



Anne Menzel

**Situating Liberal Rationality.
Unacknowledged Commitments in Progressive
Knowledge Production and Policymaking**

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Situating Liberal Rationality

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ABSTRACT

Within the contemporary liberal script, “rationality” describes an orientation towards progress based on and driven by objective knowledge. In this liberal imaginary, objective knowledge production and rational policies provide the best available option for improving human welfare – especially when dealing with the poor or “underdeveloped”. My paper sets out to disrupt this liberal imaginary by drawing attention to unacknowledged commitments in liberal practice, namely in peacebuilding and development cooperation. I begin with historical background on the conditions that have rendered knowledge-based policies possible and plausible, most notably the emergence of the social sciences alongside rising demands for rational policies “at home” and in the colonies. Next, I turn to contemporary examples from the fields of peacebuilding and development cooperation and discuss how unacknowledged commitments shape knowledge production and policies in these fields. My main point is not new but worth repeating: liberal rationality is not objective but situated in particular – and usually unacknowledged – commitments.

1 INTRODUCTION

An epistemological community has been produced at the intersection of two sets of norms: belief in the inherent value of science as a method of producing objective truth about the real world, on the one hand, and a commitment to the value of preserving liberalism, on the other (Wedeen 2016: 31).

This quote from Lisa Wedeen’s instructive essay “Scientific Knowledge, Liberalism, and Empire: American Political Science in the Modern Middle East” depicts, in a nutshell, the phenomenon I want to address in this working paper: a close association between science and objective truth and liberalism, which masks how liberal rationality is

and has been situated in particular and usually unacknowledged commitments.

In the context of the contemporary liberal script – as outlined in the SCRIPTS working paper by Michael Zürn and Johannes Gerschewski (2021) – “rationality” describes an orientation towards progress based on and driven by objective knowledge. This liberal orientation or mindset “does not defer to deities, authorities, or ideologies to solve problems” (Gerschewski/Zürn 2021: 20), and it recognizes “the permanent need to question existing insights and ask for rational procedures to produce knowledge” (Zürn/Gerschewski 2021: 19).¹ Zürn and Gerschewski and many others depict such rationality as a more general feature of liberal societies not limited to scholars, scientists, or various types of experts in the service of governments (see also e.g. Buchanan 2004; Forst 2019). Yet it is also and especially liberal governments who require and rely on objective knowledge to devise rational policies. While, in the face of climate change and the Covid 19 pandemic, the role of science in dealing with crises has come under scrutiny (as either too large or too little, depending on political persuasions), it remains strong

¹ Liberals position such (imagined) rationality in contrast or even in opposition to *Weltanschauungen* they regard as less rational or outright irrational. This position includes religious beliefs insofar as they are incompatible with secular (supposedly non-religious) reason (see Amir-Moazami 2022: 617–618); and conspiracy theories or so-called “post-truth” orientations, wherein people reject certain scientific findings based on personal or collective feelings and experiences (see Fassin 2000; Jasanoff/Simmet 2017: 755).

and largely uncontested in fields such as social policy and development cooperation. We see this, for example, in the turn towards rigorously evidence-based social and education policies, especially in the US and the UK (Shahjahan 2011; Haskins 2018); in the emergence of a policy-oriented research industry on the practices and attitudes of problematized and securitized Muslim populations in Europe (Amir-Moazami 2018); and in intense efforts to produce policy-oriented knowledge and an emphasis on technical expertise in the fields of peacebuilding and development cooperation (Ferguson 1994; Autesserre 2014). In sum – and especially when it comes to the poor or “underdeveloped” – liberals imagine objective knowledge production and rational policies as the best available path towards improving human welfare.

This paper aims to disrupt this liberal imaginary by problematizing its lack of awareness of and interest in unacknowledged commitments that regularly shape processes modelled on the ideal of objective knowledge production and rational policymaking. By “unacknowledged commitments”, I mean perspectives and investments in particular political projects that are not recognized as particular or political by those who are invested in them (see also Wedeen 2016). Commitments are also similar to what Pierre Bourdieu calls interests or *illusio*. Like Bourdieu’s interests, commitments are the opposite of being indifferent. Being committed or interested “is to be invested, taken in and by the game, [...] to accord a given social game that what happens in it matters, that its stakes are important [...] and worth pursuing” (Bourdieu/Wacquant 1992: 116).

Liberal policies and projects do not usually admit to having stakes beyond promoting progress based on objective findings. Yet I will show that it is quite possible (and often not that difficult) to discover unacknowledged commitments once a specific case of knowledge production and

policymaking is scrutinized from the standpoints of those whose knowledge, needs, and priorities were marginalized in the process (Collins 1986; Go 2016; Táíwò 2020). For this task, I turn to policy areas with which I am familiar, wherein knowledge production and rational policymaking have received much critical attention, namely so-called international peacebuilding and development cooperation. To be clear, I have no reason to expect that unacknowledged commitments are more prominent in these policy fields than in any others. They are merely the fields that I know best, which is why I focus on them for this contribution.

2 STRUCTURE AND APPROACH

My paper is structured in two parts. In the first, I draw attention to early precursors of contemporary peacebuilding and development cooperation and situate them in conditions of possibility that developed from the eighteenth century onwards. They arose with the emergence of the social sciences, which evolved in response to rising demands for rational policies “at home” and for the colonies. As a number of authors have demonstrated, such policies were shaped by commitments that remained largely unacknowledged, including projects of securing domination over “lower” classes and races (see, e.g., Zimmerman 2011; Shilliam 2018; Stoval 2020: ch. 4). In this context, I also zoom in on Max Weber’s work on objectivity in the social sciences, which he first elaborated around the turn of the twentieth century.

Weber is extremely interesting here and not primarily because of his contributions to cultural racism (see Zimmerman 2006). He is often “portrayed as the classic modernist spokesman for objectivity, understood as the cool, detached attitude of the scientific specialist” (Drysdale 2007: 31). Yet Weber was, in fact, exceptionally aware of the role that standpoints and commitments play in the social sciences (arguably in all sciences, see

Haraway 1988), even to the extent that they rule out any possibility for “objectivity”. To demonstrate this, I focus on one of his famous essays entitled “The ‘Objectivity’ of Knowledge in Social Science and Social Policy” (Weber [1904] 2012: 100–138), which discusses the consequences of values, practical interests, and particular points of view for “objective” research (Weber himself always put “objectivity” in scare quotes; Bruun 2008: 116). I would even speculate that Weber’s analyses *could have* provided an early opportunity to move towards insights and stances that were only developed much later in sociological and philosophical work on positionality and the situatedness of knowledge as spearheaded by Black feminist and feminist science and technology scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins (1986) and Donna Haraway (1988). However, Weber did not embrace his own findings. Instead, he insisted “that empirical knowledge in the social sciences can be objective and valid for everyone” (Bruun 2008: 98). Clearly, Weber felt that there was too much at stake to give up “objectivity” altogether.

In the second part, I turn to more recent examples of peacebuilding and development cooperation for the Global South, which usually involve extensive efforts to gather and analyse data to devise knowledge-based policies and projects. I draw on available scholarship from the anthropology of aid and development and the field of International Relations to introduce concepts and empirical findings that open perspectives on unacknowledged commitments and how they shape knowledge production and policymaking in the name of peace and development. I chose pieces of scholarship that vary in their overall critique of peacebuilding and development cooperation, including a focus on reform (especially Autesserre 2014) and a plea for abolition (Sabaratnam 2018). Full disclosure: I tend to fluctuate between the two but have been gravitating towards abolition. The first piece highlights *exclusions* and *depoliticization* in development cooperation, which point

towards unacknowledged political agendas (Ferguson 1994). Next, I move on to *knowledge hierarchies* (Autesserre 2014) between interveners and the targets of peacebuilding interventions and then to *coloniality* (Sabaratnam 2017), a concept that describes colonial qualities of (knowledge) hierarchies that persist even after “colonialism as an explicit political order was destroyed” (Quijano 2007: 170). Both knowledge hierarchies and coloniality identify practices that prioritize certain types of knowledge, experiences, needs, and demands over others without being explicit about the stakes and agendas behind such prioritization. Finally, I present some of my own research on the work of the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), a donor-funded peacebuilding project operational between 2002 and 2004. I specifically studied the production of the TRC’s final report, including the exclusions, knowledge hierarchies, and coloniality that shaped it (see Menzel 2020a, 2020b; Menzel/Salehi unpublished).

A common denominator in the works I discuss in the second part is that the authors – in different ways and more or less explicitly – make use of “outsider within” (Collins 1989) experiences and perspectives to uncover the situatedness and particularity of rational proceedings. One of the authors used to work as a practitioner in donor-funded peacebuilding projects and explicitly writes from a background of partially estranged first-hand experience with policy and project work (Autesserre 2014: 2–7). The other two (Ferguson 1994 and Sabaratnam 2017) and I myself sought to look at and interpret knowledge-based policies and projects from the perspectives of their targets and nominal beneficiaries whose insights, experiences, needs, and demands were not prioritized by professionals who produced knowledge or devised and implemented policies and projects.

A disclaimer is in order before I begin. I am aware that some readers may want to dismiss the points

I present in this paper by arguing that I draw upon “bad” examples of liberal rationality – because if they were “good” examples of liberal rationality proper, they would not contain unacknowledged commitments. This line of argument would prioritize liberal idea(l)s over liberal practice or over what Barry Hindess calls “actually existing liberalism” (Hindess 2008: 347). Let me briefly explain why I disagree with such objections. Accepting them would make it impossible to ever recognize any adverse real-life practice or outcome as truly belonging to the liberal script; it would, in fact, insulate liberalism from critique based on real-life events and experiences (Morefield 2014: 17). This is why I chose a different approach: one that looks at liberal practice in order to disrupt a liberal imaginary that masks its real-life unacknowledged commitments. I first provide historical background and then look at contemporary examples of knowledge production and policymaking practice in the name of peace and development, which I call “liberal” because they take place in the context of what has been described as an increasingly intrusive liberal international order (Börzel/Zürn 2021). The way I see it, these examples and their unacknowledged commitments belong to the liberal script and demonstrate the situatedness and partiality – rather than objectivity – of actually existing liberal rationality.

3 THE RISE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE AND SOCIAL POLICY “AT HOME” AND FOR THE COLONIES

During the same period as European colonial domination was consolidating itself, the cultural complex known as European modernity/rationality was being constituted. [...] Such confluence between coloniality and the elaboration of rationality/modernity was not in any way accidental, as is shown by the very manner in which the European paradigm of rational knowledge was elaborated (Quijano 2007: 171).

It makes sense to assume that many people in most parts of our contemporary world are familiar with the notion that “good” policymaking requires objective knowledge about affected populations and about the problems to be addressed. This notion is part of the modern common sense – in fact, many people in “aid-receiving” Global South contexts are probably more familiar with it today than, say, poor people in the Global North. This is because the former are often called upon to directly interact with researchers or consultants in the service of international donors or implementing organizations who seek knowledge on target problems and populations (Sabaratnam 2017: 83), whereas less obvious practices of data collection by state bureaucracies are more common in the Global North.

Yet the idea of knowledge-based policymaking is in no way obvious nor natural. It required the emergence of a set of imaginaries and powerful technologies that rendered this form of regulation thinkable and practicable, which took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the rise of statistics and the social sciences more broadly. Michel Foucault famously described this as the emergence of “biopolitics”, a set of technologies and connected forms of discipline or government that work on the level of populations and their environments, rather than on single bodies (Foucault 2003: 239–247). What Foucault did not emphasize – yet what Aníbal Quijano and other decolonial authors (e.g. Wynter 2003) draw our attention to – is that these technologies emerged not only in European metropolises but also in the context of and deeply entangled with colonialism (Howell/Richter-Montpetit 2019: 6).

In the following subsections, I provide symptomatic examples of early social policies “at home” and for the colonies and draw attention to striking continuities. I am not aiming to be comprehensive but merely to create awareness of the histories behind contemporary peacebuilding and

development cooperation. Next, I turn to Max Weber's work on "objectivity" in the social sciences around the turn of the twentieth century. This work is remarkable because it could have provided an early critique of claims to objectivity. However, Weber did not take this path.

3.1 UNACKNOWLEDGED COMMITMENTS IN EARLY SOCIAL AND COLONIAL POLICIES

While it may be the case that this "liberalism" is committed to the view that all individuals are of equal worth, this has not always been the case for actually existing liberal government. (Hindess 2008: 349)

Among colonial powers in 18th and 19th century Europe, concerns over social and political stability and improvement in the colonies emerged alongside social questions "at home". Both were seen as demanding rational interventions by the state and its colonial extensions – and both were tied up in projects that went well beyond improving the lot of workers in Europe and civilizing missions abroad. These official liberal agendas were shot through with aspirations to ensure protection and control for the propertied classes despite growing enfranchisement in the metropolises and they relied on already established imaginaries about the type of proper human being who deserved support and would be able to socio-economically rise or be uplifted (Stovall 2020: chs. 1, 4). Here are illustrations from the British Empire and Imperial Germany.

In Britain, debates about "Poor Laws", enfranchisement, and social insurance "at home" were echoed in debates about colonial policy for the West Indies and Africa and vice versa (Shilliam 2018: chs. 3–4). Regarding the colonies, a major concern was whether and how fundamentally lacking Africans and Black people of African descent would be able to acquire deserving characteristics, most importantly, such attitudes and capabilities as needed to sustain, control, and improve oneself and one's

dependents. At the same time, "at home" in Britain, the urban poor became associated with similarly undeserving characteristics, such as dependency, idleness, and promiscuity. In 1854, a Poor Law commissioner in London described this underclass as "a 'residuum' - something that had been left behind" (Shilliam 2018: 47) and could not partake in civilized life. British politicians, administrators, and bourgeois intellectuals likened the "residuum" to Blacks in the colonies and saw their supposed "slave essence" (an inability to be free and independent) mirrored in the urban poor. "The residuum was not a colonial population, but its filiation to the Anglo-Saxon family was of a negative kind – a degenerative influence" (Shilliam 2018: 55). Such degenerative influence, in turn, was diagnosed as a danger to the very integrity of the British Empire, including elite access to overseas resources. During the second Boer War (1899-1902), in particular, concerns arose that Englishmen were no longer fit for battle to defend British interests. Racial and social hygiene policies were created to counter degeneration, including a welfare system that quite explicitly sought to "preserve good working stock and ameliorate bad stock" (Shilliam 2020: 232).

It is worth noting that eugenics became an integral part of the "new liberalism" of the late 19th century, which called for state interventions in response to social questions (Rosenblatt 2018: 235–238; Stovall 2020: 143).² Eugenic interventions into the lives of problematized populations typically focused on the family and reproduction – both "at home" and in the colonies. For example, British philanthropists and administrators exported policies into the West African colonies, which attributed social problems (ranging from lacking health to less than desirable productivity) to a "failure of motherhood" among the poor or "uncivilized".

² To be fair, enthusiasm for eugenics was not limited to liberals and liberalism. Eugenics were widely approved of across the political spectrum at the time, also among socialists and social democrats (e.g., Schwartz 1994).

They [these policies] stressed, above all else, hygiene and nutrition through education, or, in the ennobling terminology of the time, the essentials of ‘mothercraft’. [...] They did not require any critique of the economic or environmental effects of colonialism on maternal and infant welfare, but they could be marshalled against a host of social problems, from population decline and infant mortality, to sexually transmitted diseases, prostitution and adultery. (Allman 1994: 25)

Similar attributions are present in contemporary “girl power” projects, which have been pushed and funded by major development actors (including the recently closed British Department for International Development) across the Global South, including in West Africa. These contemporary projects responsabilize Global South girls as the most promising drivers of so-called “poverty reduction” – if only they get an education and avoid early sex and early marriage. A key characteristic of these projects has been that they do not pay any serious attention to structural causes of poverty (see, e.g., Moeller 2018; Menzel 2019; Fofana Ibrahim et al. 2021).

Concerns over the poor and “uncivilized” were also prominent in Imperial Germany, particularly in the state of Prussia, which had been pursuing policies of so-called “internal colonization” in its Eastern formerly Polish territories (see Zimmerman 2011: ch. 2). This included efforts to establish settlements of German smallholder farmers who were expected to both civilize supposedly inferior Poles and develop themselves into a rural middle class that would counter proletarianization and growing support for social democracy in Imperial Germany. These settlements also belonged to broader “German efforts to regulate, even combat, Polish sexuality” (Zimmerman 2011: 87). Prussian authorities and intellectuals feared both immoral and degenerative influences but also saw Polish sexuality as dangerously reproductive and patriotic, effectively outdoing “Germans in the more conventional reproduction of national

subjects in heterosexual, monogamous households” (Zimmerman 2011: 87). A prominent advocate of Prussian settler colonialism in the East was Max Weber. At the same time, Weber did not fail to observe that many German settlers were struggling to make ends meet in the Eastern territories and ended up returning to German cities in search of employment. Upon receiving his first professorship in Freiburg in 1895, Weber made this problem the subject of his inaugural lecture, in which he argued that “The Polish farmer was winning the economic struggle with the German [...] ‘not despite, but rather because of, his low physical and mental habits’” (cited in Zimmerman 2006: 63). In this way, Weber presented a “peculiar twist on Social Darwinism” (Zimmerman 2006: 63). He argued that deserving German settlers needed more state support in order not to be replaced by underserving but apparently more robust Polish peasants (Boatcă 2013: 66–79).

The (forced) promotion of smallhold farming also played a key role in colonial Togo, where German colonizers sought to establish a cotton economy modelled on the North American South. They even contracted Black American scholars from the Tuskegee Institute (Alabama) to assist them in teaching Africans to grow cotton – an activity for which Black people were assumed to be especially suited (Zimmerman 2011: ch. 3). In addition, German colonizers regarded smallhold farming as a stabilizing influence.

Apart from the value of cotton itself, German officials [...] saw in smallhold farming a possibility of stabilizing the African population, creating a patriarchal domesticity that promised to control everything from sexual reproduction, to the behaviour of men and women, to the availability of labor, to the spatial location of inhabitants. In this, German hopes for smallhold farming were identical in Africa and Germany. (Zimmerman 2011: 133)

Similar types of grand expectations are attached to the contemporary promotion of foreign direct investment (e.g. by the World Bank and the EU) as a strategy for so-called developing countries, often with a focus on export-oriented agriculture or mining. Such investments promise stability in the form of paid employment that should give men (and sometimes women) a chance to take care of their families, educate their children, and escape poverty – all while foreign investors profit and resource-hungry economies get fed. However, high hopes and expectations for job creation and security are rarely met (Menzel 2015, 2016: 208–209).

3.2 A PATH NOT TAKEN: WEBER'S UNWILLING CRITIQUE OF OBJECTIVITY

In both Imperial Germany and the British Empire, bourgeois intellectuals who conducted historical, statistical, and field research influenced social and colonial policies. In Imperial Germany, the most prominent association of such intellectuals was the *Verein für Sozialpolitik* (Association for Social Policy); in Britain, an important and comparatively left-leaning player was the Fabian Society (Rueschemeyer/Van Rossem 1996). Their increasingly sophisticated social sciences were meeting rising demands for knowledge needed to devise rational social and colonial policies. The idea was that scholars (largely self-educated upper-middle-class men and women in the case of the Fabians; male professors at state universities in the case of the *Verein für Sozialpolitik*) would be able to provide objective knowledge to inform such policies. While Fabians largely assumed a pragmatic relationship between objective knowledge and policies, assuming that the latter would obviously be guided by value judgements, questions as to whether and to what extent the two could and had to be separated became an issue of debate between scholars in the *Verein für Sozialpolitik* (Rueschemeyer/Van Rossem 1996: 147–148). This was the context in which Max Weber, certainly the most widely known member of the

Verein today, wrote an essay entitled “The Objectivity of Knowledge in Social Science and Social Policy” (Weber [1904] 2012: 100–138).

The essay was published in the journal *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* (Archive for Social Science and Social Policy), for which Weber had recently become an editor. It raised the question of how an academic journal such as the *Archiv* was to ensure that it was and remained a *scientific* journal. This question, Weber argued, would give him the opportunity to “go on to consider the further question: in what sense do ‘objectively valid truths’ exist at all in the domain of the sciences of cultural life?” (Weber 1904] 2012: 101) – a much broader question with far-reaching implications. Weber’s short answer to the first question was that the journal should only publish such works that clearly separated their objective findings from expressions of values and ideals, for example, recommending that this or that social policy goal should be furthered (Weber [1904] 2012: 106). His much longer, more complex, and not just a little contradictory answer to the second question stressed the role of values, worldviews, and practical interests in all aspects of social science research – to the extent that any separation between them and objective facts would prove extremely difficult, to say the least. How these two stances (mis)fit together in Weber’s thought has been the subject of many analyses and discussions (e.g. Drysdale 2007; Bruun 2008; Morcillo Laiz 2019; Jansson Boström 2021). What is clear is that Weber valued “objectivity” in the social sciences but also acknowledged that its possibilities were limited – if, indeed, they were there at all. As Weber scholar Hans Henrik Bruun put it, “[Weber] does unequivocally state that empirical knowledge in the social sciences can be objective and valid for everyone; but he is regrettably tight-lipped as to the basis for this claim” (Bruun 2008: 98).

What is most fascinating about Weber's essay is that it is very explicit in spelling out the momentous effects of what feminist scholars from the 1980s onwards have described as the situatedness of knowledge or as positionality: "All knowledge of cultural reality is always knowledge from specific and *particular points of view*" (Weber [1904] 2012: 119; original italics). In the essay, Weber reiterates over and over again that scholars will choose their research topics and questions based on what they regard as important – for example, because they are committed to addressing a particular problem with specific political priorities and goals in mind. It is important to note that this selection is not merely a matter of choosing between three or four obvious alternatives. Rather, it entails choosing topics and questions from a "meaningless infinity of events in the world" (Weber [1904] 2012: 119). That which will constitute a nearly obvious choice for one person may well seem like sheer nonsense to another – depending on one's values and commitments. Weber illustrates this using the figure of a hypothetical Chinese observer who, because of his presumably very different values and commitments, would likely have difficulty following debates in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*. It is probably no coincidence that Weber chose "a Chinese", a representative of a culture Weber should later, in his famous work on religions, describe as somewhat (if inferiorly) rational (Steinmetz 2009: 167–174; Zimmerman 2006: 72). Upon encountering a piece of research (e.g. on some aspect of social reality deemed of policy relevance in early 20th century imperial Germany), Weber's hypothetical Chinese observer finds that he is not "'attuned' to our ethical imperatives [...] [and] often will [...] reject the ideal and the concrete *valuations* flowing from it" (Weber [1904] 2012: 105; original italics).

The tiny space Weber sees for "objectivity" (always in scare quotes) only opens up after the researcher has chosen a research question. If, for example, a particular study uncovers a relationship

between two phenomena, Weber postulates that this finding can and has to be valid even from a completely different point of view. He writes, "[A] methodically correct proof in the field of social science must, in order to have reached its goal ["objectivity"/validity as empirical truth], also be accepted as correct even by a Chinese" (Weber [1904] 2012: 105). Weber makes this point again on the next page, where he uses it to depict what it means to work "scientifically":

To the extent that a journal of social science [...] works scientifically, it must be a place dedicated to seeking [...] truth that can – to stay with our example – even for a Chinese claim to have the validity of an intellectual ordering of empirical reality. (Weber [1904] 2012: 106)

However, and this is important: even "objectivity" and "scientificity" cannot change the fact that the particular truth uncovered will be without meaning or, at least, of no interest to anyone, such as Weber's hypothetical Chinese observer, who does not share the worldviews and commitments of the scholar. For example, let us assume that someone found a statistically significant correlation between people categorized as being of Polish ethnicity and high fertility rates. This may be true. But it only has meaning and relevance if one regards a connection between being Polish and having many children as problematic – and if one believes that statistical correlations are useful representations of reality, such as for the purpose of planning policy interventions. Weber himself states this with absolute clarity: "With the means available to our science, we have nothing to offer a person to whom this truth is of no value – and belief in the value of scientific truth is the product of certain cultures, and is not given to us by nature" (Weber [1904] 2012: 137).

Yet Weber makes no move to get rid of "objectivity". Instead, he insists that it remains not only possible but also a valuable scholarly practice to separate objective truth from standpoints (Weber

[1904] 2012: 137). Based on what he had already worked out, Weber probably could have gotten rid of “objectivity” – which would have made it a lot more difficult to depict cultures as objectively more or less rational in his later works.³ In any case, Weber remained committed to “objectivity” and did not take the path towards embracing the situatedness of knowledge.

4 UNACKNOWLEDGED COMMITMENTS IN RATIONAL PEACEBUILDING AND DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

It would be difficult to overstate the emphasis placed on knowledge in policymaking for peace and development. One only needs to think of the World Bank, whose president at the time proclaimed it on the way to becoming a “knowledge bank” in the 1990s; indeed, even then, the Bank was already the largest economic development research institution in the world (Gilbert et al. 1999: F608). Other examples are long-standing and continuous demands to properly evaluate development and peacebuilding projects and promote coordination and learning within national and international bureaucracies to increase overall effectiveness (Benner/Rotmann 2008; Victora et al. 2011; Hirsch et al. 2012). In line with the concerns of a broader evidence-based policy movement (Haskins 2018; Baron 2018), it has been argued that evaluations need to become more “rigorous” and that learning from their results needs to be organized in a more systematic manner.

Knowledge is usually depicted as both a huge part of the problem where it is lacking and the solution to avoiding past mistakes and improving overall outcomes once it becomes properly available.

3 Alternatively (or perhaps complementarily), historian Georg Steinmetz presents psychological motivations behind Weber’s insistence on “objectivity”: “Weber’s attack on the *Verein’s* [für Sozialpolitik] old guard for mixing politics and science may have been partly driven by his overflowing rage at authority figures who placed him in a situation of dependence [especially his own father]” (Steinmetz 2009: 164; italics added).

The general assumption on which policy-oriented scholars, politicians, and practitioners or bureaucrats base their belief in the value of knowledge is that if only there had been enough of it and people had access to it, past failures could have been avoided. Creating more knowledge and better learning environments is expected to improve peacebuilding and development outcomes. There is even a growing conviction in many national and international bureaucracies of the need to “diversify” objective knowledge through consultation and inclusion or participation of people and organizations who are regarded as being closer to those directly affected by poverty, violence, and conflict (for discussions, see Plehwe 2007; Hughes 2011; Danielsson 2020). At the same time, it is taken for granted that more and diversified knowledge will bring everyone involved and affected on the same page while largely leaving intact (aside from necessary optimizations) existing organizations, procedures, and hierarchies. It is rarely acknowledged that such an outcome would require not objective knowledge but rather knowledge produced with commitments to the existing systems of international peacebuilding and development cooperation – and such commitments are certainly not universally shared. In this way, the belief in knowledge-based peacebuilding and development is a straightforward expression of liberal rationality in the sense that particular commitments are cast as the rational, progress-oriented perspective to have on the world.

In this second part of my paper, I present studies from the anthropology of aid and development and the field of International Relations that open perspectives on unacknowledged commitments and how they shape knowledge production and policymaking in the name of peace and development. I begin with James Ferguson’s seminal work on exclusions and depoliticization (Ferguson 1994); next, I move on to knowledge hierarchies (Autesserre 2014) and coloniality (Sabaratnam 2017); and, finally, I present some of my own

research on how exclusions, knowledge hierarchies, and coloniality shaped the work of the Sierra Leone TRC (Menzel 2020a, 2020b; Menzel/Salehi unpublished).

4.1 EXCLUSION IN THE ANTI-POLITICS-MACHINE

In the mid-1970s, the World Bank and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) proposed and sought to implement a “rural development” project in central Lesotho – the Thaba-Tseka project. It was a typical project of its time as it focused on modernizing and marketizing Third World agriculture in order to stimulate growth and reduce poverty. The problems to be solved were seen as resulting from traditional beliefs and practices and the Lesothan state’s lack of access and control over rural areas, both of which were found to impede development (Ferguson 1994: 64–67). The Thaba-Tseka project was mainly a livestock and range management project. As such, its main objectives were to encourage local farmers to sell un- or underproductive animals and engage in improved grazing and animal care practices – all under the auspices of a central government Livestock Division. The project turned out to be a complete disaster by all accounts. In 1982, when anthropologist James Ferguson arrived at the scene, he learned that “The office of the association manager had been burned down, and the Canadian officer in charge of the program was said to be fearing for his life” (Ferguson 1994: 171).

In his subsequent study, Ferguson resisted the orthodoxy of development studies, which would have urged him to explain this failure and formulate policy recommendations. Instead, he set out to understand what “development” (in this case, the Thaba-Tseka project) was doing and producing in Lesotho. This is how he came up with his now widely received concept of “development” as an

[...] ‘anti-politics-machine’, depoliticizing everything it touches, everywhere whisking political realities out of sight, all the while performing, almost unnoticed, its own pre-eminently political operation of expanding bureaucratic state power (Ferguson 1994: xv).

Ferguson found that the World Bank, in particular, had engaged in extensive knowledge production on Lesotho’s developmental problems and challenges prior to the Thaba-Tseka project. The resultant reports depict Lesotho as a “stagnated agricultural peasant economy which requires only the correct technical inputs” (Ferguson 1994: 58). They arrived at this description and conclusion by ignoring available and not difficult to come by evidence showing that Lesotho was no peasant economy but, in fact, an economy and society organized around migrant labour in Apartheid South African mines. To be more precise: World Bank reports did acknowledge that about 60 per cent of the Lesothan male labour force at the time were working in South Africa (cited in Ferguson 1994: 37). But this reported and known number did not prevent the diagnosis of Lesotho as a peasant economy, since this view supported the commitments of the World Bank. The Bank was in the business of promoting “rural development” in the Third World, and migrant workers in South Africa were not part of its mandate. “Development” as an anti-politics machine, in this context, removed migrant workers from the picture and ignored working and political conditions in South Africa as if they were irrelevant to the situation in Lesotho.

Disaster struck when the Thaba-Tseka project, endorsed by a highly unpopular central government, tried to force livestock owners into schemes that required them to sell animals – rather than keeping as many animals as possible, however unproductive they may have seemed to outsiders. The World Bank and CIDA failed to consider that, in Lesotho’s migration-based economy, livestock was not kept for its immediate productivity but

as insurance for bad times and old age. The animals were usually bought with money from men's migrant labour and also served the purpose of symbolizing the migrant's connectedness with his family and community back home (Ferguson 1994: ch. 5). Although these insights were easily available to anyone interested, none made it through the workings of the anti-politics machine and its technologies of knowledge production.

4.2 KNOWLEDGE HIERARCHIES

"Peaceland" is a peculiar place with a tribe of inhabitants who abide by their own rules and like to keep to themselves. This short description is how Séverine Autesserre begins her book *Peaceland* (2014), dedicated to the world of international peacebuilding projects in conflict and post-conflict zones in the Global South. Autesserre certainly knows this world inside out, both from experience as a practitioner/expatriate expert in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and her widely received academic work that builds on these earlier experiences. Also in the introduction, she describes how her thinking about the apparent ineffectiveness of peacebuilding interventions changed over time. At first, she had agreed with the common wisdom among Peacelanders that they needed more knowledge, more money, more time, more robust mandates, etc., to become more effective. But eventually, she started considering a different angle. According to her own account, Autesserre realized that "Many of the practices, habits, and narratives that shape international efforts on the ground – everyday elements that I had come to take for granted as an intervener – are, in fact counterproductive" (Autesserre 2014: 3). *Peaceland* (2014) explores this latter angle and presents a thorough analysis of, in my terms, unacknowledged commitments in knowledge-based peacebuilding interventions.

Autesserre highlights the effects of pervasive knowledge hierarchies that shape how things are

done in *Peaceland*. Most importantly, they privilege technical knowledge in specialized sub-fields (such as democratization, legal or security sector reforms, and gender and sexual violence) over context-specific knowledge. At least on the side of the interveners and peacebuilding professionals, these knowledge hierarchies are internalized and habitualized so that they appear normal, even natural. For example, these hierarchies shape recruitment practices that devalue context-specific knowledge *even when it is held by expatriate professionals* – be it academic knowledge from training as an area specialist or practically acquired knowledge from previous work in a specific context (Autesserre 2014: 73–74). Recruiters typically prefer professionals with technical expertise. If and when "local" people from intervened societies are hired into leadership positions, it is usually because they have acquired technical expertise and gone abroad to work outside their home country. "To move up in the hierarchy, they have to go abroad and become expatriates" (Autesserre 2014: 84). Strikingly, all of this goes on while decontextualized templates and universal models have been thoroughly criticized even by policy-oriented scholars, and "interveners on the ground are perfectly aware of this problem" (Autesserre 2014: 92). In theory, context sensitivity is highly valued. However, this is not reflected in actual practice.

Although she does not spell it out in so many words, Autesserre finds that this seeming contradiction results from unacknowledged commitments to keeping peacebuilding as untouched as possible from "local" influences. Despite official commitments to context-sensitivity, interveners regard context as potentially corrupting rather than enriching. In this regard, Autesserre's following interview findings are worth quoting in full:

The international peacebuilders I interviewed regularly brought up the need to adapt their templates to local contexts. However, [...] they

were afraid that, if they requested local input from the start, local stakeholders would manipulate the programs and bias them in favour of their political or ethnic groups. Finally, many interveners emphasized that, in spite of all the problems they encountered, they still firmly believed that their universal models provided the best answers [...]. (Autesserre 2014: 92)

Peaceland (2014) takes a surprising turn in the concluding chapter, where Autesserre, in a way, mirrors her interlocutors' commitments by stressing the need to reform the present system of international peacebuilding – even though her findings show that reform attempts meet habitualized resistance. It seems that, despite her stirring findings, Autesserre is not able or interested in shedding her own commitments to the present system (for a discussion, see Sabaratnam 2017: 30–31, 138–139).

4.3 COLONIALITY

Meera Sabaratnam's book *Decolonizing Intervention* (2017) deliberately privileges the situated knowledge held by the “targets of intervention” (Sabaratnam 2017: 47), meaning the nominal beneficiaries or addressees of statebuilding projects (a crosscut of peacebuilding and development cooperation) in post-war Mozambique. Sabaratnam presents experiences and interpretations she collected among “targets”. For example, her research partners included Mozambican peasants and civil servants who had studied and tried to make sense of the choices and actions of interveners, including expatriate donor representatives, experts, and professional practitioners working in donor-funded projects. This is how Sabaratnam summarizes her research approach and core question in a nutshell:

In Mozambique, whilst there have been ‘internationals’ of various kinds for centuries, the period after the end of the war in 1990 has seen a particularly large cohort active in the country

promoting peace, development, democracy, good governance and so on. Whilst interveners tend to come and go after a few months or years, however, the targets of intervention remain to welcome the next batch and repeat the cycles of cooperation. *What does the politics of intervention look like after two or three decades to them?* (Sabaratnam 2017: 4; italics added)

Among the main themes emerging from the answers to this question, Sabaratnam finds a pervasive “*protagonismo*”, a guiding assumption held by interveners that they know best and should retain control, and experiences of disposability without consequences on the side of the targets of intervention. After the above-cited interview findings from Autesserre's work, *protagonismo* should be self-explanatory. Yet disposability still needs some explanation: Mozambicans whose lives were supposed to be improved through interventions or who were to learn new and supposedly optimized ways of doing their work (from agriculture to bureaucracy) found that they were constantly called upon to attend meetings and provide information to interveners (even when it seriously disrupted their daily work). Yet their concerns, needs, and priorities were never prioritized and often not even considered. Instead, they experienced project after project without seeing transformative effects. Sabaratnam concludes that one cannot help but find that especially “some of the larger interveners [such as the World Bank and major Western bilateral donors] are clearly *more committed* to having things done their way” than to effecting meaningful change (Sabaratnam 2017: 133; original italics). Understanding the persistence of such commitments, Sabaratnam argues, requires an acknowledgement of the “coloniality of power” (Quijano 2007).

Coloniality describes a historically ingrained structure of contemporary global power and knowledge relations, through which agency, mastery, and rationality are ascribed to those associated with Western education and science – even after

“colonialism as an explicit political order was destroyed” (Quijano 2007: 170). Coloniality sustains Autesserre’s knowledge hierarchies and renders them obvious, seemingly unavoidable, and unamenable to reforms. Though practitioners and their respective organizations will cringe at accusations of racism and usually work hard to avoid “colonialist resonances of any kind”, they reproduce coloniality via *protagonismo* and disposability: by insisting on the priority and superiority of their knowledge and policy solutions (Sabaratnam 2017: 137). Sabaratnam argues that, if one wants to get rid of these dynamics, contemporary systems of so-called peacebuilding and development cooperation will have to be abolished.

I suggest that, to decolonise intervention, it is necessary to contemplate abandoning its central intellectual assumptions, its modes of operation and its political structures, in order to remake a terrain for solidaristic engagement and, where appropriate, postcolonial reparation. (Sabaratnam 2017: 142).

4.4 ALREADY KNOWING THE TRUTH ABOUT WOMEN AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN THE SIERRA LEONE TRC

In this final subsection, I offer some more illustrations of the above-described perspectives – exclusion and anti-politics, knowledge hierarchies, and coloniality – based on my own research on the work of the Sierra Leone TRC. More specifically, I studied the professional production of the TRC’s final report, especially the chapter on “Women & the Armed Conflict in Sierra Leone” (Menzel 2020a, 2020b; Menzel/Salehi unpublished). Let me begin with some background on the Sierra Leone TRC.

The Sierra Leone TRC was formally established by an act of parliament in 2000 and became operational in 2002 – only months after the official end of an eleven-year civil war in Sierra Leone. At this point in time, truth commissions were

emerging as a global model for dealing with violent pasts in a supposedly context-sensitive, victim-centred, and participatory way (Ancelovici/Jensen 2013: 298–304). The idea was to employ such commissions to produce detailed accounts of the root causes and dynamics of violence and develop recommendations for peacebuilding policies that should be tailored to the specific context (van Zyl 2005: 215–216). A Sierra Leonean academic who had served as a consultant to the TRC explained, “Sierra Leone was the first time that they projectized a TRC” (informal conversation).⁴ He was referring to the fact that the Sierra Leone TRC was only nominally a domestic institution. Most of its leadership positions were filled with expatriate professionals (many of whom hailed from other African countries), and it was run as a donor-funded project by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva (Menzel 2020b: 597).

The TRC collected thousands of statements from different parts of the country via a pre-formulated form distributed and implemented by rank-and-file Sierra Leonean statement-takers; it also collected written contributions from civil society organizations and held public and closed hearings mostly with victims and survivors of wartime violence (TRC 2004a: chs. 4–5). In March 2004, after this extensive data collection and subsequent report writing work, the TRC finalized a report of close to two thousand pages (not even counting the appendices). The report offers an account of wartime violence, including chapters on the history of the conflict, on the role of mineral resources (also known as “blood diamonds” in the case of Sierra Leone), on youth, children, and women and their roles and experiences, as well as policy recommendations based on the reported findings. The report is the product of strenuous efforts by a group of mostly expatriate staff and consultants from Belgium, Canada, the US, South Africa,

⁴ Informal conversation in Freetown, 12 November 2016.

Kenya, and Nigeria (this list is not exhaustive), who directed the work of Sierra Leonean consultants and personnel. Some expatriates had extensive experience in so-called “transitional justice”, a subfield of professional peacebuilding that was emerging at the time; others were fresh from the university without even a finalized undergraduate degree (Mahoney/Sooka 2015: 40–41).

My research focused specifically on the TRC’s work regarding women and sexual violence. The TRC had been mandated to pay special attention to the experiences of women, especially sexual violence (Menzel 2020b: 597–600), and it produced a report chapter entitled “Women & the Armed Conflict in Sierra Leone” (TRC 2004b: 85–229). This chapter depicts wartime sexual violence in Sierra Leone along the lines of two policy narratives that had been widely discussed among transnational women’s rights activists and professionals in the 1990s and had recently been picked up by major international organizations, such as the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and the International Criminal Court (Engle 2020). One was the “continuum of violence” narrative, according to which pre-war discriminations suffered by women enhanced their vulnerability to wartime violence, and the other was the notion of sexual violence as a “weapon of war” (Menzel 2020a: 312–313). In my research, I zoomed in on one puzzle in particular: *how did it come about that a report chapter that was supposedly based on statements and public testimonies from ordinary Sierra Leonean women and Sierra Leonean women’s organizations ended up presenting experiences of sexual violence in perfect accordance with established narratives, which, conveniently, already had clear policy implications?* These policy implications were mostly legal reforms and an ambitious reparations program outlined in the recommendations chapter of the TRC report (TRC 2004c: 168–176).

I approached this question based on materials from the TRC archive in Sierra Leone’s capital city Freetown (including internal memos, printed email conversations, minutes, etc.) and interviews with former TRC staff members (Menzel 2020a). I also drew on interviews I had conducted with survivors of sexual violence in Sierra Leone (Menzel 2020b: 601–603) and on available ethnographic research on experiences with or of the TRC (e.g. Shaw 2007; Millar 2014). What I found, in a nutshell, is that professionals at the TRC put together the chapter on “Women & the Armed Conflict in Sierra Leone” (TRC 2004b) largely without considering the voices of ordinary women captured in statements and hearing transcripts. Instead, they focused on elaborating Sierra Leonean experiences in line with established policy narratives and then re-inserted ordinary women’s voices, often in the form of quotes, after much of the chapter had been written and only insofar as these quotes served to support the preselected policy narratives (Menzel 2020a: 316–317).

Considering exclusion and anti-politics, knowledge hierarchies, and coloniality is helpful in making sense of these findings.

A focus on exclusion and anti-politics helps identify what had to be omitted to produce the chapter on “Women & the Armed Conflict in Sierra Leone”. The chapter places particular emphasis on legal issues, including long-standing legal discrimination against women and implications of international law for jurisprudence and legal reforms in Sierra Leone. This focus made sense from the perspective of professional TRC staff, many of whom were lawyers and most of whom were familiar with and committed to the language of human rights (Menzel 2020a: 311). However, interviews with former TRC staff members, archival materials, and available ethnographic research on experiences with or of the TRC (e.g., Shaw 2007; Millar 2014) clearly show that legal issues were certainly not what Sierra Leonean women – and

ordinary people in general – had raised in their interactions with the TRC. Rather, those who provided statements and testified in hearings usually expected and often explicitly asked for tangible help, including medical care, housing, and food; also, they usually voiced their disappointment once they realized that the TRC had no mandate to provide such help (Menzel 2020a: 317–318, 2020b: 600–603). Their demands and disappointments are nowhere near adequately represented in the report neither in the chapter on “Women & the Armed Conflict in Sierra Leone” nor anywhere else.

Considering knowledge hierarchies is helpful in understanding why TRC staff did not regard such omissions as problematic or even noteworthy (at least, I have not come across anything that would suggest that they did find them problematic or noteworthy). Professionals at the TRC were committed to delivering a state-of-the-art analysis of policy problems and matching recommendations, and ordinary Sierra Leoneans’ demands and disappointments were no priority in this endeavour (Menzel/Salehi unpublished). This commitment does not mean that professionals were not shaken by the experience that the TRC created disappointment among the very people it was ultimately supposed to serve. Interviews and archival materials clearly show that many were frustrated and even discussed options to help deliver tangible aid to victims and survivors (Menzel 2020a: 317–318; Menzel/Salehi unpublished). But, in the end, such frustrations did not change the direction of their work – and even though some TRC professionals wanted to (slightly) change direction, they saw no proper way to go about it. Moreover, there was a general sense that delivering a “good” report with adequate and realistic policy recommendations was the best one could do to improve the lives of ordinary Sierra Leoneans – maybe not in the short but certainly in the medium and long term. However, as is often the case after truth commissions, key recommendations

such as legal reforms and a reparations program, including for victims of sexual violence, did not materialize until many years after the TRC completed its work. And when they finally came about, they remained superficial, only reached a fraction of those in need, and delivered only meagre benefits where benefits were delivered at all (Williams/Opdam 2017; Menzel 2021: 423–425; Fofana Ibrahim et al. 2021: 368).

Finally, coloniality urges us to think about the deeper, structural forces that uphold such knowledge hierarchies, which – in turn – pave the path for exclusions. It is hardly a coincidence that the voices and demands of ordinary Sierra Leoneans “lost out” against state-of-the-art professional reporting. There is a pattern here, which repeats across projects in the name of peacebuilding and development in different contexts – and not only in the Global South (Salisbury et al. 2020; Menzel/Salehi unpublished). Ordinary Sierra Leoneans lost out against professionals who derived authority from an association with formal education, recognized expertise, and, more generally, *whiteness* – not always or necessarily involving light(er) skin but attributes signalling agency, mastery, rationality, and deservingness. Moreover, enforcing their priorities upon the TRC would have required ordinary Sierra Leoneans to have some kind of hold on the donor-funded TRC project, which they did not. This lack of agency is a general feature in the world of peacebuilding and development cooperation, where project implementers are accountable to donors – not to nominal beneficiaries (Krause 2014: 173–176; Menzel 2020b). The best ordinary Sierra Leoneans could do was to deliberately boycott the TRC’s statement-taking process and public hearing events. Ethnographic research suggests that boycotting likely happened on a considerable scale throughout the country (Shaw 2007) but it is also not mentioned in the TRC’s final report.

5 CONCLUSION

My explicit aim in this contribution has been to disrupt a liberal imaginary that portrays objective knowledge production and rational policies as the best available path towards improving human welfare, especially when dealing with the poor and “underdeveloped”. Using examples from the field of peacebuilding and development cooperation, I have drawn attention to unacknowledged commitments in processes modelled on the ideal of objective knowledge production and rational policies. My main point is that a focus on the liberal ideal masks the actual non-objectivity of liberal rationality. I hope that the examples and illustrations I provided have demonstrated that there are sound grounds for viewing liberal rationality as a situated perspective, which comes with particular commitments that co-produce “objective” findings and their policy implications. Only liberals who share these commitments, which are usually about improving the poor and “underdeveloped” *in very specific ways* (often not at all in alignment with their own preferences and priorities), will experience such findings and policy implications as rational and contributing to progress. In other words, liberal rationality is a standpoint – if an unacknowledged one.

Efforts to situate liberal rationality are often countered with accusations of an “anything-goes” relativism or of a naïve desire to “just listen to the people” and give them what they want. Let me conclude with two replies.

Embracing that *all knowledge is situated* is not the same as “anything goes”. Rather, it is about not only acknowledging but also explaining as meticulously as possible how and why a specific problem or situation looks differently to differently situated people. Furthermore, finding out about different experiences, commitments, and interpretations creates opportunities for questioning established truths (even the ones we usually

regard as progressive) – and for learning to see the world otherwise (Collins 1986; Haraway 1988; Mahmood 2005: 13–17; Táíwò 2020). For example, we may come to see the unsatisfactory outcomes of international peacebuilding and development cooperation more from the perspective of nominal beneficiaries who experience that their realities and priorities are not taken into account, even though knowledge of them is readily available. Such insights, in turn, would suggest options for thinking about the perpetual crises of peacebuilding and development cooperation beyond demands for more and better knowledge (see section 4).

This brings me to the issue of naïveté. Learning about people’s different experiences, commitments, and interpretations does not mean we have to agree with them or accept their truths as ours. However, once we encounter them and are willing to learn about and from them, we will likely come to better understand or even see some truth in worldviews that used to seem exotic, strange, or possibly even distasteful (Fassin 2000; Janasoff/Simmet 2017). And yet, we do not need to agree with them. But we may use them to better understand conflicts, power relations, and political options.

Conclusions drawn from situated knowledge are not universally true but will have to be partial and political, based on how we have come to see the world through different perspectives. For example, we might conclude that widely observed shortcomings in peacebuilding and development cooperation do not result from technical problems that generations of professionals have been unable to fix. Rather, a good part of the problem is deeply ingrained hierarchies and inequalities that demand not better fixes but alternative, more horizontal forms of inter- and transnational solidarity, even if they are still difficult to imagine (see, however, Táíwò 2022). Approaching the world this way is not naïve. Rather, it is more *explicitly* political

– in the sense of being consciously committed and partial (rather than “objective”) – than liberals are usually comfortable with. To be clear: liberal rationality is no less partial and committed but still claims objectivity.

Questioning such claims and embracing situated knowledge opens up exciting scholarly and political options and opportunities, as I hope to have shown in this paper. The downside is, perhaps, a loss of scientific authority – if and where such authority is tied to the notion that scholars can identify the one true truth through what Donna Haraway called “a conquering gaze from nowhere” (Haraway 1988: 581). Of course, one can choose to follow Max Weber who remained committed to “objectivity” despite, apparently, knowing it better. However, I would argue that giving up the conquering gaze is a small price to pay for the opportunities that await.

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