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Ideology of Humanitarian Imperialism

By Jean Bricmont
November 27, 2015

Àngel Ferrero: It has been 10 years since Humanitarian Imperialism appeared in Spanish. What made you write the book?

It started as a reaction to the attitude of the Left during the 1999 Kosovo war, which was largely accepted on humanitarian grounds and to the rather weak opposition of the peace movement before the 2003 invasion of Iraq: for example, many “pacifists” have accepted the policy of sanctions at the time of the 1991 first Gulf war and even after it, and were favorable to inspections in the run-up to the war, without realizing that this was just a maneuver to prepare the public to accept the war (this became even public knowledge through later leaks, like the Downing Street memos).

It seemed to me that the ideology of humanitarian intervention had totally destroyed, on the left, any notion of respect for international law, as well as any critical attitude with respect to the media.

Àngel Ferrero: What do you think it has changed in this last 10 years?

A lot of things have changed, although, I am afraid, not because of my book. It is rather reality that has asserted itself, first with the chaos in Iraq, then in Libya and now in Syria and Ukraine,

leading to the refugee crisis and a near state of war with Russia, which would not be a “cakewalk”.

The humanitarian imperialists are still busy pushing us towards more wars, but there is now a substantial fraction of public opinion that is against such policies; that fraction is probably more important on the right than on the left.

Àngel Ferrero: The role of the intellectuals in legitimizing Western interventions and interferences is heavily criticized, as well as their symbolic actions (signing public letters or manifestos). Why?

The problem with “intellectuals” is that they love to pretend that they are critics of power, while in reality legitimizing it. For example, they will complain that Western governments do not do enough to promote “our values” (through interventions and subversions) which of course reinforces the notion that “our side” or “our governments” mean well, a highly dubious notion, as I try to explain in my book.

Those intellectuals are sometimes criticized, but by whom? In general, by marginal figures I think. They still dominate the media and the intellectual sphere.

Àngel Ferrero: Another of the preoccupations of your book is the degradation of the public discourse. Do you think that the situation worsened? How do you assess the impact of social media?

The public discourse goes from bad to worse, at least in France. This is related to the constant censorship, either through lawsuits or through campaigns of demonization, of politically incorrect speech, which includes all the questioning of the dominant discourse about the crimes of our enemies and the justifications for wars.

The social media is the only alternative left to “dissidents”, with the drawback that there, anything goes, including the wildest fantasies.

Àngel Ferrero: Some commentators point that Russia is now using their own version of the “human rights’ ideology” to justify their intervention in Crimea or the air campaign in Syria against the Islamic State. Is it fair?

I don’t think that Russia even claims to intervene on humanitarian grounds. In the case of Crimea, it bases itself on the right of self-determination of a people which is basically Russian, has been attached to Ukraine in an arbitrary fashion in 1954 (at a time when it did not matter too much, since Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union) and had every reason to be afraid of a fanatically anti-Russian government in Kiev.

For Syria, they respond to the request for help of the government of that country in order to fight foreign supported “terrorists”. I don’t see why it is less legitimate than the intervention of France in Mali (also requested by the government of that country) or of the more recent intervention of the U.S. in Iraq, against ISIS.

Of course, those Russian moves may prove to be unwise and maybe debatable from a “pacifist” point of view. But the fundamental question is: who started the total dismantling of the international order based on the U.N. Charter and the premise of equal sovereignty of all nations? The answer, obviously, is the U.S. and its “allies” (in the old days, one used to say “lackeys”). Russia is only responding to that disorder and does so in rather legalistic ways.

Àngel Ferrero: Let's stay in Syria. Several European politicians demand a military intervention in Syria and Libya to restore the order and stop the influx of refugees to the European Union. What do you think of this crisis and the solutions proposed by the EU?

They do not know how to solve the problem that they have created. By demanding the departure of Assad as a precondition to solving the Syrian crisis and by supporting so-called moderate rebels (the label moderate meaning in practice that they had been chosen by “us”), they prevented any possible solution in Syria. Indeed, a political solution should be based on diplomacy and the latter presupposes a realistic assessment of forces. In the case of Syria, realism means accepting the fact that Assad has the control of an army and has foreign allies, Iran and Russia. Ignoring this is just a way to deny reality, and to refuse to give diplomacy a chance.

Then came the refugee crisis: this was probably not expected, but occurred at a time when European citizens are increasingly hostile to immigration and to the “European construction”. Most European governments face what they call “populist movements”, i.e. movements that demand more sovereignty for their own countries. The flux of refugees could not come at a worst moment, from the European governments’ point of view.

So, they try to fix the problem as they can: having peripheral countries like Hungary build walls (that they denounce in public but are probably happy about in private), reinstall border controls, pay Turkey to keep the refugees etc.

There are of course also calls to intervene in Syria to solve the problem “at the source”. But what can they do now? More support for the rebels, through a no-fly zone for example, and running the risk of a direct confrontation with the Russians? Help the Syrian army fight the rebels, as the Russian do? But that would mean reversing years of anti-Assad propaganda and policies.

In summary, they are hoisted by the own petard, which is always an unpleasant situation.

Àngel Ferrero: Why do you think that the Greens and the new left are so adamant in defending the humanitarian interventions?

Ultimately, one has to do a class analysis of the “new left”. While the old left was based on the working class and their leaders often came from that class, the new left is almost entirely dominated by petit-bourgeois intellectuals. Those intellectuals are neither the “bourgeoisie”, in the sense of the owners of the means of production nor are they exploited by the latter.

Their social function is to provide an ideology that can serve as a lofty justification for an economic system and a set of international relations that are based ultimately on brute force. The

human rights ideology is perfect from that point of view. It is sufficiently “idealistic” and impossible to put consistently into practice (if one had to wage war against every “violator of human rights”, one would quickly be at war with the entire world, including ourselves) to allow those defenders the opportunity to look critical of the governments (they don’t intervene enough). But, by deflecting attention from the real relations of forces in the world, the human rights ideology offers also to those who hold real power a moral justification for their actions. So, the petit-bourgeois intellectuals of the “new left” can both serve power and pretend to be subversive. What more can you ask from an ideology?

Àngel Ferrero: In the conclusions of your book you recommend a sort of pedagogy for the Western audience, so they accept the end of the Western hegemony and the emergence of a new order in the international relations. How can we contribute to this?

As I said above, it is reality that forces the Western audience to change. It was always a pure folly to think that human rights would be fostered by endless wars, but now we see the consequences of that folly with our own eyes. There should be a radical reorientation of the left’s priorities in international affairs: far from trying to fix problems in other countries through illegal interventions, it should demand strict respect of international law on the part of Western governments, peaceful cooperation with other countries, in particular Russia, Iran and China, and the dismantling of aggressive military alliances such as NATO.

Àngel Ferrero: I would like to ask you about the other book that made you known to the general public, Fashionable Nonsense. This book, co-written with Alan Sokal, is a critique to postmodernism. What is the influence of postmodernism amongst scholars and the public opinion today? It fades away or is it still alive and kicking?

It is difficult for me to answer that question, because it would require a sociological study that I do not have the means to undertake. But I should say that postmodernism, like the turn towards humanitarian interventions, is another way that the left has self-destructed itself, although this aspect has had less dramatic consequences than the wars and the damage was limited to “elite” intellectual circles.

But if the left wants to create a more just society, it has to have a notion of justice; if it adopts a relativist attitude with respect to ethics, how can it justify its goals? And if it has to denounce the illusions and mystifications of the dominant discourse, it better rely on a notion of truth that is not purely a “social construction”. Postmodernism has largely contributed to the destruction of reason, objectivity and ethics on the left and that leads to its suicide.