

Alpaslan Özerdem – Roger Mac Ginty (eds.): Comparing Peace Processes

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Conflict resolution and peace processes (CRPP) represent a topic that is, at least in the realm of international relations and politics, heavily discussed and often as enticing as the conflict itself. Therefore, CRPP are tackled by various scholars and publications, one of them being the book *Comparing Peace Processes*, edited by Alpaslan Özerdem and Roger Mac Ginty. As the title of the publication tells us, the group of 22 authors (including the editors) takes up the challenging task of comparing various peace processes because “[a]lthough comparison between peace processes is difficult, it is useful – indeed, imperative [...]. What works in one context may not work in another, but it can be modified and right-sized to fit another context” (p. 2). The number of contributing authors suggests that they don’t form a coherent group connected to one particular university, foundation, or institution. Indeed, their backgrounds and academic affiliations vary. However, all of them have working experience either directly in conflict and peace studies or in similar areas. Especially the editors – Alpaslan Özerdem and Roger Mac Ginty – have years of experience in the field of research and publishing.

Even though the reader intuitively understands what the goal of the publication is, the introductory chapter does not explicitly state it. Thus, the reader is left only with the aforementioned statement about why it is important to research peace processes without being specifically told what to expect from the book itself. The absence of a clear definition of the goal also makes it more difficult to grasp the whole essence of the publication and simultaneously appreciate its added value. Similarly to the goal of the book, the research method is not specifically mentioned either; however, the second part of the introduction provides the reader with an explanation of how to compare peace processes, thus giving the reader a hint of what research method is used in the book. The authors combine three key ways to compare peace processes: 1. a side-by-side comparison of peace processes as case studies of conflicts, 2. identification of an important issue within the peace process and comparison of particular peace processes with regard to that issue, and 3. examination of procedural issues – e.g. negotiations – and their comparison. As they state: “*In this book, our case study-led approach delves into issues areas in peace processes as well as procedural issues. To maximize comparison, we take a structured approach: the chapters – on the instruction of the editors – touch upon a set of key peace process elements (such as the pre-peace process context, or the negotiations)*” (p. 3). Accordingly, the book is divided into 18 chapters. Each

one contains a case study of a particular conflict and the related peace process. The basic structure of all the chapters is similar – 1) the introductory part, 2) the conflict analysis, 3) the conflict resolution process, 4) lessons to be learned – with each one having certain specifics based on the researched case. The only exception to this statement is the concluding chapter, which is organized around 11 variables set by the authors. Each variable is given a numeric score on a case-to-case basis and, as a whole, the variables should subsequently help the authors to assess “*the extent to which a peace process can be judged a ‘success’ or ‘failure’*” (p. 4).

The body of the publication, i.e. the case studies, presents very interesting and detailed analyses of all the conflicts and the subsequent peace processes. The similar structure of the chapters bears fruit as it is easy for the reader to orient him- or herself in the text. Moreover, thanks to the structure, it is also possible to pre-compare the cases even before the concluding chapter. The big positive lies in the “lessons to be learned” sub-chapters. They sum up the most important findings of each chapter and allow the reader to reflect on the chapter in its entirety. The set of selected cases constitutes a mixture of well-known and less well-known conflicts and peace processes. Unfortunately, the criteria behind the selection of the cases are absent. This fact leaves the reader wondering why the authors selected specifically those cases and not other ones. The same logic applies to the number of selected cases. However, it needs to be said that the aforementioned mixture is quite balanced. Understandably, due to the number of selected cases, they are, in many senses, diverse. In terms of geography, the authors cover cases from Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America. There are cases where a peace accord (in some shape or form) was achieved (South Africa, Colombia) and cases where this did not happen (Afghanistan), cases that are finished (Sri Lanka, Northern Ireland) and ongoing ones (Israel and the Palestinians), etc. The list of differences can go on and on. Each chapter (as well as the case within it) is interesting in its own way; however, I prefer the ones that copy the aforementioned basic structure (without a slew of additional sub-chapters), pay more attention to the peace process than the conflict itself, and provide the reader with some “extra” piece of information that is not to be found elsewhere. Thankfully, the vast majority of the chapters fulfil at least the first two points. As an example of my preferred type, I can name the chapter on Bosnia-Herzegovina. Dejan Gruzina, the author of this chapter, uses

the four-sub-chapter structure described above. He gives substantial space to the conflict resolution process, and in his discussion of it, he points out the highs and lows of the Dayton Agreement and the role of the USA. Last but not least, at the end of the introductory sub-chapter, he provides the reader with some research questions that his chapter should answer. This fact makes the whole chapter unique and even more interesting. In contrast, to demonstrate the features of the “problematic” chapters, I can use the examples of the ones on Liberia and Afghanistan. The former is 13 pages long and divided into 12 subchapters in total, which means that the number of subchapters is too high, considering the chapter’s relatively brief length. Moreover, such a high number of subchapters is not needed at all. The titles of most of the sub-chapters distract the reader and keep him/her from immersing him-/herself in the text rather than helping him/her to get a better orientation in the chapter. The latter chapter – on Afghanistan – is mentioned here due to different reasons. Although, like all of the other chapters, the Afghanistan chapter is full of interesting and detailed information, the reason for its inclusion in the book is confusing. Its conflict resolution sub-chapter is very short because there has been no real conflict resolution in this case. Some demands that would possibly enable the peace process were made by both of the belligerent sides but those were never met. Hence, the substance for the analysis is missing.

Regarding the formal side of the text, I appreciate that at the end of each particular case study chapter, there are references. Thus, it is clear which set of sources was used in the said chapter. The same logic is used with regard to the notes. In this case, however, the result is not so convincing. Being forced to turn to the end of the chapter every time a reference is made in the text may become quite tiring. Subsequently, the reader may start to completely ignore the references and thus make their presence redundant. Putting the notes at the bottom of the pages where they are referred to would seem like a better solution.

In the concluding chapter, the authors admit to the difficulties connected to the comparison of the cases, which vary from one to another quite a lot. Of course, some of the cases are more similar than others, but the conditions of each peace process are unique. The authors also tackle the question of numeric assessment of the variables and its arbitrary and subjective character. They also provide the reader with two tables. The first

one summarizes the most important facts regarding each case study, which I find very helpful. The reader can't remember 18 distinct cases so this is a way to refresh his/her memory. The second one contains the numeric assessment of the variables for each case with the number 1 meaning low attainment and the number 5 high attainment. This table is then followed by a comparative analysis based on each variable. As I mentioned before, the authors discuss the arbitrary character of the numeric assessment and its repercussions. The numeric assessment itself can be helpful but I was missing a better explanation of each number's meaning with regard to a particular variable. For example, for the first variable – the level of symmetry between the parties (of the conflict) – I would imagine that ideally, the authors would state something like: the number 1 means a radical asymmetry between the parties without a real possibility of a sustainable conflict resolution, the number 2 means a notable asymmetry between the parties with a possible solution depending on the third party's support to the weaker side, etc. Without any more specific explanation of the assessment, the numbers are just numbers. This statement comes to light in the comparative analysis sub-chapter. Due to the high number of case studies, the analysis for each variable is very brief. If the numeric assessment had an explanation, the brief character of the analysis would not matter that much because the reader would be able to imagine what a certain number means. However, this is not the case so the reader must settle for a brief commentary on only some of the analyzed cases.

In general, the book *Comparing Peace Processes* represents an interesting probe into the topic of peace processes and their comparison. It contains diverse information about various conflicts that (in most cases) were connected with a successful or unsuccessful peace process. The authors present well-known cases (South Africa, Bosnia-Herzegovina) as well as some less well-known ones (Mindanao, Liberia). Unfortunately, in my view, the introductory and concluding parts of the publication are negatively affected by the (possibly) excessive ambition of the authors. Firstly, they decided to apply more than one method for comparing peace processes. Secondly, they analyzed a total of 18 case studies. Thirdly, they included a numeric assessment system without a proper explanation of the values that can be acquired by particular variables. It is important to note that such ambitious practices can work. However, for this to be the case with

the discussed publication, it would have to be much longer. When it operates with its present length, the result seems half-baked. The authors' promising start stopped somewhere in the middle and thus left their ideas incomplete. If the authors chose the "less is sometimes more" strategy and decided to cut the number of case studies and pick only one method of comparison (for example, a comparison of only a few particular important issues within the peace processes), the final result may have been clearer and more coherent. But even with this particular criticism, I would recommend the book to people who are interested in the topic of conflict resolution and peace processes, or want to simply explore various conflicts and their dynamics. The case studies offer invaluable information about many cases that would be otherwise rather hard to find. Lastly, from the theoretical and methodological point of view, the book may function as a starting point for scholars who want to try to improve upon the authors' approach to researching peace processes.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Michal Himmer completed his master's studies in Law and International Relations at the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen. He is currently pursuing a PhD degree in International Relations at the same university. His academic interests consist of conflict resolution, foreign policy motivation, and the PRC in international affairs.