
ONLINE BOOK REVIEW

Catherine E. Bolten*The University of Notre Dame****Peacebuilding in Practice: Local Experience in Two Bosnian Towns***

Adam Moore (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013)

In this careful, precise monograph, Adam Moore offers a compelling analysis of how divergent peacebuilding outcomes occurred in the Bosnian towns of Mostar and Brčko following the war that devastated the region in the 1990s. Moore bases his analysis on ethnographic and archival research he conducted in the two towns in 2007, a full decade after the ostensible end of the war, and yet a time of tension in one place and transition in the other. While Moore was in Mostar, the town exploded in ethnic violence, a momentary flash of “thickening of place” (p. 2) illustrating what occurs in a town that suffers more marked ethnic and social divisions than it had ever known before the war, and mapped along the same physical lines that marked the warfront during the fighting. In Brčko, in contrast, the town was largely peaceful, with the country’s only integrated high school, and high levels of trust displayed by residents in their institutions. What accounts for these differences, and what lessons can be learned about peacebuilding from this comparison?

Moore begins by rejecting the argument that the success or failure of peacebuilding efforts rests in large part on the amount of resources devoted to a place, and instead maps out four interconnected factors that influence the outcome of physical and social rebuilding. The first factor involves the design of local political institutions—whom they include, how they are run, and how integrated these institutions are with residents and the international community. The second factor is local and regional legacies from the war—the influence of culture and history in the particular context of place. The last two factors involve the sequencing and timing of political and economic reforms, as well as the practice and organization of international peacebuilding efforts. Moore emphasizes that no one factor had a disproportionate effect, nor are their effects separable, in the sense that one effect or another can be isolated (p. 6). Rather, in combination with each other, these factors created a particular trajectory in Mostar that differs profoundly from that of Brčko, resulting in a divided, violent society in Mostar, and an integrated, peaceful society in Brčko, though Brčko suffered some of the worst ethnic cleansing of the war and the international community feared for its future.

What accounts for these differences? Moore offers an articulate, detailed accounting of how divergent histories and practices mold the trajectories of similar people in very different places. Starting with two theories of rebuilding, consociational and centripetal institutions, Moore outlines the failures of consociational institutions, namely the idea that “good fences make good neighbors”, which was adopted as the guiding principal in Mostar (pp. 18-22). Mostar’s foundation of ethnic tension was built on the entrenchment of ethnic differences, the hastiness of the implementation of elections, early privatization of institutions, and the prioritization of distant concerns over local, concerns. By contrast, Brčko was created after the war as a special district with a highly interested and involved supervisor, peacebuilders who focused on local concerns, and grounded in centripetal, integrated institutions, resulting in a situation of trust and economic growth. The contrast between Mostar and Brčko was also explained through the short-term and often absent international workers who cycled through Mostar, and the long-term, very locally involved workers who dedicated themselves to Brčko. Though Moore cautions against extrapolating too far from the particularities of the examples he provides, implications for the focus, range, and priorities of peacebuilding programs do emerge.

Moore reinforces his unwillingness to generalize from these conclusions with the final substantive chapter, which involves a detailed rendering of international patronage politics in Brčko. It was a singular case of a supervision that resulted from international arbitration, creating a situation of a self-governing entity that was completely unique in Bosnia, and prompted the heavy involvement of foreign institutions to supervise the process. Though Moore spends much of the book touting Brčko’s successes, he worries that the peace was so specific to that place that its dissolution (with the end of supervision) may undermine peace in Bosnia writ large (p. 164). It does not leave the reader with many take-away lessons about peacebuilding, which is perhaps Moore’s point. The tools may exist, but only an approach as careful, detailed, and methodical as his own within damaged social worlds can possibly lead to success.

This was a very satisfying read, however, I was left with a few lingering questions unanswered. As Moore is a geographer, I was hoping to see more of how the physical and social geography mingled in affecting the various peacebuilding outcomes. Though the book is full of maps, it was difficult for me to get a sense of the spatial and social details involving the creation and entrenchment of ethnic divisions in Mostar, and by contrast the effectiveness of integration in Brčko. Moore also introduces a question that he hesitates to answer, namely: is effective peacebuilding inherently undemocratic? (p. 116) He introduces rich, detailed data about how international patronage and supervision of the peacebuilding process in Brčko contributed to the success of those efforts, but stops short of inferring the possible meanings this has for peacebuilding processes elsewhere in Bosnia and the world. Rather, he skirts the issue by explaining that people in Brčko were heavily involved in the

process through dialoguing and informed decision-making, but at the end of the day, the supervisorship of the district was always in the hands of a foreign diplomat. It would certainly be a provocative conclusion to argue that effective peacebuilding requires the firm hand of disinterested parties, but it is one that bears exploring.