

“Humanitarian Wars” and Associated Delusions

Book review of Jean Bricmont's recent book

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Humanitarian Imperialism: Using Human Rights to Sell War by Jean Bricmont,
[Monthly Review Press](#), 1-58367-147-1, 176 pp.

Most inhabitants of Western countries are afflicted by nefarious delusions about the nature of their societies and government policy; the public at large is led to believe that their societies are superior, and their governments' policies are noble and generous.

The illusions have to do with the dissonance between the fabricated image and the reality of state power, especially when it entails wars waged against third world countries. Awful wars are waged for crass motives, yet they are sold on the basis that they are driven by benevolent intent.

Promotion of democracy, freedoms, human rights, women's rights, and even religious tolerance are some of the purported motives for current interventions, subversion or wars. Since the 1990s, in the lead-up to the wars against former Yugoslavia, the primary justification offered to wage war was that it was necessary to safeguard human rights or to improve the humanitarian conditions of the target population.

If the blatant hypocrisy wasn't bad enough, the Left's delusions regarding the stated humanitarian rationale for wars has had a distinctly deleterious effect on the Left as a movement and the organized opposition to the depredations of their states. Jean Bricmont's *Humanitarian Imperialism* is an extensive analysis of the "humanitarian war" rationale, and how its twisted arguments should be countered and its rationale for war rejected.

One of the defining aspects of the Left of yesteryear was an opposition to imperialism and its consequent wars; Bricmont's important contribution aims to resurrect the principled opposition to the new imperial wars waged primarily by the United States and Britain.

Subversion of International Law

Perhaps the most important point addressed in this book is that the "humanitarian intervention" rationale served as a cynical means to sideline international law; it is usually presented as one requiring utmost speed to avert further disaster and therefore there is no time for formalities such as observing the UN Charter or international law in general. For at least two decades, the US has been itching to emasculate the UN even further and to undermine the basis of international law; the means to obtain this objective has been to promote "humanitarian wars" or even "humanitarian bombing" (it is difficult to concoct a nicer oxymoron) [1].

What is disconcerting is that this Trojan horse wasn't repelled by the principal human rights organizations, the so-called public intellectuals, or groups on the Left. The acceptance of the justification for wars has undermined the anti-war movement and it seems that few are aware of the stark implications of a debilitated international legal framework, i.e., a world afflicted with incessant wars and ruled by the law of the jungle. Those seeking to resist imperial wars or obtain a modicum of justice ought to defend the principle of international law, and certainly not allow it to be undermined by disingenuous appeals for war.

Kissing your SUV goodbye

If the US and its allies wage wars on the basis of false justifications, then the question arises what their real motives are. Another important section of Bricmont's book analyzes the nature of state power and the real reasons for wars or interventions. His analysis suggests that one of the reasons wars are waged is to guarantee access to raw materials and markets [2].

It is also fair to say that most western societies owe their economic development very much to the access to cheap resources, and most interventions seek to continue to guarantee such access. Even the tiniest/poorest third world countries are whipped into compliance — no deviation is tolerated. If one rejects the notion of wars to guarantee cheap resources then there are serious implications for our societies; our economies will have to be weaned from such cheap supplies entailing costly restructuring. To change our societies so that they are less destructive to others requires rejecting delusions about our states, it demands rejecting interventionist wars, and certainly confronting specious justifications for such wars.

Clearing up arguments

Bricmont provides a lengthy analysis of the pro-war humanitarian arguments, and, in order to do so, also addresses the ineffective anti-war arguments used by some on the Left. Maybe it is fair to suggest that the Left in western countries has sometimes engaged in less-than-clear thinking. In the past Leftist groups opposed wars against third world countries as a matter of principle, but beginning in the late 1990s some succumbed to the humanitarian interventionist ideology; what is surprising is how effective this ploy has been. Others reject wars, but do so using weak, confusing or even contradictory arguments.

In countering the pro-war arguments, Bricmont provides analysis suggesting the strongest

counter-arguments, and how the twisted historical analogies used to sell wars are best dealt with (e.g., appeasement, or confronting Hitler early on). Bricmont's analysis of the Second World War analogies — a favorite with the human rights crusaders — should certainly be studied by anyone opposing wars.

What is missing

While the book deals with pro-war humanitarian arguments, it doesn't mention that some humanitarian disasters haven't elicited the same reaction. For human rights crusaders some cases deserve the intervention imperative, yet others are neglected. While they demand intervention in Darfur they are mysteriously silent about Congo; Palestine is perhaps the most neglected issue. Since part of the book deals with exposing the hypocrisy in the way wars are sold, maybe the book could have highlighted the cases where the vocal advocates for war apply a double standard.

The book is perhaps best read in conjunction with Diana Johnstone's *Fools' Crusade* (Johnstone is also the translator of Bricmont's book). While *Humanitarian Imperialism* deals with the humanitarian war topic in general, *Fools' Crusade* deals with a case history of this issue, i.e., the war against Yugoslavia, a particularly important chapter for the humanitarian war rationale and the origins of this ideology. Her book provides a historical background of the way the wars against Yugoslavia were deliberately and cynically planned. Kirsten Sellars' *The Rise and Rise of Human Rights* is another important book providing additional context. Sellars presents a history of how human rights have been exploited by the United States and Britain, and it also provides an unflattering history of the principal human rights organizations.

Human Rights Watch in particular has been a key organization pushing for humanitarian wars, and a proper appreciation of such organizations is necessary to counter their influence. Finally, while Bricmont refers to a few of the principal proponents of humanitarian wars, the so-called public intellectuals or Liberals, more of these human rights crusaders need to be taken to task about their positions [3]. Edward S. Herman and David Peterson have compiled a list of these operators and it is also worth reading in conjunction with Bricmont's book [4]. One of the listed crusaders is Bernard Kouchner, the recently appointed French Foreign Minister, and his interventionist proclivities may well explain the changing French policy aligning itself closer to US policy.

Applying the lessons to Darfur

Bricmont's book doesn't deal with Darfur in any great detail, but one should apply its lessons to this case in rejecting calls for intervention. There are several reasons for this, and the primary one is that it has been a stated objective of the neocons to "take out" Sudan [5], and if this rotten gang bays for intervention, it behooves one to reconsider joining the chorus. The US has stepped up its presence in the region by organizing an invasion of Somalia, establishing a military presence in Chad, arming some Sudanese rebel groups, etc. The US seeks to undermine Sudan for reasons unrelated to the humanitarian situation, e.g., denying oil resources to its competitors. The US has also used the Darfur issue to deflect attention from its own depredations in Iraq or Afghanistan. Furthermore, several US-based Zionist groups have taken up the Darfur issue for equally cynical ends.

Pushing the Darfur issue is viewed among some of these groups as a means of deflecting

attention from Israel, suggesting that the situation in Darfur is worse and therefore “why single out Israel”. Divestment from companies doing business in Sudan serves the similar purpose of undermining efforts in the US to launch a divestment from Israel or boycott campaign. The situation in Darfur was also exploited after the Israeli war of aggression against Lebanon in 2006; as soon as the war ended, the media focus shifted immediately and preponderantly to cover the Darfur situation in order to deflect attention from a criminal war by US/Israel.

There is also the question of focus as a humanitarian catastrophe of a much higher magnitude in Congo has barely elicited a peep. Finally, it is also clear that much of the conflict has to do with population dislocations due to environmental change, and it is likely that armed interventions aren’t the best solution.

If we reject intervention as Brimont urges us to do, there is an issue about what must be done. According to Jonathan Steele, negotiations among local groups will likely result in accommodation and conflict resolution [6]. Armed intervention on the other hand could only make matters worse.

Just like the chickenhawks, but more likely useful fools

The neocon chickenhawks are best known for urging the US military to go to war while they remained safely ensconced in their think tanks. The leftists or Liberals who have jumped on the humanitarian war bandwagon engage in very much the same hypocrisy. When anyone today prescribes “intervention”, they are really only urging the military of their state to attack other countries, while they themselves are sitting pretty. Someone else will die for the positions they propound, and it is certainly a very different attitude compared to those who joined the International Brigades in Spain — no chickens then.

What makes matters worse is that the military was really not established to further humanitarian aims, but is meant to impose the interests of state power. Recently, the British military was concerned that “increasing emotional attachment to the outside world” had led the British public to expect humanitarian interventions [7].

The UK military sought to shape public attitudes so that military activities wouldn’t be constrained or, let alone, face demands to have the military be used in legitimate peacekeeping! When the military are actually used for “humanitarian intervention” this means that the rationale has been exploited by state power to sell its wars and they have even managed to get some Lefty or Liberal dupes on board. Alternatively, if a state doesn’t care to intervene in a given country, it will simply ignore the humanitarian appeals. When the British government’s hypocrisy is exposed, e.g., with the “genocide” in Darfur, it simply states that it will “consider joining multilateral action” and, of course, it has been wringing its hands about what to do [8].

The first indication that a state doesn’t want to use its military for humanitarian ends is when there are references to “multilateral action”; translation: do nothing or simply provide token forces subject to stringent “rules of engagement”. Anyone opposed to the imperialist trends of the US and its faithful poodles should reject calls for direct military intervention in the third world; there already have been too many interventions.

Tony Judt wrote: “In today’s America, neoconservatives generate brutish policies for which liberals provide the ethical fig leaf. There is no other difference between them” [9]. His

article's apt title is "Bush's Useful Idiots". When jumping on the same bandwagon as the neocons, human rights crusaders might consider whether they are being jerked around.

Conclusion

The adoption of the humanitarian war rationale has had a particularly damaging effect on what remains of the Left in Western countries; one of the basic tenets for Leftists should have been to oppose imperial wars, and it has been disconcerting to witness the adoption of the human rights lingo to either co-cheerlead wars, accept portions of the rationale for war or simply to demonstrate unreflective muddled thinking. Jean Bricmont's book, *Humanitarian Imperialism*, is a clearly written guide through this moral maze, an unmasking of tendentious interpretation of history, and an antidote to the principal malaise afflicting our times: hypocrisy. It is an important contribution to help the Left to assess critically history, and to break through an intellectual logjam surrounding the so-called humanitarian wars.

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Notes

1. See Alexander Cockburn, [*How the US State Dept. Recruited Human Rights Groups to Cheer On the Bombing Raids: Those Incubator Babies, Once More?*](#), CounterPunch Newsletter, April 1999.
2. Of course, there are other reasons too — some of them irrational, others to favor Israel, etc. For further discussion see: Jean Bricmont, [*The De-Zionization of the American Mind*](#), 12 August 2006.
3. Public intellectuals are only public or "celebrity" in so far as they present a serviceable rationale for state power. As soon as their message deviates from the interests of the state, they are quickly demoted to the ranks of relegated intellectuals.
4. Edward S. Herman and David Peterson, [*Morality's Avenging Angels: The New Humanitarian Crusaders*](#), Znet, 30 August 2005.
5. Wesley Clark, the former NATO commander stated on DemocracyNow: "... And he said, "This is a memo that describes how we're going to take out seven countries in five years, starting with Iraq, and then Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, *Sudan* and, finishing off, Iran." Amy Goodman interviewed Wesley Clark, [*"Gen. Wesley Clark Weighs Presidential Bid: 'I Think About It Everyday'"*](#) , 2 March 2007.
6. Jonathan Steele, *Unseen by western hysteria, Darfur edges closer to peace*, 10 August 2007.
7. Mark Curtis quoted in David Miller (ed.), *Tell me lies: Propaganda and Media distortion in the Attack on Iraq*, Pluto Press 2004.
8. Statement by Mike Gapes MP, member of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee,

Compass Conference, London, 2006.
9. Tony Judt, "Bush's Useful Idiots", *London Review of Books*, 21 Sept. 2006.

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