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The road to hell is paved with “Humanitarian Interventions”

Western Violence, the Hippocratic Oath, & the Second Arab Revoltⁱ

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“It would have been a breach of duty to have left the population prey to anarchy—deprived of all the apparatus of civilized life. Therefore, the...military have, at considerable sacrifice, expended much time and energy in securing the safety of persons...This is a responsibility which was thrust upon them by events, and one which they had as little desire to assume as to evade.”



'Do Not.' Sarajevo Herzegovina 2004
by Neverendingseptember on flickr.com

“The liberated populations see...not the aggressor state, but the power which has the right and the capacity of extending...high protection.”

“Filled with earnest desire to serve the true interests of the peoples dwelling in this area, to safeguard the...peoples, and to further the peace and social welfare of all...”

The above quotes can easily be assumed to be statements of the US-led Western allies justifying their ostensibly humanitarian motives for the current war against Libya, carried out under the auspices of a no-fly zone authorized by the UN Security Council.ⁱⁱ In fact, all three quotes come from the 1930s, from Japan, Italy and Germany, justifying Japan’s September 1931 invasion of Manchuria, Italy’s invasion of parts of Africa in the 1930s, and Germany’s invasion of Czechoslovakia in March of 1939 respectively, all carried out in the name of humanitarian intervention, supposedly guided by the highest ideals, namely the protection of human life (Murphy, 1996: 60-62). Sean Murphy (1996), a leading expert on the subject, identifies three so-called “humanitarian interventions” between the Kellogg-Briand pact and the UN Charter, including the genocidal campaign of Italian dictator

Mussolini in Eastern Libya, the first post-World War I genocide (see Simon, 1993: 136).

As Michael Mann (2005: 309) notes, “Fascist writers... had a eugenicist vision of expanding the Italian population through colonies. Since settling large numbers of Italians in Africa required clearing the land of natives, Mussolini’s Libyan and Ethiopian adventures led to mass killings. During the 1928-32 the pacification of Libya killed almost a quarter of the 225,000 people of Cyrenica.” Thus did one of the most destructive world wars in human history begin.

No surprise then, that the great powers of today, carry out their programs of bombardment from the air based on supposedly humanitarian ideals, with the assault against Libya ironically right around the time of the anniversary of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Naples, Italy is at the moment the coordinating place for the attack, bringing up uncomfortable reminiscences of Italy’s invasion and conquest of Libya starting in 1911, where Italian troops landed in various Libyan cities, including Tripoli and Benghazi, and occupied that country for three decades thereafter.

To be sure, all can sympathize with the rebels in Libya who are aiming to overthrow a corrupt and ruthless dictatorship, one which in recent years, has been powerfully supported by the Western powers, including Italy and the United States. But that is far different from calling for participation in what seems to be essentially a civil war, to be sure, one that forms a part of what Immanuel Wallerstein has called the “*Second Arab Revolt*,” surely already one of the 21st century’s most inspired examples of largely nonviolent revolutionary social change (see also Kaufman-Lacusta, 2011).

When it comes to the Western powers, for those who remember history, the rhetoric of humanitarian intervention can be easily dismissed. The track record of the West, which includes supporting brutal dictators acting against defenseless civilians in Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen and Saudi Arabia, makes a mockery of their current claims to have humanitarian intent in Libya. And yet, it is still the case that many peace-loving peoples, with the best of intentions, are sometimes persuaded to support such violence, out of real humanitarian concerns. But, as the saying goes, the road to hell is paved with good intentions, and so it is with humanitarian interventions. The current sympathy for Western intervention by many progressives is clearly motivated by the desire to avert the very real prospect of a massacre by Libyan government forces of the inhabitants of Benghazi. Indeed, as the New York Times (4/29/11) reported in an article on President Obama’s March 28, 2011 speech on Libya, the White House argued that it acted in order to avert a “*looming genocide*” in Benghazi. Western leaders freely toss around the word genocide, always as applied to others, but never to their own actions. Somehow, it is only non-whites that seem responsible for genocide, never the Western powers (see Herman and Petersen, 2010; Mamdani, 2007, 2009).

The problem with supporting Western military intervention in the Third World, however, is that in the actually existing world, support for humanitarian intervention has typically – though not always - led to the worsening of violence, exacerbating conflict, while

bringing additional harm to the civilian population. And in those instances where non-Western interventions may have had a positive effect in terms of the protection of innocents, such intervention was bitterly condemned by the same Western powers that now seek the cloak of humanitarian intervention for their use of military force.

Immanuel Wallerstein (2006), in his *European Universalism: The Rhetoric of Power*, traces the humanitarian intervention debate to the origins of European conquest and colonization, though as Noam Chomsky notes, doubtless we would find earlier examples, if we had, for instance, the records of Genghis Kahn. As Wallerstein (2006: xiii), notes, humanitarian interventions today are carried out in the name of human rights and democracy. Looking back historically, though, we can see the evolution of these notions over time.

Among the earliest of those addressing these questions of humanitarian intervention was the legendary Bartolome de Las Casas, the first priest to be ordained in the Americas in 1510. The significance of Las Casas lies in his spiritual conversion which led him to denounce the injustices of the Spanish conquest to the indigenous peoples of the Americas, whose protection he then sought to secure. Las Casas was countered in his efforts by Juan Gines Sepulveda (1545), whose book *About the Just Causes of the War Against the Indians*, brought four arguments to bear on the question, as Wallerstein recounts. The Indians were accused of barbarism, which supposedly then justified Spanish rule, due to their being guilty of the violation of divine and natural law, including through their practice of human sacrifice. Furthermore, Sepulveda argued, the Spanish had an obligation to protect the innocents harmed by the practices of the Indians, most especially through their programs of human sacrifice. Additionally, Spanish rule was necessary for bringing the message of Christ to the peoples of the Americas. Wallerstein (2006: 6) goes onto note:

“As one can see, these are the four basic arguments that have been used to justify all subsequent “interventions” by

the “civilized” in the modern world into “noncivilized” zones—the barbarity of the others, ending practices that violate universal values, the defense of the innocents among the cruel others, and making it possible to spread the universal values...However strong these arguments were as moral incentives for those who did the conquering, it is clear that they were greatly reinforced by the immediate material benefits the conquests brought to the conquerors.”

Las Casas countered Sepulveda on all fronts, part of a counter tradition – what Noam Chomsky referred to as *“the responsibility of intellectuals”* – that included Vitoria and Fray Antonio Montesinos (whose words stamp the recent movie, *Even the Rain*), all of whom *“argued for a natural right of self-government possessed by peoples”* (Coady, 2002: 23; see also Seed, 1993). First there was the thorny question of who were the barbarians: if practices were the issue, surely there were examples of barbaric behaviors by the so-called bearers of universal values, namely the Spanish empire and the Catholic Church the two institutions that bore the torch of humanitarian intervention in their time. Additionally, there was the question of jurisdiction, and here Las Casas argued that the Spanish claim to govern non-Christians following their own religious practices, such as Jews & Muslims, was dubious, and arguably even more doubtful when discussing peoples who had no knowledge of the Church and its doctrines at all, such as the Indians of the Americas. As Wallerstein (2006: 8) notes, however, the argument of Las Casas here was vulnerable to the charge of moral or legal relativism: *“It was subject then, as now, to the attack that this view demonstrated indifference to the suffering of innocents....”*

Here, Las Casas countered that just because a just cause existed – such as the protection of innocents - did not mean that there was an appropriate actor to protect the innocent, or even that it could be done with minimal harm. And if the supposed cure was worse than the disease, then where did that leave the ideology of humanitarian intervention, not to mention its supposed moral vision? Arguably, what was thus revealed was the apocalyptic nature of Western violence, wherein the attempted sacralization of violence was revealed as profane, shorn of legitimacy

or proper justification. Moreover, as Las Casas argued: *“The Spanish penetrated, certainly with great audacity, this new part of the world...and...committed monstrous and extraordinary crimes...Can such sanguinary, rapacious, cruel and seditious men be truly said to know God, to whose worship they exhort the Indians?”* (quoted in Wallerstein, 2006: 10).

With the passage of the Second World War, with all its horrors, and the birth of the United Nations, the rhetoric of the great imperial powers shifted from that of civilizing missions and notions of racial and cultural superiority to human rights, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, and this in an age of decolonization. The civilizing mission remained strong, however, well into the early to mid-20th century. For example, President William McKinley, discussing the annexation of the Philippines after the Spanish-American war and the brutal suppression of the Filipino independence movement noted: *“...they were unfit for self-government. There was therefore nothing left for us to do but to take care of them and educate them and Christianize them...,”* something it apparently took fifty years to accomplish (Coady, 2002: 8).

These sentiments, about the inability of the barbarians to govern themselves, were held by the most progressive and liberal of Western thinkers, such as John Stuart Mill. Subsequently, the ending of the Cold War superpower competition led to a reemphasis by the powers that be on so-called humanitarian intervention and the supposed nobility of Western intentions. But here, the West has an embarrassing history, from the Vietnam War to the so-called war on terror, not to mention the entire history of Western conquest and colonization. But even on the grounds of humanitarian intervention itself, Western hypocrisy is clearly revealed.

As many analysts have noted, the instances that come closest to humanitarian intervention in the post-World War II era are India’s invasion of East Pakistan in 1971 – the Indo-Pakistani war -- and Vietnam’s 1978 invasion of Cambodia; notice that neither of these are

Western interventions. In intervening in 1971, India primarily invoked the justification of self-defense but it also aimed to cloak its intervention in humanitarian concerns, as Indian intervention was associated with the ending of the massacres- replete with the indiscriminate murder, torture and rape of innocent civilians by the West Pakistani Army - that led to over a million Bengalis killed and the creation of some nine to ten million refugees flowing into India, along with the birth of the new state of Bangladesh. India's attack on Pakistan was called "*clear-cut aggression*" by then American Ambassador to the UN, George Bush (senior), in contrast to the USSR and its Warsaw Pact ally, Poland, which supported their Indian ally (Wheeler, 2002: 65-66). Furthermore, a General Assembly Resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire was passed by 104 votes to 11, with ten abstentions, despite the opposition of India and its allies.

Leo Kuper noted that the UN Resolution demonstrated a "*rejection of humanitarian intervention and [an] overriding commitment to norms protective of state sovereignty and territorial integrity and noninterference in the internal affairs of member states*" (quoted in Wheeler, 2002: 69). Nicholas Wheeler (2002: 74) goes on to note that "*The international response to India's intervention demonstrates that there was no support for a doctrine of unilateral human intervention in state practice.*" In the Indo-Pakistani case, a broad swath of the international community lined up behind Pakistan's right of sovereignty, including the most powerful Western states, which bitterly condemned India's intervention, with the US continuing to supply arms to the Pakistanis.

The other instance of the use of military force which arguably came closest to humanitarian intervention was Vietnam's 1978 invasion of Cambodia and overthrow of Pol Pot, whose brutal regime had killed one to two million persons in an onslaught that was then peaking. Despite Vietnam's claims that its actions were justified in self-defense under the UN Charter – not without some plausibility as has been noted - the invasion was once again bitterly condemned by the US and allied

powers. This was at a time when the US and its allies were effectively supporting Pol Pot.

Subsequently, despite decades of US-sponsored wars in Central America, which left hundreds of thousands dead, in 1999 the US claimed the right of humanitarian intervention once again, this time in Kosovo, this during the very same period when the US continued to support large scale massacre and repression by its close NATO ally Turkey, and in Columbia, and most notably of all, in East Timor, including in that very same year (Chomsky, 1999b, 2000; Nevins, 2005, Robinson, 2006, 2010; Kiernan, 2008). Even a supporter of the Kosovo War, legal ethicist David Luban, expressed grave concern about the results. Noting that he had published a paper some twenty years earlier supporting humanitarian intervention, by the time of the Kosovo War, Luban, who still supported the Kosovo intervention, was nevertheless haunted by the notion:

"Be careful what you wish for."

As Luban (2002: 80-83) noted:

"The American-led NATO attack on Kosovo began on March 24, 1999. Within two days, it appeared that the immediate result was a humanitarian catastrophe of incredible proportions. As if the air attack was their cue, Serbian police and military units joined with Serb Kosovar militias and opportunistic thugs to drive Kosovar Albanians from their homes (a process that had been happening before, although on a much smaller scale). Tales of horror followed the hundreds of thousands of miserable refugees streaming to the borders...an unknown number of men (several thousand, it now appears) were murdered. Young women were gang-raped...The NATO forces appeared helpless to stop the disaster...it seemed that the NATO incursion had turned into an unmitigated disaster, running the very people it was supposed to help. It was hard not to share the sentiment of Noam Chomsky, who circulated a lengthy e-mail message in the first week of the bombing in which he assailed NATO for violating the fundamental Hippocratic principle that should govern all humanitarians: "First, do no harm!" ...NATO's cautious, low-risk-of-casualties, air-power-only approach may well have prolonged the war, inflicted needless suffering on the civilian population of Serbia, permitted additional

atrocities to be visited on the Albanian Kosovars, and thereby provoked them to revenge-atrocities and reverse ethnic cleansing when they returned...It also sent a message that could hardly be lost on the world: that Americans considered one American life to be worth thousands of Yugoslav lives—hardly a resounding endorsement of the doctrine of universal human rights” (see also Kuperman, 2001).

Even Nicholas Wheeler (2002: 284), also sympathetic to humanitarian intervention, agrees with Luban that in Kosovo “the selection of the bombing as the means of humanitarian intervention...produced results that contradicted the humanitarian justifications of the operation...the intervention precipitated the very disaster it was aimed at averting” (see also Mertus, 2001: 146-148). Indeed, then NATO commanding General Wesley Clark, informed both the White House well before the bombings began and the press at the time that the effect would be to cause massive atrocities (Chomsky, 2008: 43). Not surprisingly, in light of the Kosovo disaster and the possible precedent for unauthorized US-led Western military action it represented, a subsequent April 2000 meeting at the South Summit of G-77, representing some 80% of the world’s population (and now representing 133 countries), in Havana, there was issued the Declaration of the South Summit, which stated: “We reject the so-called ‘right’ of humanitarian intervention” (quoted in Chomsky, 2000: 4). Rejection of humanitarian intervention and support for the UN Charter was later reaffirmed both in 2004 by the Secretary-General’s High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges & Change, and then in 2005 by the UN General Assembly following that year’s world summit.

The subsequent Anglo-American invasion and occupation of Iraq, in defiance of international law, and US-supported Israeli invasions and attacks against Lebanon and Gaza in more recent years, involved massive attacks on civilian populations and corresponding devastation, in both instances. Western states didn’t speak then of using military force to protect the populations of course, as they were then using their military forces to instead attack civilians who they now claim to be protecting in Libya. And, given the West’s

embrace in the last decade and those previous of widespread torture and indefinite detention of suspects caught up in the so-called war on terror, including of civilians, it is hard to believe that the powers that be have the audacity to speak of their support of human rights or the so-called responsibility to protect.

As Immanuel Wallerstein (2006) noted in *European Universalism*,

“The question—Whose right to intervene?—goes to the heart of the political and moral structure of the modern world-system. Intervention is in practice a right appropriated by the strong. But it is a right difficult to legitimate, and is therefore always subject to political and moral challenge. 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...[At the moment] the skeptical constraints on our impulsive moral arrogances that Las Casas preached will probably serve us better than the self-interested moral sureties of the Sepulvedas of this world. Constructing world legal constraints on crimes against humanity has little virtue if these constraints are not applicable to the powerful as to those to whom they conquer...”

The Las Casas of this world have been condemned as naïve, as facilitators of evil, as inefficacious. But they have nonetheless something to teach us—some humility about our righteousness, some concrete support of the oppressed and persecuted, some continuing search for a global universalism that is truly collective and truly global.”

To be sure, people will disagree about the proper course of action in Libya (see Cole, 2011; see the Nation, 4/29/11; see Bennis, 4/29/2011a, b). The lessons of history, however, are clear. Those with the best of intentions should at a minimum be extremely cautious about supporting the powerful Western states in any military interventions in the Third World. The Western powers used the prospect of a possible massacre by Libyan government forces to garner support for their attack on Libya. But US-led Western intervention immediately went beyond these narrow aims to take sides in a civil war, replete with

widespread bombing of Libyan government forces and civilian areas, in violation of the very UN Resolution 1973 that they were pledged and were obliged to obey. Once again, human rights were the bait used to garner support for a military intervention by the Western powers whose aims are quite different than the protection of innocents (see Mertus, 2008; Cohn, 2011). The major strategic aim of the US in the Arab Middle East has always been the region's tremendous oil resources, control over which has long been a major lever of world power. This remains the great prize in the jockeying for control of the great powers in the region still (see Chomsky, forthcoming).

What is needed is not more wars but instead the demilitarization of the planet and proposals for popular participation, democracy, conflict resolution and greater global equity that ensure all the world's peoples of the right to peace and justice, and not just a select few. In the early 21st century, it would appear that the emperor has no clothes. Having witnessed months of Western support for the most brutal dictators across the Arab Middle East, Western powers have now finally found a dictator they no longer support, as before with Saddam Hussein. At the same time as the world is witnessing the US-led West's support for brutal violent crackdowns on peaceful protestors, in Bahrain, Yemen and Saudi Arabia, the Western powers are at the same time trying to claim the high road of supporting human rights and democracy, easy enough to do when it's against official enemies, in Iran, Syria and now Libya. As in Iraq, though, this support always seems to come through bombs and bullets (see Gowan, 1991).

In the end, what we will likely find are that the dead and wounded by Western airpower, most especially by US forces, as earlier in Indochina and today in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and now Libya, are mostly civilians. Moreover, in the past the violence that sustained bombing generated spawned the likes of genocidal regimes such as Pol Pot – which grew from a tiny force of some 10,000 to over 200,000 from 1969 to 1973 - and the Taliban today, stimulating the very insurgencies they were supposed to prevent (Kiernan & Owen,

2010). As noted above, the front page headlines in the New York Times of March 29, 2011 ratcheted up the rhetoric: *"Defending Libya Actions, Obama 'Refused to Wait'" -- Cites Need to Avert 'Looming' Genocide-- Rejects U.S. Force to Oust Qaddafi.*" Then, in a related piece in the Financial Times (4/29/11) "Russians Question Allies' Adherence to UN Remit," reporters James Blitz & Daniel Dombey reveal that the Western powers are considering *"arming his [Gaddafi's] opponents- a move Washington says would be permitted under the UN resolution."* So we've gone from the protection of the civilian population ostensibly, to stopping genocide, and now to arming the Libyan rebels in a civil war, but somehow the US maintains it's not aiming at regime change.

In recent days, diplomats and officials have met in London to plot the future of Libya, but as the Los Angeles Times (4/30/11) and other papers reported, *"no Libyans were included in the blue-ribbon guest list."* And just today, the New York Times (4/30/11) reported that CIA operatives have been in Libya working with the rebels for weeks, after a secret finding signed by President Obama weeks ago authorizing the agency to support and provide arms to the rebels. CIA operatives have been working alongside dozens of British special forces soldiers and MI6 intelligence officers, with the Anglo-American intelligence services aiding airstrikes and coordinating with the rebels. As the war escalates, no one can know it's ultimate outcome (see Cordesman, 2011; see Chomsky, 4/30/11).

Perhaps one day, when the structures of powers in the West are swept away, the West can finally overcome its own democratic and human rights deficits and begin to truly support human rights, democracy and self-determination. Today, however, support for Western violence, however tempting for those who stand with the rebels and the civilian population in Libya, is truly a Faustian bargain, one from which the region and world may not soon recover.

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ⁱ Thanks to Noam Chomsky, Tom Dobrzeniecki and Rodney Peffer for helpful comments. The positions expressed in this piece, however, are mine alone.

ⁱⁱ Both Phyllis Bennis (2011a) and the *Nation* (2011) magazine have written recent powerful and fairly convincing pieces opposing even a no-fly zone. See also Bennis, 2011b.