

Humanitarian Interventions: The Doctrine of Imperialism

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Theme: [History](#)

Featured image: Muhajideen fighters in 1984. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

“Hell is full of good wishes and desires” – Saint Bernard of Clairvaux

Defining the concept of humanitarian intervention is problematic and, therefore, implementation of its conceptualisation is contentious. On the one hand, humanitarian intervention is commonly acknowledged to be an action of ‘last resort’ taken by a state or a group of states to alleviate or end gross violations of human rights on behalf of the citizens or ethnic minorities of the target state, through the use of military force. On the other hand, humanitarian intervention is perceived to be one of the most subtle and hidden forms of power in contemporary geopolitical systems. That is to say, the ideological structures that provide and underpin legitimacy for the more overt exercise of political and economic powers are manifested through the rhetoric of humanitarian interventionism.

Consequently, a phenomenon of humanitarian intervention has been one of the most contentious topics in international law, political science, and moral philosophy. Nonetheless, by reviewing the evolution of the concept, it can be concluded that the motives for humanitarian intervention are morally and legally intolerable, acting as a force of liberal imperialism. Furthermore, history illustrates that humanitarian intervention is a part of a wider process employed by power states as a strategy to expend their political and economic influence.

“International history is rife with interventions justified by high-sounding principles” (Doyle, 2006: 5).

From the very beginnings of the world system as it is recognized today, some 500 years ago, ideologies that justify Western power on the grounds that it is based on natural law and universal values were developed and espoused by Euro-American leaders. As such, the power wielded by their actions is presented as a benevolent vehicle through which the common good is spread. According to Wallerstein (2006), the humanitarian intervention debate can be traced back to the origins of European colonization. However, as Chomsky emphasizes,

“if we had records we might find that Genghis Khan and Attila the Hun professed humanitarian motives” (1999: 76).

Although contemporary humanitarian interventions are carried out in the name of democracy and more specifically human rights, a historical survey of this phenomenon

reveals a clear evolution of such notions over time. As noted by Wallerstein

“the intervenors, when challenged, always resort to a moral justification — natural law and Christianity in the sixteenth century, the civilizing mission in the nineteenth century, and human rights and democracy in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries...” (2006: 27).



Juan Gines de Sepúlveda (Source: Alchetron)

Juan Gines de Sepúlveda (1984) in his book, *Democrates Segundo o de las Justas causas de la guerra contra los indios*, outlined “basic arguments that have been used to justify all subsequent ‘interventions’ by the ‘civilized’ in the modern world into ‘noncivilized’ zones” (Wallerstein, 2006: 6). Sepúlveda (1984) accused the indigenous population of barbarism due to their practice of human sacrifice, which violates the divine and natural law. As such, according to Sepúlveda (ibid.), the Spanish had the responsibility to protect the innocent harmed by such hostile practices. In addition, Sepúlveda (ibid.) argued, Spanish rule was essential in bringing the message of Christ to the secular indigenous population. Therefore, as Sepúlveda (ibid.) notes, the positive ends including the spread of the natural law for the great benefit of the barbarians and protection of the innocent justify bellicose means employed by the civilized.

Bartolome de Las Casas, the first priest appointed in the Americas in the early 1500s, however, questioned the morality of such intervention. By denouncing the injustices of the Spanish conquest of South and Central America, Las Casas sought to secure the protection of the indigenous population. Las Casas (1999) countered Sepúlveda’s arguments by asserting that irrespective of how prevalent those motives were, they lacked moral significance. Moreover, even if such claims were justified, it did not mean that Spain was the appropriate actor to protect the innocent, or even that it could be done without causing more harm than good (Las Casas, 1999).

Such sentiments, the inability of the barbarians to govern themselves and the consequent need for civilizing missions, followed through to the nineteenth century, and were even

shared by the most liberal and progressive of Western thinkers, such as John Stuart Mill. While mainly agreeing with the principle of nonintervention, Mill (1867) argued the case for 'benign colonialism'. In other words, Mill's principles of nonintervention were applicable only to 'civilized' nations. According to Mill (1867), 'uncivilized' peoples suffer from debilitating infirmities such as anarchy, despotism, familism and amoral presentism, which, in turn, makes them incapable of self-determination and, therefore, unfit for the principles of nonintervention. As such, Mill notes:

"...there assuredly are cases in which it is allowable to go to war, without having been ourselves attacked, or threatened with attack... To suppose that the same international customs, and the same rules of international morality, can obtain between one civilized nation and another, and between civilized nations and [barbarians](#), is a grave error...." (1867: 166-167).

Nevertheless, once Mill's words are put into the context of the whole paper, it is clear that Mill (ibid.) advocates for neither racial domination nor exploitation; on the contrary, Mill (ibid.) promotes the duty of paternal care, precluding exploitation and oppression while acquiring education and care so that one day colonized people become fit for independent national existence. That is to say, in order for 'uncivilized' societies to advance to the point where they are capable of sustaining liberal institutions and self-government, a temporary period of political dependence or tutelage is necessary. From this perspective, colonialism is not principally a form of economic exploitation and political domination, but rather an empire's paternalistic practice that exports 'civilisation' in order to foster the improvement of indigenous population (Mill, 1867). However, a benign trusteeship is a slippery slope that generally, as history has shown (refer to colonialization of Africa, Latin and Central America as well as Asia), become malign imperialism. After all, as Doyle (2006) notes, how far is it from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and King Leopold's Congo Free State to the Aborigines' Protection Society and the Anti-Slavery Campaign? Furthermore, there is a great difficulty of consistently and objectively delineating between the 'uncivilized' and 'civilized' peoples. The problematic nature of such can, therefore, be exploited in order to legitimize subjugation as a way to facilitate the salvation and enlightenment of indigenous peoples.



1946 – General Assembly adopts its first resolution (Source: UN Photo/Marcel Bolomey)

With the passage of WWII, and the inception of the United Nations, powerful states shifted their rhetoric from the notions of cultural and racial superiority and consequent ‘civilizing missions’ to human rights. Such sentiments intensified after the end of the Cold War, which subsequently saw a surge in the number of humanitarian interventions, concomitant to the seemingly decreasing prominence of state sovereignty. This “revolution of moral concern” (Davidson, 2012: 129), emphasized through the moral necessity (Teson, 2001) and responsibility to intervene militarily in the face of gross violations of human rights, has, therefore, been promoted heavily within contemporary liberal circles. Up until the beginning of 1990s, an act of self-defence was a predominant justification for intervention, however, the rise to pre-eminence of liberal ideas regarding states’ responsibilities to individual rights “seemed to be manifesting itself in the interpretation of international law” (Davidson, 2012: 134). Thus, the principle of non-intervention, which was founded on the principle of states’ sovereignty, no longer had the authority it once did within the international community. Such shift in attitudes regarding the permissibility of military interventions culminated in the formulation of the term ‘Responsibility to Protect’ based on the principle of natural law theory — “our common human nature generates common moral duties — including, in some versions, a right of humanitarian intervention” (Holzgrefe and Keohane, 2003: 25). However, an absence of international legal mechanism that is able to address and enforce laws formulated on the back of such principle provides room for powerful states to act flexibly based upon their own political and economic bias and challenges the traditional humanitarian values of “impartiality, neutrality and independence” (Barnett, 2005: 724), ultimately rendering such principle purposeless and, in some cases, even damaging, susceptible to manipulation and exploitation.

In sum, the use of military force to further humanitarian ideals seems, at the very least, a paradox in terms. That is, “wars are no longer waged in the name of a sovereign who must be defended, they are waged on behalf of the existence of everyone” (Foucault, 1990: 137). According to Dillon and Read (2009), such are the paradoxes inherent in humanitarian intervention — liberal powers are waging war against human life in the name of human life’s

protection and preservation. In other words, issues such as poverty, health crises, environmental concerns and civil conflicts are re-conceptualized as international threats that necessitate intervention so that they do not “inundate and destabilize Western society” (Duffield, 2007: 1). Accordingly, those ways of life that do not conform to Western liberal standards are viewed as a threat to society as a whole. This notion is at the root of the drive to liberal interventionism.

Considering the above-outlined historical survey, it is difficult to argue that, despite its humanitarian cloak, liberal interventionism has not, in reality, always been a part of a liberal strategy of global governance. That is to say, liberal imperialism. As such, it can be concluded that liberal enterprise is “quintessentially concerned with the art of global supremacy” (Burchell, Gordon and Miller, 1991: 14). As illustrated, there are distinct similarities between the current discussions surrounding liberalism and old rhetoric of the empire. In other words, humanitarian intervention is basically a veil behind which political and economic imperialism can disguise itself. Furthermore, it seems there exists a significant cognitive dissonance between liberal universalism proclaimed through cosmopolitan humanitarianism, and liberal imperialism expressed through high-sounding principles of humanitarian intervention that, in reality, functions as a vehicle through which all forms of life that do not conform to liberal ideals are eradicated or expelled (McCarthy, 2009: 166).

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