itself, and which it refracts so expertly. It is not just that aftermath photographies contort the post-conflict environment into something conforming with its imputed significance, just like the other stakeholder knowledges reviewed in this volume. Instead, we are concerned with the way aftermath photography elicits the participation of the subjects of intervention in the "framing" of their own circumstances. In *that* process we see an allegory of the laborious framing of the post-conflict environment itself—that is, the precise mechanism of the post-conflict environment's dramaturgical constitution. The post-conflict environment, in sum, is constituted in the extorted performances of those upon whom accommodation to a dramaturgical order becomes the price of survival.

Notes

1. Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan, 2007).

2. György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialects*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 83.

3. "Reified Consciousness provides an ersatz for the sensual immediacy of

which it deprives people in a sphere that is not its abode." Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2004), 16.

4. It largely addressed the question of mediation by repeatedly attempting to rescue transcendence from immanence. A notable exception is Cold War deterrence theory, which considered it a matter of human survival to examine a "logic of images" in international politics. See Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959).

5. Charles Tilly, *Contentious Performances* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Erving Goffman, *Strategic Interaction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1969).

6. Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960).

7. No one would have needed to read a book to know this. Simply witness Pjer Zalica's brilliant film *Gori Vatra* (2003), a contemporary take on "Waiting for Godot" in which a town in post-conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina scrambles to present itself as an image of reconciliation in preparation for a visit from President Clinton who, in the end, almost arrives but not quite.

8. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959). For an interesting confirmation of Goffman's assessments see Dean Scheibel, "Faking Identity in Clubland: The Communicative Performance of 'Fake ID,'" *Text and Performance Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (1992): 160–75.

9. Theodor Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964–1965*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Malden, MA: Polity, 2006), 53. Theodor Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

10. See Adorno, *Metaphysics*, lecture seventeen.

11. See, for example, Eric Rentschler, "The Place of Rubble in the *Trümmerfilm*," in *Ruins of Modernity*, ed. Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

12. Working in New York in the 1930s and 1940s, "Weegee," a *nom de guerre* derived from his allegedly Ouija-board-like ability to divine the presence of a crime scene, produced visceral images of victims dead in the streets. Working freelance, Weegee based himself in police stations, and as the only civilian then to be permitted a police scanner in his car, arrived at crime scenes in next to no time. Through the use of flash, a narrow aperture, and a fast shutter speed, Weegee's photographs are forensic, stark, and immediate. "I have no inhibitions and neither has my camera," Weegee maintained (quote from http://www.amber-online.com/exhibitions/weegee-collection/detail).

13. Weegee, "Human Head Cake Box Murder" (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/190017406; Weegee, "Their First Murder" (The Getty Museum, Los Angeles): http://www.getty.edu/art/gettyguide/artObjectDetails?artobj=61129.

14. *War Is Only Half the Story. Volume V*, ed. Sara Terry (Los Angeles: The Aftermath Project, 2012), 25, 73.

15. Debbie Lisle, "The Surprising Detritus of Leisure: Encountering the Late Photography of War," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29 (2011): 873–90.

16. Simon Winchester, *War Is Only Half the Story. Volume I* (Los Angeles: The Aftermath Project, 2008), 6.

17. Sara Terry, *War Is Only Half the Story. Volume I* (Los Angeles: The Aftermath Project, 2008), 2–3.

18. Calvin Woodward, "The Post-9/11 'New Normal' Looks Much Like the Old," *Associated Press* (September 4, 2011), http://cnsnews.com/news/article/post-911-new-normal-looks-much-old.