

# DENATURALISING THE NATURAL A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY PEACE OPERATIONS<sup>1</sup>

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The promotion of international peace in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is deeply connected to the implementation of UN peacekeeping operations. Indeed, even if these operations are not expressly provided for in its Constitutive Charter, the presence of the ‘blue helmets’ in conflict scenarios has been consolidated as a central instrument available to the Security Council for the maintenance of international peace and security. In this context, over the more than 75 years of existence of the United Nations, there has been a process of progressive naturalisation of the use of these operations as a way to meet the objectives of this organization. Thus, discussions on international peacekeeping at the Security Council very often concern decisions on how to conduct peace-keeping

operations, which includes, among others, procedural discussions on the mandate and duration of such operations. As such, the peace promotion agenda, which requires a multidimensional understanding of the causes of contemporary conflicts, is often addressed with a reductionist approach that prioritises the debate on the implementation of peace operations.

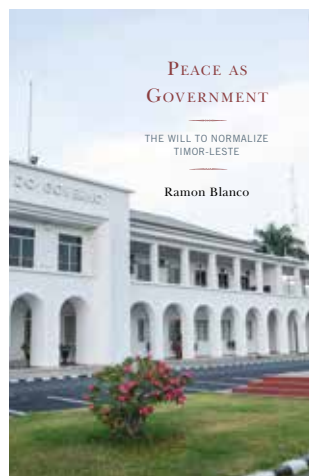
By bringing a critical approach to this context, Ramon Blanco’s work, *Peace as Government: The Will to Normalize Timor-Leste*, provides

an opportunity to ‘denaturalise the natural’, in the author’s words, in order to analyse peace operations as part of broader power dynamics that organise international society according to liberal precepts. Through an in-depth analysis of the action of the United Nations in the context of East Timor, the author offers a critical look regarding both the *rationale* of peace that guides the performance of international society in this matter and the instruments it employs for the operationalisation of this *rationale*.

RAMON BLANCO

**Peace as  
Government:  
The Will  
to Normalize  
Timor-Leste**

Lanham, Rowman  
& Littlefield, 2020,  
278 pages



In this context, East Timor constitutes a paradigmatic case for the promotion of a critical analysis of contemporary peace operations. In fact, according to Blanco, East Timor not only hosted a wide range of United Nations peacekeeping operations,<sup>2</sup> it also was regarded later on as a success story regarding the involvement of the United Nations in post-conflict contexts. Thus, the selected case possesses high relevance for a broader understanding UN's logic of action through peace operations, since it allows a critical analysis of the limits of this understanding of success.

To analyse the selected case, the author mobilises theoretical instruments provided by both the English School and Michael Foucault. While the English School enables the understanding of international society as an environment for sharing liberal values, the Foucaultian approach offers concepts that make it possible to analyse the mechanisms of consolidation of these values at a global level. Thus, although, according to Blanco, this theoretical combination can be considered eccentric, since the two approaches create important epistemic differences, this analytical framework unveils the gears that make the international system work. With this theoretical support, the work makes it possible, in the author's words, 'to broaden the spectrum of the visible' on the deep-seated dynamics that govern the contemporary international order, to the extent that they identify peace operations as one of the devices that make it work.

In order to address the subject, the author uses a qualitative methodological approach

which included both extensive archive research and fieldwork based on direct observation and in-depth interviews with actors involved in the process. In this context, the main argument put forward by the author is that peace operations exercise, in the international context, the function of ensuring the maintenance of the liberal order. According to Ramon Blanco, this international order is based on liberal values and principles, and the States that show limited adherence to these liberal precepts are perceived as misfits, abnormal or even 'failed States' – failed in the sense that they did not manage to act internationally in the same way as liberal states, considered normal. Thus, international society finds in the liberal rationale a guide that enables both i) to differentiate normal states – which follow liberal precepts – from abnormal states – which are to some degree out of alignment with these precepts; ii) justify the deployment, in the context of countries considered abnormal, of mechanisms for the correction of these misalignments, as is the case of peace operations.

According to Ramon Blanco's analysis, states considered abnormal are perceived by the international society as a threat to the functioning of the global order. As a result, the correction of this situation is now envisaged as an urgent requirement for the preservation of the international order. To understand this context, the author makes use of two key concepts from the Foucaultian toolbox, namely the concepts of 'normalisation' and 'device': while normalisation seeks to bring abnormal states to a situation of normality,

devices are precisely the instruments that enable the shaping of the States' conducts according to the desirable (liberal) forms. Thus, according to Blanco, the perception that certain States, deemed abnormal, constitute threats to the international order, is used as a justification for the implementation of processes of 'standardisation', in which these States are subjected to 'devices' that seek to shape their conduct according to liberal values.


Drawing on the case of East Timor, Blanco resorts to ample evidence to support his argument that peace operations can be understood as devices that allow the normalisation of the conduct of abnormal states. In fact, peace operations encompass a list of mechanisms capable of directing the behaviour of states and populations according to the liberal values that guide international society. Thus, the proposed theoretical framework allows for a critical reflection on the design and implementation of peace operations in the contemporary world, since not only it offers an analytical lens that explains not only the (abnormal) profile of the States that welcome peace operations, but also elucidates the purpose behind the conception of these operations – the preservation of liberal values. According to the author, the process of standardisation of States involves both the guidance of States' conducts at the international level and the interaction between states and their respective populations. This process is linked, therefore, with the notion of biopolitics, which, according to Blanco, refers to the administration and control of the processes necessary for the survival of the population of a given State.

In this sense, Blanco stresses that contemporary peace operations can be, to a large extent, associated with a state-building logic. In fact, according to the author, the process of state-building seeks not only to promote the consolidation of state institutions, but also to regulate relations between States and societies. Considering that this is precisely the case of the UN engagement in East Timor, the analysis developed by the author offers plenty of evidence regarding how the normalisation process of the Timorese State works, considering the operationalisation of monitoring, control and supervision mechanisms implemented by the United Nations both regarding the Timorese State and the population of that State. In this context, by proposing a critical analysis, the author paves the way for a broader understanding of this engagement, as it makes it possible to enrich the debate about the power dynamics underlying this process.

The presentation of the argument unfolds over five main chapters. In the first chapter, the author analyses the evolution of the peace-building process on the international stage, with a view to problematising the liberal peace logic that leads peace operations in the contemporary world. Chapter 2 deepens the debate on the specific circumstances of the East Timor case and the process that led to it being considered as urgent by the international society. Chapter 3, in turn, discusses the engagement of the United Nations in East Timor, in order to discuss the shortcomings of this process, with particular emphasis on the failures of this organisation to dialogue with the needs and reality of

Timorese society. Finally, whereas chapter 4 expands on the outlining of the surveillance mechanisms that composed the standardisation process in East Timor, chapter 5 furthers the debate on how the United Nations has operationalised a state of governance in the country, which involved both the conduct of the Timorese State and its population.

As such, this work offers a fundamental contribution to the analysis of contemporary peace processes, inasmuch as it promotes a critical reflection not only on its operationalisation mechanisms, but on the rationale underlying these mechanisms.

In the same sense, research sheds light on the fact that, by proving incapable of dialoguing with the reality of Timorese society, the approach to peace undertaken by the United Nations betrayed fragile foundations for the promotion of sustainable peace in that country. By starting from a paradigmatic case to enable an in-depth reflection on the dynamics that govern contemporary international society, Blanco's book is an essential contribution to an expansion of the debate on the meanings and paths adopted by international society for the promotion of peace in the contemporary world. 

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<sup>1</sup> A previous version of this review was published in Portuguese in the journal *Relações Internacionais*, no. 72, December 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Ramon Blanco mentions that the country has received five missions from the United Nations - UNAMET (1999), UNTAET (1999-2002), UNMISSET (2002-05), UNOTIL (2005-06) and UNMIT (2006-12) - in addition to two multilateral missions: INTERFET (1999-2000) and ISF (2006-13).