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# Towards an Ecology of Peace as a Political Topology after the End of History

ENGLISH

ABSTRACTS

The post-Cold War promise of liberal democracy as history's endpoint has collapsed. Illiberalism has resurged globally, while both liberal and illiberal peacebuilding strategies have repeatedly failed to prevent societies from relapsing into armed conflict. This paper argues that both approaches share a fundamental flaw rooted in their underlying political topology representing the conceptual framework through which space, power, and actors are perceived and prioritized in political interventions. Grounded in universalist, state-centric, and Eurocentric assumptions, both liberal and illiberal peace strategies enact epistemic violence: imposing external knowledge systems that erase, delegitimize, and silence local ways of knowing and being, thereby systematically misrepresenting the lived realities of post-conflict actors and preparing the ground for renewed violence. To move beyond this impasse, the paper proposes an ecology of peace as an alternative political topology. Rejecting universalist reductionism, it embraces relational ontologies that recognize the vast diversity of human and non-human relationships, positionalities, and cosmologies as constitutive foundations for sustainable peacebuilding interventions.


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DEUTSCH

**Eine Ökologie des Friedens als politische Topologie nach dem Ende der Geschichte**

*Das Versprechen der liberalen Demokratie als Endpunkt der Geschichte nach dem Ende des Kalten Krieges hat sich nicht erfüllt. Illiberalismus gewinnt weltweit wieder an Zulauf. Gleichzeitig scheitern liberale wie illiberale Friedenskonsolidierungsstrategien immer wieder daran, einen Rückfall von Gesellschaften in bewaffnete Konflikte zu verhindern. Dieser Beitrag argumentiert, dass beiden Ansätzen ein fundamentaler Mangel gemeinsam ist. Dieser wurzelt in ihrer zugrunde liegenden politischen Topologie, also dem konzeptuellen Rahmen, mit dem Raum, Macht und Akteure in politischen Interventionen wahrgenommen und priorisiert werden. Liberale und illiberale Friedensstrategien beruhen beide auf universalistischen, staatszentrierten und eurozentrischen Annahmen und üben dadurch epistemische Gewalt aus: Sie setzen externe Wissenssysteme durch und löschen damit lokale Formen des Wissens und Seins aus, delegitimieren sie und bringen sie zum Schweigen. Die gelebten Realitäten von Akteur:innen in (Post-)Konfliktkontexten werden so systematisch enggeführt, wodurch der Boden für erneute Gewalt bereitet wird. Um diesen Stillstand zu überwinden, schlägt der Beitrag eine Ökologie des Friedens als alternative politische Topologie vor. Dieser Ansatz lehnt universalistische Reduktionismen ab und umfasst stattdessen relationale Ontologien. Diese erkennen die immense Vielfalt menschlicher und nicht-menschlicher Beziehungen, Positionalitäten und Kosmologien als konstitutive Grundlagen für nachhaltige Friedensinterventionen an.*

| KEY WORDS

environmental peacebuilding; climate crisis; pluriversal; indigenous; illiberal peace; transactional peace

environmental peacebuilding; *Klimakrise; pluriversal; indigen; illiberaler Frieden; transaktionaler Frieden*

| BIOGRAPHY

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On 11 September 1990, US President George H. W. Bush addressed the US Congress on the occasion of the waning Operation Desert Storm to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation. He states:

> *"Out of these troubled times, […] a new world order […] can emerge: a new era—freer from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice, and more secure in the quest for peace. An era in which the nations of the world, East and West, North and South, can prosper and live in harmony. A hundred generations have searched for this elusive path to peace, while a thousand wars raged across the span of human endeavor. Today a new world is struggling to be born […]. A world in which nations recognize the shared responsibility for freedom and justice. A world where the strong respect the rights of the weak."* (Bush 1990)

More than 35 years later, after the conclusion of a successful US military intervention to abduct Nicolas Maduro, the president of Venezuela, US President Donald J. Trump states in a press conference:

> *"Under our new national security strategy, American dominance in the Western hemisphere will never be questioned again. […] [W]e are reasserting American power in a very powerful way in our home region. […] The future will be determined by the ability to protect commerce and territory and resources that are core to national security. […] [T]hese are the iron laws that have always determined global power. […] We will secure our borders, we'll stop the terrorists, we will crash the cartels and we will defend our citizens against all threats, foreign and domestic."* (Trump 2026)

The language of peace, liberty, and justice that defined the post-Cold War era of the 1990s stands in stark contrast to the contemporary discourse of power, coercion, and dominance. While Donald Trump may appear as an exceptional figure in recent history, he represents merely a very visible manifestation of a broader illiberal tendency that has gained considerable momentum across the globe, encompassing Europe and North America alike. In these regions, the shift toward illiberalism can be traced to the counterterrorism measures implemented in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, a trajectory that was further entrenched by the austerity policies adopted in response to the 2007–2008 financial crisis. Within the European Union, anti-liberal parties have secured significant political influence, among them Viktor Orbán's Fidesz in Hungary, the Kaczyński brothers' Law and Justice Party (PiS) in Poland, the Alternative for Germany (AfD),

and the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ). Beyond Europe, Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) has systematically consolidated illiberal governance in Turkey. Among others, Russia and China have strategically employed such approaches as instruments of global power projection (cf. Nik et al. 2025; Lewis et al. 2018).

The "end of history" was never as definitive as once assumed.

These developments over the past two decades fundamentally challenge Francis Fukuyama's (2020) assertion that humanity has reached the "end of history" represented by the supposed culmination of ideological evolution in which liberal democracy emerges as the final form of governance. While Fukuyama acknowledged the possibility of political setbacks, he maintained that liberalism, from a rationalist perspective, was without viable alternatives. Yet this claim has proven increasingly untenable. Illiberal politics have not only persisted but have found a foothold alongside liberal ideologies in both Europe and North America, demonstrating that the "end of history" was never as definitive as once assumed. On this foundation, this paper emphasizes that international peace practice has entered a post-apocalyptic phase after the revelation of the existence of alternatives to political liberalism with substantial legitimacy. These post-apocalyptic times mark an era of uncertainties beyond the normative clarities after the end of the Cold War. Therefore, this paper introduces a political topology that facilitates the navigation of peace practice in this era: an ecology of peace.

In international peacebuilding, liberal approaches dominated the post-Cold War landscape, characterized by state-centric, top-down interventions aimed at establishing peace through liberal governance on the foundation of a liberal setup of state institutions. International organizations such as the United Nations sought to provide both material and ideational support for these efforts. However, the outcomes remained largely detached from the lived realities of populations in post-conflict environments, such as in El Salvador or Cambodia, where state institutions were captured by local elites or criminal groups, or in Kosovo, East Timor, Sierra Leone, and Bosnia, where the focus was on setting up strong institutions with robust security infrastructures (cf. Lizée 2000; Wade 2016; Dodge 2021; Mako/Edgar 2021; Kappler 2014; Belloni 2020). Acknowledging these shortcomings, international peace interventions attempted a reorientation towards local actors and strategies, but instead of moving beyond liberalist strategies

this produced yet again new avatars of liberal peace under the guise of a different rhetoric (cf. Sabaratnam 2013).

The rapid Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2023 stands out as the epitome of failure of the liberal peace model, marking the definitive end of its post-Cold War hegemony. Illiberal alternatives, long dismissed as relics of a bygone era, have not only reemerged but have gained legitimacy as viable, if not superior, approaches to respond to conflict. This shift has been fueled by the persistent inability of liberal peacebuilding to address the material and social realities of post-conflict societies.

## A persistent inability of liberal peacebuilding

In Mali, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission (MINUSMA) faced widespread criticism for its ineffectiveness, ultimately being replaced by the Russian Wagner Group's mercenary forces. A similar fate may await the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) (cf. Gazeley 2022). Meanwhile, the UN-led Syrian peace process, which excluded key armed groups on ideological grounds and focused narrowly on constitutional reform, was overshadowed by the Russia-backed Astana Process. The latter, though far from perfect, included all major stakeholders and succeeded in restoring regime control and a semblance of stability albeit through coercion across much of Syria. At the same time, it did so by transferring and concentrating all rebel militias into Idlib province, deliberately creating a rebel-held exclave (cf. Beaujouan 2025). However, the distinction between liberal and illiberal peace strategies is difficult to draw in the first place. Research has indicated that UN stabilization missions, particularly those deployed in Mali, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the Central African Republic, incorporate central elements that bear a strong resemblance to illiberal strategies in the service of peace promotion. After all, illiberal peace strategies intend to manage conflict and achieve social stabilization by implementing architectures of security instead of attempting to resolve underlying conflicts (cf. Duarte 2024).

The pursuit of social stability by force is a strategy that has been adopted in a number of (post-)conflict contexts since the end of the Cold War, among others in Rwanda, Myanmar, in Nagorno-Karabakh by Azerbaijan (cf. Lakitsch/Hushcha 2026), as well as in Benjamin Netanyahu's security-driven approach to managing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (cf. Pinfold 2025). Yet these illiberal interventions have proven no more effective than

their liberal counterparts. Wagner's operations in Africa have been marred by inefficiency, while Russia's peace in Syria eventually led to the military takeover of the country by the very militias that were deemed to have been contained. In all these cases, the imposition of order through coercion has merely suppressed conflict temporarily, leaving underlying tensions unresolved and the risk of renewed violence ever-present (cf. Spearin 2024). The failure of liberal peacebuilding to prevent societal relapse into armed conflict, coupled with the resurgence of illiberalism as a widely accepted alternative, seriously undermines the notion of liberalism as the apex of political evolution. At the same time, neither liberal nor illiberal strategies have succeeded in engaging with the lived realities of post-conflict actors. Instead, both impose a predetermined understanding of reality along with a set of political imperatives, and a state-centric, top-down-oriented strategy. Whether compliance is considered the result of supposedly universal legal frameworks or whether it is the result of tactics of co-optation, corruption, and patronage, both liberal and illiberal peace are inherently violent: sometimes physically in enforcing compliance, and in any case epistemically. They enact epistemic violence: the imposition of external knowledge systems that erase or delegitimize local ways of knowing and being, thereby misappropriating them, silencing them, displacing them from the traditional spaces of politics and preparing the ground for physical violence against humans and non-humans (cf. Teo 2010).

## Both liberal and illiberal approaches create an absolutist and universalist space.

Backed by the absolutist Newtonian conception space, propagated along Immanuel Kant's (1974) imperative "sapere aude", the liberal as well as the illiberal peace conceive human everyday-life to be manageable and managed to an extent that justifies the creation and maintenance of social order based on rationality—the foundation of Descartes' (1986) substance dualism that freed the subject from empirical constraints, thereby marking the corner stone of modern universalism. Both are modernist. Both liberal and illiberal approaches create an absolutist and universalist space for a universal political topology to manage human everyday-lives. At the same time, these approaches have proven far too rigid to accommodate the unpredictable disruptions of non-human origin, which are increasing with the growing destabilization of the biosphere, driven by rising $CO_2$ emissions, the continued pollution of the atmosphere, land, and water, and the

decline of biodiversity. As a result, extreme weather events such as heatwaves, droughts, extreme cold, storms or floods are increasingly disrupting everyday-lives in political communities and cast serious doubt on the universalist conception of space as a political topology and its ability to manage human everyday-lives (cf. IPCC 2023).

In order to prevent the epistemic subjection of human-non-human actors and their habitats, and thus restore the possibility of peace, the paper demands to move beyond the end of the End of History and its modernist and universalist conception of space underlying liberal and illiberal approaches—thereby entering more or less a post-apocalyptic era in terms of political topology. It presents an ecology of peace as a political topology that allows to grasp empirical difference without epistemic subjection. Political topology is crucial for shaping international peace strategies by defining how space, power, actors, and their relationships are perceived and prioritized, which influences which and how issues and actors are actively addressed in peace efforts (cf. Richmond 2005). In essence, this paper is a theoretical intervention for practical purposes. Its ecology of peace as a political topology shall allow to grasp the unique human-non-human relationships beyond universalist selectivity and reductionism.

## A theoretical intervention for practical purposes

This paper's understanding of ecology is not only about emphasizing the relevance of climate and environment for peace practice, but about addressing the multitude of factors that contribute to peace, of which climate is an integral and complexifying part, not within a universalist space, but within their distinct configuration.[1] Ecology commonly describes the interrelations between human and non-human entities within their very own habitat. The ecological understanding presented in this paper differs from the dominant theoretical conceptions of political ecology, which do not explicitly reject the predefined metaphysical separation between nature and politics.[2] Based on a relational ontology that rejects Cartesian substance dualism, this paper's ecological approach emphasizes the inextricable entanglement of the human and non-human worlds, to the point of epistemological and ontological inseparability. After all, any attempt at distinction would introduce metaphysical predeterminations and accordingly distort the richness of lived reality. Related approaches have already been adopted in the academic literature on peacebuilding, for example Elisa Randazzo and Ignasi Torrent's (2020) attempt to rearticulate peace

1 See e.g. Morton 2016; for more peace-related approaches see Simangan 2024 or Lakitsch 2023.

2 See for political ecologies that deal with the issue of peace e.g. Benjaminsen 2018; Selby et al. 2017; Ash/Obradovich 2019, Ide et al. 2023 or Von Uexkull/Buhaug 2021.

agency in a relational way or Torrent's (2021) suggestion to consider the entangled constitution of actors and actorness in UN peace missions. Morgan Brigg (2024; 2018) emphasizes the importance of relationality for a comprehensive understanding of peacebuilding and seeks to align it with non-modernist perspectives, such as indigenous worldviews. The intention of this paper is closely related to these relational approaches. However, it attempts a topological approach to contribute to a change of practice. While this paper is theoretical, it is intended to be relevant to practice, in the same way as Thania Paffenholz's (2021) or Cedric de Coning's (2018) theoretical attempts to make peacebuilding more pragmatic or Gearoid Millar's (2019) theoretic intervention to make peace practice more effective through a trans-scalar framework.

The first section examines the inherent violence of both liberal and illiberal strategies, tracing it to their shared underlying universal modernist topology and demonstrating how this violence manifests through epistemic and physical subjection, thereby laying the groundwork for armed conflict. The second section introduces a political ecology of peace as an alternative political topology, one that seeks to engage with empirical difference without reducing it to any particular external positionality, and illustrates this framework through a number of relevant cases. The final section summarises and concludes the paper's argument.

## 1 Moving Beyond the Violence of Universal Modernist Political Topology

A political topology offers a conceptualization of the relationship between political space, power, and actors, thereby shaping the perception of the political relevance attributed to those actors. A universalist topology gives rise to an understanding of sovereignty that embraces the notion of one universal world with an abstract conception of territory as its foundation. In European modernist understanding, sovereignty provides the distinct quality that gives the territory a national meaning. The modern state claims a distinct territory as the habitat of a distinct group of people that is governed by one authority. Accordingly, the trias of statehood, sovereignty, and territory constitutes political power. Territory becomes the exclusive domain of state power, which demarcates its sphere of influence from others. Thereby, political power is being constituted at the expense of the infinite qualities of territory which is rendered void in the end. It is thus regarded as *terra nullius* that is to be conquered. In other

words, state-centrism negates difference of space and time for the purpose of control and power, which among others served and still serves (neo-)colonial interests (cf. Parasram 2023).

State-centrism has been at the center of a universalist political topology and is the foundation for the constitutive character of the state in International Relations and in peace research. The conception of the international as an amalgam of states was unquestioned from the early days of the discipline in the 1920s at least until the 1970s and 1980s. This perspective aligns with the academic discipline's core ambition after the First World War and during the Cold War, which was to foster interstate stability in order to avoid war. Despite approaches that focused on the sub-state level such as John Burton's and Edward Azar's theories that emphasized the role of basic human needs for armed conflict, or Samuel Huntington's early interest in culture, the dominating vantage point from which to look at war and peace remained the nation state. This was rearticulated as the unquestioned dominance of the liberal peace after the end of the Cold War with its reliance on state structures and governance as a means to foster and maintain peace (cf. Parasram 2023). State-centrism proved to be overtly persistent despite the growing acknowledgement of non-state entities and factors as crucial for the "new wars" and attempts to embrace the role of the local for the issue of peace (cf. Kaldor 2002). Ironically, the notion of the local seems to contribute to bringing back state-centrism through the backdoor as it is framed as the other to the international and the national (cf. Sabaratnam 2013). Notably, state-centrism also lies at the heart of the illiberal peace, finding clear expression in China's conception of developmental peace, which seeks to foster development and stability through the existing governance structures of the state (cf. Kwok Chung 2021; Yunfei 2025).

The underlying universalist topology not only ignores but also hides local complexities.

Accordingly, whether it concerns a liberal or an illiberal intervention, the underlying universalist topology not only ignores but also hides local complexities. It covers up the infinite variety of everyday-realities of a certain place underneath a concept that was crafted in another location based upon a certain assumption of what exists and what is relevant from the perspective of that very location. In other words, external knowledge subjects a certain space and thereby exerts epistemic violence. This epis-

temic subjection concerns local particularities such as communities and their distinct cosmologies, narratives, truths, and norms. Accordingly, the assertion of a universalist topology means that worldviews underneath this veil are evaluated in reference to the one universalist (modernist) world and thus demeaned. Thereby, many actors find themselves distanced from the places where they used to participate in matters affecting their political community. Their articulations are not taken into account on a level that is regarded politically relevant since their articulations might be rendered as myths, legends, and stories. They are denied rights due to an alleged lack of so-called civilized manner in engaging with the world (cf. Trownsell et al. 2019). They become subaltern in Spivak's understanding as they are not organized formally and thus politically invisible to the overarching political authority such as a state government and the international community (cf. Spivak 1990). What was true before is banned to the realm of fiction, childish myth, and barbarism. Epistemological subjection paved the way for physical subjection in colonial endeavors and still does so (cf. Said 2019). Tales of barbarism have been serving to legitimate conquest and war for centuries and still do. Among others, the horrendous accounts of the October 7 Hamas terrorist attack against Israeli civilians and soldiers added to a notion of Palestinians as a supposedly uncivilized and wild people and was excessively referenced in the justification of Israel's war on Gaza (cf. Tenbarge/Chan 2023; Khouri 2023). Israeli decision-makers framed the destruction of Gaza as a desperate attempt of a civilized people to secure their lives against savage threats by uncivilized and barbaric people, barely humans, inhumans, human animals or animals (cf. Karanth 2023).

## An artificial separation of a human realm from a non-human one

The disregard for the inhuman is inherent in modernist universalism and thus also within a universalist topology such as the one underlying the state. Based on the modernist nature-culture dichotomy, the realm of the human is strictly separated from nature. While the human sphere is something that is depicted as comprehensible, (the state of) nature is unfathomable and thus unpredictable. On this foundation, modernism calls upon humans to build themselves a hospitable home in this world and recraft it according to their needs. Thereby, it artificially separates a human realm from a non-human one and understands the non-human part as the realm of nature and the abstract background that provides the stage

for human history. This epistemological subjection of nature as human background paves the way for its exploitation to serve human purposes (cf. Latour 1993, 76-79). While the nature-culture dichotomy drove (a certain) scientific progress and massively increased human wealth and well-being in Europe and North America, it eventually fostered the destabilization of the biosphere that brings nature back to the fore in its social and political relevance in the Anthropocene (cf. Lakitsch 2021).

The epistemic and ontological subjection of human-non-human particularities is not only of ethical concern, it is first and foremost a distortion and reduction of reality and therefore highly problematic for political topology. A related topology does not adequately account for what is actually happening and misconceives the setup of power and the relevant actors. Accordingly, it is not able to respond to the dynamics that are taking place, it cannot contribute to fostering social stability and thus to preventing a society from relapsing into armed violence.

The international mission in Bosnia stands out as a universalist peacebuilding project, driven by liberal confidence and bolstered by the considerable political authority vested in the UN as the de facto governing power of the newly established state. Quite unusual was the fact that the Dayton peace agreement did not focus on local dynamics for resolving and ending hostilities, but instead sketched a political project of democratization and imposed a related state upon the people living in Bosnia. However, it did not entrust the people living in Bosnia with this responsibility and instead delegated the duties and capacities for building and sustaining peace to international bodies. Accordingly, the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms was directly applied to Bosnia, granted superiority over national law, and its human rights monitoring mechanisms were afforded direct access. Eventually, the Office of the High Representative was established to monitor the implementation of the peace agreement, promote compliance of state representatives with all civilian aspects of the peace accord, and facilitate cooperation with international organizations. It was finally imbued with the so-called Bonn Powers in 1997, which allowed the High Representative to alter binding decisions when elected state representatives were in disagreement and to take action against officials who had violated the Dayton agreement. (Chandler 2000) In essence, the international Bosnian peace project did not represent local actors and their visions, it imposed external agendas. It ignored and took away the political agency of the local actors. This happened both intentionally (out of caution regarding sectarian

dynamics) but also unintentionally. After all, its universalist liberalist topology was not able to grasp the relevance of traditional cultural institutions for civil society since there were no respective NGOs, which did not align with the traditional intervention logics (cf. Kappler/Richmond 2011). Accordingly, institutions and governmental practices in order to foster and protect institutional frameworks became more important than actual human needs (cf. Richmond 2009).

Institutions and governmental practices
became more important than actual human needs.

Another UN mission in which the organization was entrusted with state authority during the 1990s was UNMIK in Kosovo. It similarly viewed local dynamics through the state prism and did little to address the underlying conflict between ethnic Serbs and Albanians. International cooperation was channeled through this same prism, with funding drawn from external donors (cf. Franks/Richmond 2008). International peacebuilding strategies in Iraq after the US-initiated regime change in 2003 also mistrusted local stakeholders and sought to replace related dynamics with a liberal one led by a newly built Iraqi state. It thereby excluded important stakeholders and was not able to grasp the underlying dynamics that fragmented the country along sectarian lines and eventually led to renewed armed conflicts (cf. Mako/Edgar 2021; Ali 2021).

In Sierra Leone, natural resources had been among the main drivers of armed conflict and were thus included in the peacebuilding mission that sought to put its governance under state control. However, the institutions that were created to do so remained oddly artificial with little relevance and resulted in renewed armed violence, despite a shift to include local actors in hybrid peace initiatives. The shift towards the local epitomizes a crucial problem which is its inclusion via the common international framework, which means that these local actors are preselected through international practitioners and end up being avatars of the universalist liberal peace (cf. Johnson 2021; Millar 2014). Similar dynamics occurred in East Timor (cf. Richmond/Franks 2008), the Democratic Republic of Congo (cf. Russo 2021), Sri Lanka (cf. Goodhand/Walton 2009), Liberia (cf. Andersen 2010), Colombia (cf. Cárdenas 2022), South Sudan (cf. Berdal/Shearer 2021), Mali (cf. Gazeley 2022), and elsewhere: Whether international practitioners directed and enacted peace interventions alone or in tandem with local actors through hybrid institutions or initiatives, their

understanding of who is relevant and how to respond to certain issues are to be located within a universalist state-centric political topology that is unable to grasp and acknowledge the agency of local stakeholders who were often non-formal actors.

Eventually, having been conceptualized as an exclusively human realm, a state-centric topology erases non-human dimensions in their inextricable and constitutive relevance (cf. Lakitsch 2026). As a result, a plethora of peace interventions have ignored the relevance of environmental dynamics resulting from an increasingly instable biosphere for the purpose of armed conflict. Accordingly, the number of armed conflicts overlaps to a large extent with the areas most affected by the climate crisis (cf. Lakitsch 2023). In cases where peacebuilding interventions included environmental agendas, they were often designed along liberalist agendas within a universalist topology in tandem with classic liberalist aspects such as inclusion and gender empowerment. Therefore, however, these agendas excluded traditional local institutions, rites, and practices and eventually led to an increase in armed violence where they should have responded to dire environmental conditions (cf. Gaston et al. 2023). Erasing the non-human dimension, some peace missions directly harm and destroy the ecosystem, such as in in the case of Colombia. The exclusion of coral reefs such as the Varadero reef from the peace process might turn out detrimental for peace in the near future. Ironically, measures that are being taken due to the peace agreement and development initiatives in order to extend the local port and dig a new channel might destroy the reef. This would threaten agricultural land in coastal areas and thus undermine food security, while also destroying the rich fishing grounds around the reef, further compounding the risks to food security in the area (cf. Baker 2017).

## The legitimacy of the claims of certain (mostly ethnic) groups is being denied.

In Nagorno-Karabakh, a complex history of peace processes between Armenia and Azerbaijan with liberal as well as illiberal elements ended in a human disaster. The overconfidence in the frozen nature of the conflict on the one side, and half-hearted peace initiatives with little broader involvement of various parts of society found a tragic end in the displacement of an entire population in summer 2024 (cf. Lakitsch/Hushcha 2026). As the Russian-led Astana process sought to bring peace to Syria by gathering

the remaining armed regime opposition in Idlib in order to control them and stabilize the situation, rather than addressing the underlying issues (cf. Abboud 2021), the Israeli government imposed a blockade on the Hamas-run Gaza Strip instead of responding to the Palestinian grievances that had led to Hamas's election (cf. Pinfold 2025). Both cases proofed to be incapable of managing peace by force and ended in the takeover of the central government in Damascus in the first case, and a horrific massacre against people living in Israel by Hamas. Other cases of illiberal peace such as in Rwanda, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, China (Uigurs) or Russia (Chechnya) did not lead to mass armed violence, but are also not able to reduce intense social tensions. In all cases, the legitimacy of the claims of certain (mostly ethnic) groups is being denied, thus the existence of ethnic conflict in the first place, and political opposition including armed violence is rendered as terrorist activity that justifies robust means of containment and oppression (cf. Duarte/Souza 2024)

## 2 An Ecology of Peace as Political Topology

While ecologies describe the interrelations between humans and non-humans in their habitat, political ecologies typically focus on the interrelations and correlations between politics, society, and the environment (cf. Braun 2015). However, such a traditional approach often assumes a strict ontological separation between the human and the non-human and tends to perpetuate the modernist dichotomy between nature and culture. It thereby further obscures large aspects of reality along (arbitrarily) predetermined patterns (cf. Chagani 2014). Especially the separation of politics from non-human dimensions of reality is an illusion that is becoming increasingly apparent in light of the climate crisis and the rising frequency of disruptive, extreme biospheric dynamics and events, such as heatwaves, droughts, flooding and wildfires. Rather, politics itself resembles an ecology comprising an inextricable web of human-non-human actors-in-relation and dynamics. Accordingly, no actor owns a particular action; actors always act together or in relation to each other. This paper's ecology of peace emphasizes the equal peace relevance of human and non-human actors-in-relation. In essence, instead of seeing the world through presumed metaphysical categories, peace practice along such a political topology understands peace through human-non-human ecologies, seeks to reach beyond these arbitrary distortions and reductions and

intends to grasp and comprehend the interrelated human-non-human dynamics in their relevance for politics and for peace in their very own habitat (cf. Bennet 2010, 94-109; Morton 2016). The choice to conceive of a certain context as an ecology is not merely theoretical or arbitrary, but rather an unavoidable consequence of taking biospheric processes and phenomena seriously in relation to political communities.

In other words, peace practice along an ecological understanding of peace seeks to be attentive to the whole world rather than picking out aspects desired by a certain policy or research agenda (cf. Grove 2014). In doing so, it is aware of the inextricable entanglements of human thought and action with the myriad entities that surround and penetrate it (cf. Morton 2016, 159-162). Accordingly, peace practice on the foundation of an ecology of peace does not subject actors and their interrelations in their habitat to a certain predefined understanding, but seeks to grasp these by getting more accurate epistemic access to a certain (post-)conflict context and its specific human-non-human interrelationships. Thereby, it opens up new possibilities for engaging with the world for the purpose of peace that are more realistic since they reflect the actual processes and phenomena in their locality (cf. Morton 2016; Bennett 2010, 94-109).

## The human dethroned from the center of thinking

In essence, peace becomes manifest in and through ecologies comprising human-non-human interrelations. It cannot be designed or crafted from the outside. Thus, while an ecology decenters from (arbitrary) individual approaches towards (post-)conflict environments, it also obscures the frame of reference for peace and thus its compass to navigate peace practice. This issue arises from the conceptual shift towards a relational ontology and its tendency towards depoliticization. With the human dethroned from the center of thinking and thus the transcendental ego removed, there seems to be no position anymore from which to differentiate between unfavorable and favorable constellations and thus determine their relevance for peace. Thereby, the traditional metaphysical universalist reference to evaluate politics is being rejected. The difficulty of declaring a certain process or phenomenon favorable or unfavorable lies in the flat ontological character of a relational world that is without hierarchy. That means that declaring something favorable or unfavorable might mean to assert oneself as subject above the flat ontology and distort it by bringing back in the epistemologically and ontologically domi-

nant human and thereby an arbitrary individual perspective under the guise of universalism (cf. Lakitsch 2021, 7–9).

A point of reference is the *sine qua non* of peace practice in order to navigate peace practice in complex contexts and at the same time be able to grasp and comprehend power and related asymmetries. This paper's ecological understanding of peace refrains from crafting peace along predetermined ideas and at the same time maintains a frame of political reference. Accordingly, it seeks to orient peace practice along the peace that is being articulated through the ecologically interrelated myriads of human and non-human actors-in-relation (cf. Agathangelou 2016). This shift is not motivated by fatalism, rather by the recognition of the epistemological primacy of the articulations of actors-in-relations and their positionalities within a relational ecology. While the subject is constitutively interrelated with its human-non-human others, it is still positionally grounded (cf. Braidotti 2013). In other words, humans must not elevate themselves into an epistemologically dominant position in order to avoid the creation of structures of subjection by evaluating and judging processes and phenomena beyond their positionalities. Instead, it is precisely the articulations at a certain positionality that provide the political reference to evaluate phenomena and processes related to this very positionality. Human-non-human processes and phenomena are all on the same ontological level within an ecology, nevertheless, the plethora of articulations provides points of political reference for a certain positionality.

Articulations of actors-in-relation at distinct positionalities serve as political reference and provide the condition of possibility to understand peace through ecologies. However, it does not yet present criteria for an ecological understanding of peace. These should allow to determine the peace relevance of processes and phenomena within ecologies. Being situated within a relation ontology, such an understanding of peace constitutively rejects universalist and thus external conceptions of peace. Peace within a relational ecology on the other hand is fundamentally non-universal and local through its constitutive positional reference. Assuming articulations at their distinct positionality as its foundation, peace relates to any process or phenomenon that corresponds with the articulations of actors-in-relation at their positionality.[3] This ecological understanding of peace is more or less a relational and positional articulation of the fundamental understanding of peace as coherence of inner-human dynamics with a certain environment. Understanding peace through ecologies moves their conceptions into an ecological context and thus decent-

3 See also Morgan Brigg's (2024) and Ignasi Torrent's (2021) cohering understanding of relational peace.

ers inner dynamics from individual and only human actors towards a wide and elusive human-non-human web. Nevertheless, an ecological understanding of peace fundamentally relies on the positionality through which these widespread, intertwined dynamics are articulated. This positional foundation of peace prevents openly universalist images of respective (post-)conflict contexts, but also prevents unintentional universalizations through misunderstandings of an alleged localized conception of peace (cf. Richmond 2024).

## Peace articulates itself through an intricate human-non-human web at a distinct positionality.

Reimagining peace as something that becomes manifest in and through an ecology of its own fundamentally rejects any possibility to appropriate it from the external. Peace articulates itself through an intricate human-non-human web at a distinct positionality. Therefore, each peace is incommensurable. In some situations, peace means the silencing of arms and thus the absence of violence; in others, it might include democracy or the restauration of a forest or a reef (cf. Pospisil 2018). While peace articulates itself through an ecology and cannot be attributed externally, it is accessible through the articulations of actors-in-relation at distinct positionalities. Peace as process or phenomenon that coheres with an articulation of human-non-human actors-in-relation refers to a certain positionality, yet represents the wider web of interrelations that is a distinct ecology. Any actor, whether human or non-human, such as a glacier, reef, soil, forest, jellyfish or locusts, can articulate itself as part of an ecology. Accordingly, an ecological approach circumvents the problem of an arbitrary reduction of complexity from the external by having the human-non-human-actors that are ecologically interrelated articulate what is peace relevant.

In essence, reimagining peace through human-non-human ecologies shifts the focus to the articulations of actors-in-relation and the responses to these. Articulations of humans- and non-humans-in-relation are tied to their positionality. In other words, thinking and doing always relate to a certain positionality. The greater the distance to a particular positionality, the less intimacy with the respective interrelations, the less understanding of related articulations and the less legitimacy to articulate in representation to the other positionality. Intimacy with human-non-human interrelationships more or less demarcates the blurry bounda-

ries between the various ecologies (cf. Trownsell 2019). This intimate understanding within an ecology provides the foundation to adequately make sense of human articulations on a deeper level. Thereby, it allows to respond to even contradictory notions without fostering contradictions, conflicts, and fragmentations. A deeper sense of understanding also allows to make sense of articulations of non-human actors-in-relation. The articulations of human-non-human actors-in-relation need to be understood and interpreted within their ecologies in order to not misunderstand them and distort their perspectives. Accordingly, based on these intimacies, various forms of knowing beyond European episteme have developed and allow to make sense of non-human speech (cf. Kimmerer 2013). After all, there are many non-verbal ways to communicate such as communication through affect, synergy, actancy or biosemiosis (cf. Youatt 2020, 124), but also through shamanic ways, meditation, art works or performances (cf. Carvalho/Riquito 2022).

Various forms of knowing
beyond European episteme have developed.

Communities which have been living together for decades or centuries have a shared understanding of their worlds and their places within them. Many among them are well aware that they are constitutively entangled with the forest, the lake, the soil or the glacier that they have been sharing their habitat with. Thus, the non-verbal articulations of a forest, which might be a change of color patterns of leaves, or an altered color of soil or ice might be well understood and can be responded to by its fellow human inhabitants. However, while an ecological approach understands the pluriverse of worlds as consisting of inextricable webs of human-non-human interrelations, a political community or any other way in which humans are organizing their lives together are human imaginatives. They are not relevant as such for oceans, lakes, soil, rivers, mountains, coral reefs, cattle or jellyfish. Yet, in turn, these non-human actors-in-relation are of fundamental relevance for human imaginatives (cf. Brigg 2024, 11). After all, they are constitutive parts of their dynamics. Therefore, for the purpose of fostering peace, the focus is not on understanding non-humans-in-relation as such, but on the various forms through which people are organizing their lives together such as communities, villages or cities. In other words, while peace articulates itself through ecologies, it does so through the human-non-human actors-in-relation that inhabit eco-

logically constituted worlds; it is to be grasped and understood by human actors-in-relation from within these worlds. Accordingly, international peace practice has to seek access to these worlds through their human inhabitants and navigate along their understandings of peace relevance (cf. Escobar 2020, 164-167).

Embracing an ecology of peace should enable international peacebuilding interventions to grasp actors and practices in their interrelations, dynamics, and political relevance, rather than neglecting them due to epistemic distance or incompatibility with a particular universalist epistemology. The Gacaca Courts in Rwanda offer one such example: rooted in customary practice, they provided a public space for voicing grief and were widely adopted in the aftermath of the genocide as a means of addressing perpetrators. Although largely effective, they faced significant international criticism for perceived arbitrary conduct, and attempts to accommodate this critique had considerable repercussions on their overall effectiveness (cf. Golding/Fontan 2025). This disregard for local dynamics likely stems from an epistemic gap that an ecology of peace seeks to overcome by understanding dynamics purely through the interrelations among the actors involved. Such an approach also makes it possible to account for dimensions that tend to be obscured within universalist frameworks, including the non-human. Tara Bandu, a customary practice in East Timor that is inextricably entangled with both environmental and community dimensions, illustrates this point well: by responding to diminishing food security and rising violence through ritual, it was able to foster peace in a genuinely comprehensive manner. Similarly, initiatives addressing water scarcity in Nepal and Yemen proved successful in promoting both water access and the reduction of violence by embedding themselves within ritualistic practices that reflected the holistic entanglement of human and more-than-human cosmologies across various communities (cf. Nalbo 2024; Gaston et al. 2023).

Conflicts involving indigenous communities in particular should not be approached on the foundation of a state-centric topology if one is to adequately comprehend their underlying dynamics. Instead, an ecology of peace offers a more attentive framework, one that takes seriously the actual relations between human and non-human actors and the cosmologies that find expression in customs and rites. The Mi'kmaq community in Canada illustrates this well. After 2010, they were violently targeted for fishing practices that state authorities and civil society members considered to be endangering fish populations. Yet for the Mi'kmaq, such

a framing fundamentally misrepresents their relationship to their territory: they understand themselves as deeply interrelated with their land and sea, including its human and non-human inhabitants. This entails a strong sense of kinship with the land and its animals, as well as a stewardship ethic that governs, among other things, their interaction with fish. Restricting their fishing rights thus does not merely curtail a practice but imposes an external, universalist understanding onto their relational sense of self, degrading their worldview while simultaneously misreading the very actions it seeks to regulate (cf. Parasram 2023).

### Embracing ontologies of interconnected selves, encompassing land, forests, water, and animals

This is not an isolated case. Numerous indigenous communities across Australia, Africa, and beyond hold relational ontological understandings of the world, sustained by animist cosmologies and shamanic traditions. Many conceive of territory not as inert matter but as a living being with memory. They embrace ontologies of interconnected selves, encompassing land, forests, water, and animals as constitutive rather than peripheral (cf. Escobar 2020). A reconsidered ecological political topology which reveals the infinity of politically relevant dimensions obscured beneath modernist conceptions of state, land, and nation is therefore indispensable for adequately responding to such conflicts (cf. Trownsell et al. 2019).

## 3 A New Beginning for Peace Practice after the End of History

The second Trump administration's transactional way of conducting international politics shattered the remnants of liberalist triumphalism and at the same time cast light on the fact that illiberal alternatives had already emerged years before. Emphasizing these observations unveils a world that is far more diverse than the linearities of modernism allow; a world beyond the separation of nature and culture; a world in which non-human phenomena, processes, and beings have political agency; a world which is actually a pluriverse of many worlds representing a myriad of ontologies beyond the exclusivity of one modern cosmology. Peace practice needs to embrace this End of History and navigate the complexities that have been unveiled.

This paper acknowledges the current geopolitical dominance of illiberal approaches in responding to societal challenges and conflicts, but does not make a case for reinstating the liberal peace. Rather, it argues that neither the liberal nor the illiberal approach is capable of achieving social stability in a sustainable manner. It suggests that the underlying problem is the modernist understanding of political topology shared by both, which obscures the complexity of local dynamics and is therefore unable to engage with them in ways that foster lasting social stability. To this end, the first section described the epistemic blindness of modernist political topologies and its consequences for international interventions, while the second section outlined how a political ecology of peace rearticulates political topology through a relational ontological understanding that seeks to engage with empirical diversity without reducing it according to any particular external positionality.

Admittedly, the path from the currently dominant illiberal mindset to a political ecology of peace is longer than it would have been with the liberal peace as a starting point. Yet the definitive decline of the latter also creates an opportunity to think seriously about genuine alternatives for fostering peace in ways that could once again lend legitimacy to international peace interventions. Ultimately, there may be no other choice than to embrace the full breadth of empirical diversity.

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