**John Torpey** 00:00

Welcome to International Horizons, a podcast of the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies that bring scholarly and diplomatic expertise to bear on our understanding of a wide range of international issues. My name is John Torpey, and I'm Director of the Ralph Bunche Institute at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

**John Torpey** 00:20

Today we discuss the dynamics of peacebuilding around the world with a noted expert on the topic, Séverine Autesserre, a professor of political science at Barnard College of Columbia University. Professor Autesserre has spent more than 20 years doing peacekeeping work in sites around the world, including Somalia, Israel and the occupied territories, Colombia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, among others. And she has interviewed hundreds of people working in these efforts in the course of her time in those locations.

**John Torpey** 00:54

She's the author of "*The Trouble with Congo*" and "*Peaceland*", and has published articles in the New York Times, the Washington Post and Foreign Affairs. She's just published her latest book, "*The Frontlines of Peace: An Insider's Guide to Changing the World*" with Oxford University Press. Thanks so much for taking the time to be with us today, Séverine Autesserre.

**Séverine Autesserre** 01:21

Well, thank you so much for having me, John.

**John Torpey** 01:23

Great to have you. So we're very happy to have you to talk about your new book, "The Frontlines of Peace" and I don't always ask people about personal stories. But since you lay one out in the book, I'd like to ask you to talk about it here. Could you tell us a little bit about how you got into the field of peacemaking in the first place? I think it was a very personal kind of trajectory.

**Séverine Autesserre** 01:52

Well, it's kind of the story of my life and the story of my Dad's life. So when I was a kid growing up in Paris, my father was a journalist. I mean, he was a sound technician working with journalists for the French radio stations. And he traveled the world, reporting on wars and revolutions and presidential visits. And he would always come back and tell me stories: stories of him riding the Orient Express; him participating in the Algerian revolution; him being kidnapped in Iran; all of these stories.

**Séverine Autesserre** 02:34

And I remember as a little kid that was absolutely fascinated. And so I grew up thinking, when I'm an adult, I want to be like my Dad. I want to go to these places and discover all of these people, all of these cultures, and have all of these wonderful adventures that my Dad was telling me about. So I discovered afterwards that my Dad was often... how do you say? Well, he often stretched the truth. Okay. I grew up thinking that my Dad was one of the leaders of the Algerian Revolution. And right, yeah, it's only after I was a bit older that I realized that probably no, he was not.

**Séverine Autesserre** 03:20

But still, anyway, at that time, I really really wanted to be a journalist. And so I started studying to be a journalist, I prepared the competitive exam to enter journalism school, and I failed. And I failed because I passed the written exam, that was really difficult, but I completely failed the oral exam because the jury thought that I had a humanitarian vocation.

**Séverine Autesserre** 03:49

So at the beginning, I didn't agree, but then I had various experiences that made me realize that they were right. So I went to work with humanitarian aid organizations. And I was really happy at that time, because I was finally working in Congo, in Afghanistan, in Kosovo. I was doing work, that to me, was incredibly important, and incredibly rewarding. So we were helping people who were displaced, and who needed medical care to survive or who needed food to survive or blankets, etc. So we were doing really important work.

**Séverine Autesserre** 04:28

But then I got extremely sad at the idea that I was addressing the consequences of the problem, rather than addressing the causes. Meaning that everything we were doing, we were responding to crisis, but we were not preventing the crisis from happening. And so that's how I switched to the whole field of what I call peacebuilding. Basically, anything that helps prevent violence or respond to violence and violence before, during, and after an armed conflict.

**John Torpey** 05:06

Right. So you get into this field and you discover that there are aspects of it that seem not very compelling to you, to put it nicely, that you're very critical of. And I would say the heart of the book is a critique of top down approaches to peacebuilding that you refer to as "Peace, Inc."

**Séverine Autesserre** 05:28

I'm more than happy to tell you more about my approach. So the heart of the book, to me, is really this different approach; is the success stories that I tell all throughout the book. And I tell stories coming from all over the world; from Somaliland, which is an autonomous region in the north of Somalia, from Congo, from Colombia, from Israel and the Palestinian territories. And what I do throughout the book is that I contrast the things that have worked to build peace to decrease violence on the ground in conflict zones, with the approach that, as you said, John, I called "Peace, Inc."

**Séverine Autesserre** 06:16

So "Peace, Inc.", to me "Peace Incorporated", is the traditional conventional approach to end war. And this conventional approach relies on a series of misleading and very detrimental assumptions, like the idea that only top down intervention can end all violence, top down interventions means working with governments, with state representatives, with elite and leaders based in capital cities.

**Séverine Autesserre** 06:49

Another really common assumption is the idea that only outsiders, foreigners, have the required skills and expertise to end violence. So for instance, is this idea that if we want to resolve the conflict in Congo, or in Somalia, or in the Palestinian territories, we're going to send someone from the United States or from Paris or from Bogota, or from another parts of the world. And that these people, these outsiders, if they have good training, then they will be able to resolve conflict for local populations.

**Séverine Autesserre** 07:30

And the "Peace, Inc." approach relies on on many other assumptions like the idea that all good things come together. So there is a package deal that we can promote in conflict zones. And the package deal includes peace and justice and democracy and human rights and gender equality, you know, all of these good stuff. And I share in my book that all of these assumptions on which the "Peace, Inc." approach relies are all detrimental, they're misleading. And they often lead to counter-productive consequences on the ground, including an increase in violence.

**Séverine Autesserre** 08:10

And so I could trust that, and I have, of course, a lot of stories; you've read the book, you know I love telling stories. So I have a lot of stories and evidence and statistics, etc, to support that. But the prototype referred in the book is what I spent, I think, 70% of the book, or or 90% of the book doing, [which is] talking about the success cases. And that's the approach that I think is absolutely fascinating, the alternative approach.

**Séverine Autesserre** 08:41

So the idea is that we've talked a lot about what has gone wrong when we've tried to stop wars in the past. But now it's time to think about what has gone right. And when you look at what has gone right, well, it turns out that elections don't build peace. That democracy itself might not be the golden ticket, at least not in the short term. Contrary to what most politicians preach, I showed that building peace doesn't require your billions in aid or massive international interventions. Instead, it often involves giving power to ordinary citizens.

**Séverine Autesserre** 09:21

And so I show in the book that ultimately, many successful examples of peacebuilding in the past few years have involved innovative grassroots initiatives led by local people, and at time supported by foreigners, often using methods shown by the international elites. So my approach is really completely different from "Peace, Inc.", because "Peace, Inc." focuses on elite agreement, abstract peace agreements, handshakes between presidents, negotiations between government and rebel leaders and that's probably what most of your audience has in mind when they think about peacebuilding; they think about these big peace conferences in New York or in Geneva, or in Addis Ababa.

**John Torpey** 10:08

Well, and then they also think about peacebuilders who come in from the outside. And we're talking about, I mean, you use the term at one point, the aid industry. My predecessor Tom Weiss, Director of the Ralph Bunche Institute, used to talked about aid business. So, there are these critical voices that have come forward to make these kinds of critiques. But we're talking about a kind of phenomenon that now basically goes back to the end of World War Two and over time, there's been the development of this whole bureaucracy, and this whole whatever approach to dealing with peace and conflict in other places.

**John Torpey** 10:57

And to some degree you sort of caution against this conclusion that "Peace, Inc." really just has to go away. But at some level, you are sort of saying that a lot of that is unhelpful, really, to the process of building or maintaining peace. So you know, how would you respond to somebody who is invested in those bureaucracies and thinks that they do a lot of good in the world?

**Séverine Autesserre** 11:27

Well, I think that the bureaucracies like the United Nations are our standard bureaucracies. Meaning that they are flawed, they have plenty of problems. But on the other hand, I agree with Tom Weiss that the UN is still, as an ideal, something fantastic. The idea that all of the countries in the world will send representatives, and that all together we want to resolve problems like war, like underdevelopment, like human rights violations all together. I think that it's a beautiful ideal.

**Séverine Autesserre** 12:02

And I really don't want to get rid of these kinds of bureaucracies. So whenever I meet with people who work for these bureaucracies, what I tell them is that I absolutely do not want to get rid of their jobs or what they do in conflict zones. What I do want is to increase the effectiveness of these bureaucracies. When you look at the main goals of these bureaucracies, for instance, for the Peacekeeping and Department of Political Affairs, they wanted to prevent violence, they want to resolve conflict, they want to promote peace. And to me, they can do that so much more effectively, if they change the approach; if the change the way they understand war and conflict, and if they change the way they understand peace. And that's why I wrote the book is to promote this different understanding of war and peace.

**John Torpey** 13:01

Right. So your approach also has certain features of what I call leading by following. That is you approach counsels humility, listening, putting the local people at the front and center, and what's been called in various contexts leading from behind -- I think, was an Obama official most recently used it prominently. But I wonder, is that really possible -- if you're a person from the wealthy parts of the world, who's now in an impoverished place; far from Europe and the United States -- to try to contribute to this goal that you may share with the local people? But, inevitably, you're in a kind of privileged position, it seems to me, so how do you deal with that?

**Séverine Autesserre** 13:51

Well, I think it's completely possible for white, wealthy people to help as long as they change their attitude, as long as they don't use and adopt the "Peace, Inc." attitude. The "Peace, Inc." attitude is the thinking that you know better, that you have the right theories, skills and expertise, and that you bring the ideal solutions to people's problems. And that's something that I've really seen in every conflict zones where I've worked; both the very poor places like Congo, for instance, or South Sudan, and the much richer ones, like for instance, Northern Ireland, or Israel and the Palestinian territories.

**Séverine Autesserre** 14:38

And so what I show is that the attitude is really the important part; the way you go about your job. But the way you try to interact with local populations, how long you stay on site, how extensively you try to learn the local languages and cultures. And I portray in the book a lot of role models. A lot of people who come from really all over the world who work for very different organizations in very different countries who have all kinds of backgrounds. So some of them are very highly educated and others are not. Some of them are very poor, and others are very wealthy. Some of them are white, or some of them are Caucasian, or African or Asian. I mean, you know, people of really all kinds of background, nationalities, etc. And many of them actually show how we can lead from behind; lead by following and be humble, and actually be effective on the ground. And, and again, I have many stories in the book, precisely to show that it's possible, whoever you are, and wherever you come from, you can be one of these role models.

**John Torpey** 15:57

But how do you inculcate the sort of humility that you're describing as really the essential kind of attitude to have? We are talking about people, generally speaking, who go overseas. We're talking about people who are highly educated, often have expertise --however useful you may think it is in the contexts in which they go-- but nonetheless, they tend to be people with relatively advantaged backgrounds. And maybe that's not so easy to pair with humility and leading from behind. So how do you persuade people that that's what they really need, rather than some other kind of expertise?

**Séverine Autesserre** 16:45

Well, that's why I wrote "*The Frontlines of Peace*". That's exactly the reason why I wrote this new book. It's because I wanted to show people two things: I wanted to show aid workers that ordinary people have a lot more knowledge, skills, and expertise than what we usually believe. And that's why the stories I tell of each way of Somaliland have these pockets of peace, where people have managed to resolve conflict in the middle of the most violent, the bloodiest conflict in the world.

**Séverine Autesserre** 17:20

I think it's really important because it shows that local community resources, ordinary people do have the power to build peace; much more than what we usually think. And the other thing that I try to show in the book is that the approach that we were talking about, leading from behind, is actually much more effective.

**Séverine Autesserre** 17:41

So it's not only that, morally, it's a better way to go about things, which is something that most people agree on. But also the idea that in terms of results, in terms of effectiveness, it enables aid workers to reach the results that they want. It enables them to decrease violence, to have better relationships, to be much more effective. So in The Frontlines of Peace, I really tried to convince aid workers that adopting this new approach and getting rid of the "Peace, Inc." assumptions is something that's going to benefit not only for the populations that they want to help but also themselves in the long run.

**John Torpey** 18:26

So all this also bears on your research methodology, which is known as participant action research. I mean, maybe you could tell us a little bit more about that, and how it differs from what you think of as less effective research strategies.

**Séverine Autesserre** 18:41

Yes, I'm always happy to talk about research methodology. So my own research methodology is what I call participant observation. Meaning that in the book I work as an ethnographer. So to me, everything is data. And so I try to put myself in the shoes of the peacebuilders. I try to experience the world like they do experience the world. So I went patrolling with United Nations peacekeepers, I spent a lot of time talking with them, hanging around with them. Eating, partying, working, writing reports. So I really try to experience the world through their eyes.

**Séverine Autesserre** 19:29

And I also draw on the standard archival research and in depth interviews and document analysis. But for peacebuilding --and that goes back to the question you were asking-- which was precisely about participatory action research. To me, participatory action research is a method of peacebuilding. It's not a method of research. It's a method of peacebuilding. And as a method of peacebuilding it's a method that has been used in social action all over the world: for social justice, for human rights promotion, for economic development. And the Life and Peace Institute [LIP], one of the role model organizations I mentioned in the book, brought it to peacebuilding.

**Séverine Autesserre** 20:13

And so the idea in a nutshell, is that, first, you don't have template answers to war and violence. So the Peace, Inc., approach is to have this kind of standard strategies that you put in place, wherever you are in the world. In the participatory action research approach, you actually try to design strategies with your intended beneficiaries. And so would you like me to tell you a little bit about how LPI does that on the ground?

**John Torpey** 21:01

Sure. Definitely a couple of other questions I'd like to get to, but absolutely.

**Séverine Autesserre** 21:07

Okay, so LPI doesn't implement programs directly. So instead, it works with and through a few handpicked local organizations. And the main goal of these local organizations is to support people on the ground. So the local organizations empower ordinary people, to develop their own analysis of their community's conflict, think about what the best solutions would be, and then implement the solutions. So you see, the difference with the usual way to build peace in the war zones. In the LPI model in the participatory action research model, it's not foreigners based in headquarters and capital cities who conceive, design and implement these peacebuilding programs. It's not national or provincial, it's not the state or the government. But instead it is the intended beneficiaries themselves, including ordinary people who conceive, design and implement peacebuilding programs with the help of the Life and Peace Institute and its global partners.

**John Torpey** 22:14

Got it. So you mentioned in the book another issue that I wanted to ask about, and that is meeting the expectations of donors. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the tensions that there may be between the expectations of donors, and the sort of on the ground demands of peacemaking. I'm always curious to what extent donors are driving things that are happening on the ground in these contexts that might not really be the kinds of things that the people on the ground think are the things they need the most. Could you speak to that?

**Séverine Autesserre** 22:56

Yes, I'm so glad you asked this question, John, because it is really important. And it's also one of the things that when I talked to peacebuilders on the ground, they constantly mentioned donor constraints as one of the reasons why they're using the "Peace, Inc."- top down-outsiders led approach as opposed to using the alternative approach that I think works better. And so the donor constraints that they often complain about is first, the fact that programs have to be set from the start.

**Séverine Autesserre** 23:31

What you do when you want to get funding from a donor is that you submit a plan of what you're going to do for the next six months or two years or three years; with very set activities, and with indicators to show when you have succeeded, etc. So everything is planned from the start, when in fact, when you look at the programs that have actually succeeded on the ground, these programs are flexible.

**Séverine Autesserre** 23:59

And it's not only my research is also the research by Susana Campbell, for instance, and by many other people showing that flexibility in responding to how situations evolve on the ground, how people perceive your programs, what kind of feedback they give you what kind of request they make, that's really important. But if your donor tells you: "no, no, you're committed to doing XYZ from the start", then you're stuck as a peacebuilder.

**Séverine Autesserre** 24:28

So, so the set programs is a is a first constraint. Another one is, we were talking about leading from behind, but donors often request logos they would they call visibility. And if you've ever been to a conflict zone or if you're anybody who's listening to us has ever been to a conflict zone or to a very impoverished area, you can probably picture in your mind what I describe in the book, which is places where logos of donors are everywhere to show which road was rehabilitated with the money of which country.

**Séverine Autesserre** 25:11

So for instance, I remember when I'm in Congo and driving through a rural area, it's very common that I see a billboard saying: "this road was rehabilitated by USAID". And it's next to a hospital where you have a big logo from the European Union. And then next to it, you meet the mayor, whose computer was given by, let's say, the German government; and so you have a big German flag. I mean, you see that.

**Séverine Autesserre** 25:44

So it's just a matter of putting logos everywhere, the donors tell me, but putting logos everywhere really shows the work of the donors, it shows that these programs were led by the donors that they own the programs. And so it goes completely against the idea of being low profile, and supporting from behind without putting yourself forward. So visibility is another big thing.

**Séverine Autesserre** 26:12

And the third one is the timeframe. Donors often request programs that are in a very short timeframe: six months, two years, three years. While we all know that, if we want to build peace, or if we want to build democracy, it takes more than six months. I think about how long it has taken for the United States to get over the discourse on the Civil War. And same in Europe. Think about how long it's taken for European countries to get over World War Two and to reconcile after World War Two, and we still have a lot of tensions.

**Séverine Autesserre** 26:55

So the idea that we're going to resolve a conflict or promote development within six months or even two years, it's completely absurd. And I show in the book that whenever we have long-term funding, long-term deployment, that's when we have much more effective programs.

**Séverine Autesserre** 27:13

And the last thing is accountability. Because --and I'll just go very briefly on that-- donors require accountability to them, but not to people on the ground. Meaning that as an aid worker, you will write reports, a lot of reports; you will do everything to satisfy your donor. But it's much more rare that you try to satisfy and that you ask for feedback and you adapt your work based on feedback from the people you're intending to help. And that again, Susanna Campbell has shown, and I show, and many other people show that it's one of the reasons why peacebuilding programming are not as effective as they could be.

**John Torpey** 27:57

Interesting. So, to ask you a last question. One of the things that struck me as very interesting in the book was your mention of Saul Alinsky and the kind of parallels between what you're arguing and his philosophy of community organizing from back in the 60s. And it struck me as interesting that you conclude the book really with a chapter that has to do with the ways in which your ideas might also apply, do indeed apply, here in the United States as well. Given that this is a book primarily about places like Colombia and Somalia and Congo. I thought that was an interesting way to conclude the book. So could you tell us a little bit about how you see that?

**Séverine Autesserre** 28:44

Of course, because to me, that's a really essential part of the book. I put it in the conclusion, because somehow it struck me that as a narrative device, it was a nice way to conclude the book. But really to me, we have to think of a continuum in terms of violence. It's unhelpful to think about, on the one hand, war torn countries and on the other hand, peaceful countries. Because really, we can think about your continuum from war and violence to peace, and many countries are somewhere toward the middle of this continuum.

**Séverine Autesserre** 29:20

And the other reason why I don't like the dichotomy -- war torn versus peaceful countries -- is that when you look at the countries with the highest number of murders and killings in the world, only half of them are actually war torn countries and the other half are considered to be peaceful countries. And there's the research by Keith Krause that really shows that very well. And so to me, when we think about addressing violence, we think about addressing a problem that has manifestations all over the world. And the guiding principles, not the template, of course, not the strategies, but the guiding principles can work in many different places.

**Séverine Autesserre** 30:09

And so we've talked about the the main one, or some of the main ones already, the fact that you have to be flexible. It's something that, again, whether we're talking about programs in the United States, or programs in Congo, flexibility, being responsive to changes in the situation is really important. We've talked about leading from behind, again, just as important if you're in the United States, in France, in the UK, or in other parts of the world. Relying on insiders is really important. Again, when you look at the programs that actually work in the United States, the programs against, for instance, gang violence, they rely on insiders.

**Séverine Autesserre** 30:55

I love the work of Cure Violence. I don't know if you're familiar with this organization. Cure Violence is this grassroots organization that works with former gang members, and with victims of violence and with members of the community to address problems of gangs and violence in inner city neighborhoods in the United States. So this idea of working with insiders, respecting their action, respecting their knowledge, listening to them, and, as an outsider, not believing that you're arrived with the right theories, the right skills and the right expertise. Again, that's something that's extremely important, wherever you are in the world if you try to address problems like violence. And so to me, I really see, and I saw during my research, a lot of parallels between the strategies that work in conflict zones and the strategies that work also here in the United States.

**John Torpey** 32:07

Well, indeed, it's a great way to wind up the book and it gives all of us whether we're interested in the rest of the world or the United States reasons to read the book. So I want to thank Séverine Autesserre of Barnard College of Columbia University for taking the time to talk with us about her new book "The Frontlines of Peace: An Insider's Guide to Changing the World".

**John Torpey** 32:29

Remember to subscribe to and to rate International Horizons on SoundCloud, Spotify and Apple podcasts. I want to thank Hristo Voynov for his technical assistance and Merrill Sovner for her help organizing this episode. I also want to acknowledge Duncan Mackay for sharing his song International Horizons as the theme music for the show. This is John Torpey, saying thanks for joining us, and we look forward to having you with us for the next episode of International Horizons.

**Séverine Autesserre** 33:02

Thank you so much, John, for inviting me, and thanks to all of you for listening.

**John Torpey** 33:06

Thanks so much. Great to have you.