The Politics of Virtual Security

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ABSTRACT

As one of the first attempts in critical international relations (IR) scholarship to explore the political and ideological intent of visual simulations, François Debrix's *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping* has a lot to offer critical IR studies and critical security studies. More than twenty years after its publication, Debrix's theoretical and methodological insights into the study of global (dis)order and the virtualization of security still remain relevant in many ways. In this essay, I will first focus on Debrix's deployment of the virtual in relation to reality, security, and ideology, and I will argue that his understanding of virtual reality taps well into and transgresses the ongoing divide/debate between positivist and post-positivist approaches to reality in IR and security studies. Second, I will briefly touch upon the recent local turn in peacekeeping studies vis-à-vis Debrix's critical world order project. By doing so, I will highlight that Debrix's project provides novel insights also into the study of the local with its call for an anti-imperialist spirit by stressing the oscillation of discipline and ideology in reordering and recolonizing the subjects of international politics in the guise of the "New World Order" vision mobilized through techniques of simulations.

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Over the past couple of decades, a handful of critical international relations (IR) scholars such as Timothy Luke,[1] Cynthia Weber,[2] and James Der Derian[3] has explored the virtualization of security and deployed the concept of "the virtual" as a way to question an objective truth with regard to the meaning of security. In conversation with those scholars, Debrix further expands the notion of the virtual (i.e., various techniques and strategies of simulation) as an analytical category in *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping,*[4] and he explores how "virtual/visual substitutes of reality are often put to efficient use"[5] not only to modify and ideologically influence perception of the real in the domain of international politics, but also to ideologically discipline the subjects of international politics. In this contribution, I will first focus on Debrix's deployment of the virtual in relation to reality, security, and ideology, and I will argue that his discussion of virtual reality taps well into and transgresses the ongoing divide/debate between positivist and post-positivist approaches to reality in IR and security studies. Second, I will briefly touch upon the recent turn to the local in peacekeeping studies vis-à-vis Debrix's critical world order project. By doing so, I will highlight the point that Debrix's project also provides novel insights into the study of the local with its call for an anti-imperialist spirit by stressing the oscillation of discipline and ideology in reordering and recolonizing the subjects of international politics in the guise of the "New World Order" vision mobilized through techniques of simulation.

In *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping,* Debrix sheds light on how UN peacekeeping operations/missions in the 1990s function as a virtual form of insurance in the post-cold war era of international politics. Debrix mainly argues that "UN peacekeeping simulates a real landscape of ordered international politics, a New World Order, by trying to multiply the scenes of peaceful intervention and humanitarian assistance throughout the mediatically envisioned domain of international politics."[6] Instead of focusing on questions such as "Have UN peacekeeping missions made any difference in bringing order to the disorder?" or "Have these missions achieved their goals?," Debrix explores how UN peacekeeping has been ideologically rediscovered and mobilized after the demise of the Cold War, and what strategies have been deployed by the UN to "fill the promised space of global security."[7]

Drawing on Jean Baudrillard, Louis Althusser, and Michel Foucault, Debrix views the UN as "a framework of simulation and deterrence," and he contends that "the UN is a rediscovered 'empty frame' that is asked to mobilize the appearance of collective security in a world that still looks disorderly."[8] Here, Debrix stresses the significance and effectiveness of the visual not only in the (re)making and (re)structuring of international order, but also in reshaping "the reality of international politics"[9] whereby both the UN and "the 'outside world', the actual undisciplined international landscape with its new threats, will fall for this play of reconstructed reality, and finally, will be deterred and (virtually) tamed."[10] In other words, while suggesting that techniques and strategies of visual simulation deploy a vision or an appearance of international order, collective security, or an image of peace, Debrix also crucially points out that the use of various techniques and strategies of visual simulations by the UN is, in fact, "an ideological and disciplinary strategy."[11] The UN, therefore, becomes a virtual mode of governance that is "always already an ideological enterprise."[12] Debrix explains this ideological enterprise

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1   Timothy W. Luke, "Power and Politics in Hyperreality: The Critical Project of Jean Baudrillard," *The Social Science Journal* 28, no. 3 (1991): 347–67.

2   Cynthia Weber, *Simulating Sovereignty: Intervention, the State and Symbolic Exchange*, (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

3   James Der Derian, "Global Swarming, Virtual Security, and Bosnia," *Washington Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (1996): 45–56.

4   François Debrix, *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping: The United Nations and the Mobilization of Ideology* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

5   Ibid., 14.

6   Ibid., 21.

7   Ibid., 9.

8   Ibid.

9   Ibid.

10   Ibid.

11   Ibid., 25.

12   Ibid., 22.

through what he calls "disciplinary liberalism." Disciplinary liberalism refers to a "ideology that promises individual freedom and welfare in society through the implementation of disciplinary modalities of power."[13] Importantly, disciplinary liberalism goes hand in hand with a virtual mode of governance through which peacekeeping operations embody a simulacrum (that is, a simulated global peace, security, and/or order) that conceals the UN's inability to either eradicate violence or implant non-violence in the international system. This simulated global peace, security, and/or order is virtual, that is to say, "the vision of global unity or governance… is a matter of visual illusion."[14] It is a visual reality that generates illusions but is perceived as very real.

With regard to the relationships between simulation and reality and between reality and security, *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping* offers, in particular, a great potential contribution to IR and security studies at a meta-theoretical level. I contend that Debrix's understanding of simulation as "an alternate mode of experience that can look like the imaginary… and yet can be just as convincing and true-to-life as empirical reality"[15] taps into and transgresses the ongoing divide/debate between positivist and post-positivist approaches to reality in IR and security studies. According to this divide/debate in IR (what some IR theorists call the fourth debate), reality is conceived either as an independently existing domain whereby an objective truth can be known or represented as such, or as something that is constructed by practices of interpretation or regimes of (subjective) representation.[16] However, Debrix's mobilization of simulation is a clear complication of the real perceived by both approaches. For Debrix, simulation aims at "recuperating the real of representation in its absence."[17] It is no longer purely in the domain of the real or the actual or in the system of subjective representation. And yet, simulation still deals with reality in a way that it "play[s] with reality without the recourse of the concept."[18] The real of/in simulation is, as Debrix puts it, "no longer the product of interpretive mechanisms, but, rather, the outcome of operative media"[19] or of various virtual/visual technologies that present the real over and over again to the point where the real becomes a hyperreal. For this reason, Debrix contends that strategies of simulation are "no longer about re-inscribing 'empirical reality' in reason or thought, but of 'reviving' reality through the hyperreal, simulated, visual, and virtual instruments offered by technological media."[20] Thus, Debrix's mobilization of simulation transcends the dichotomous relationship between an objective perception of the real and subjective representations of reality, and it allows us to consider security issues in the domain of hyperreality by taking into account strategies/techniques of simulation as well as the workings of (neo)liberal ideology.

In contemporary politics, one illustration of this understanding of hyperreality can be seen in virtual appearances of refugees in the aftermath of the Syrian Civil War. The iconic refugee images (for instance, the iconic image of three-year-old Syrian boy Alan Kurdi) entered the internet sphere in the form of memes whereby images traverse the virtual realm and lose form and meaning, and as a result the figure of the refugee and its reality are constantly reprocessed, remade, and reinvented. Moreover, public perception, political debates, and some state policies have largely been shaped by dramatic images of refugees. Sometimes such dramatic images have strategically been used to frame the refugee crisis as a border control problem or as a potential security threat.[21] At other times, these images have been used to announce the so-called "benevolent" or "humanitarian" policies of some states or governmental entities, such as Germany's *Wilkommenspolitik*, that is to say, Germany's open-door policies towards Syrian refugees, perhaps as an attempt to preserve the existing order in the region.

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13   Ibid., 24.

14   Ibid., 217.

15   Ibid., 13.

16   For more information, see: Steve Smith, Ken Booth, and Marysia Zalewski, eds., *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond* (Cambridge University Press, 1996); Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith, eds., *International Relations Theories* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 29–30.

17   Debrix, *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping*, 13.

18   Ibid., 12.

19   Ibid., 13.

20   Ibid.

21   For more information, see: Roland Bleiker et al., "The Visual Dehumanisation of Refugees," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 4 (2013): 398–416.

Debrix's book pushes us to rethink and problematize the ways in which UN peacekeeping operations simulate "a New World Order" through visual "scenes of peaceful intervention and humanitarian assistance."[22] Under the guise of the New World Order, UN peacekeeping, for Debrix, seeks to affirm itself by viewing the post-cold war international landscape as "a field of disruption, destruction, disillusion, and uncertainty"[23] that must be made safe and ordered. According to Debrix, the New World Order is not merely a neoliberal-neoidealist discursive project[24] that seeks to "reorder the post-cold war age and its proliferation of 'evils' in the absence of evident structural binaries."[25] It is also supplemented by plays of appearances that seek to simulate order in its absence. That is to say, UN peacekeeping relies on "plays of appearances and make-believe situations"[26] that aim at proliferating scenes of effective peacekeeping operation and humanitarian assistance. Debrix insightfully articulates this vision of the New World Order as a matter of recolonizing or of conquering the "outside" since it aims at "expanding the limits of the liberal state under the ideological formula of disciplinary liberalism on a global scale."[27] As part of a wider hegemonic, liberal world order project, this vision becomes a "matter of glocalization"[28] by globally recolonizing the disorderly outside.

Since the mid-2000s, some works on peacekeeping have started to critique this hegemonic world order narrative/vision and have advocated for a "local turn" in critical peacekeeping studies.[29] With the advent of a local turn and/or the analysis of the everyday in critical peacekeeping scholarship, these works seek to critically rethink peacekeeping and peacebuilding missions through a bottom-up approach; that is to say, they place local agents, policies, or contexts at the center of their analyses and examine the relations between power and resistance. In critiquing the top-down analysis of governance, these works affirm the complex nature of peacekeeping operations in relation to the forces of the everyday. It is important to underline that Debrix's critical world order project still takes the local into account in the analysis of peacekeeping. For instance, Debrix highlights the fact that the UN mission in Somalia (and also in Bosnia) did not even generate an appearance of effectiveness as some of the local actors in Somalia, for example, preferred to "follow their own scripts."[30]

Indeed, what is more interesting about Debrix's analysis of the local is his argument that "the UN imposes itself as a no-escape mechanism"[31] vis-à-vis the subjects of international politics. That means, that even if a state chooses to follow its own path, it will become a rogue state (i.e., North Korea and Iraq). It will also be surveilled and potentially tamed/disciplined by forcing them into "abiding by the New World Order dictates,"[32] and thus, will fit into globalized regulatory patterns. Following Debrix's insights, it seems to me that this post-cold war formation of "global governance as governmentality"[33] also requires the subjects of international politics to govern themselves and to be autonomous but responsible actors in order to strengthen, sustain, and reproduce the conditions of disciplinary (neo)liberalism. Therefore, I believe that it is crucial for

22 Debrix, *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping*, 21.

23 Ibid., 7.

24 For Debrix, the neoliberal-neoidealist discourse is premised upon the idea that power can be transferred to international organizations through which "conflicts, disorders, instabilities, ambiguities, proliferations, and differences are resolved" in a new world order. See: Ibid., 56.

25 Ibid., 56.

26 Ibid., 212.

27 Ibid., 57.

28 Ibid.

29 For example, see: Oliver P. Richmond, "Becoming Liberal, Unbecoming Liberalism: Liberal-Local Hybridity via the Everyday as a Response to the Paradoxes of Liberal Peacebuilding," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 3, no. 3 (2009): 324–44; Oliver P. Richmond, "Resistance and the Post-Liberal Peace," *Millennium* 38, no. 3 (2010): 665–92; Laura Zanotti, *Governing Disorder: UN Peace Operations, International Security, and Democratization in the Post–Cold War Era* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011); Roger Mac Ginty, *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance: Hybrid Forms of Peace* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Thania Paffenholz, "Unpacking the Local Turn in Peacebuilding: A Critical Assessment towards an Agenda for Future Research," *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 5 (2015): 857–74; Elisa Randazzo, "The Paradoxes of the 'Everyday': Scrutinising the Local Turn in Peace Building," *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 8 (2016): 1351–70; Elisa Randazzo, *Beyond Liberal Peacebuilding: A Critical Exploration of the Local Turn* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017).

30 Debrix, *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping*, 100.

31 Ibid., 78.

32 Ibid., 211.

33 Ibid., 93.

critical IR/security studies researchers to pay attention to Debrix's invitation to adopt an "anti-imperialist spirit"[34] to enable a destabilizing enterprise while studying hegemonic world order narratives or/and visions.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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34   Ibid., 220.

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