

Truth, Universalism and Empire:
A review of recent criticisms of the politics of
humanitarian interventions

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In the post-Cold War international system, states increasingly take pains to justify their wars morally, and “humanitarian interventions” are demanded both by head of states and among the general populace. This article is a critical review of three recent attempts to challenge the discourse of interventionism: Immanuel Wallerstein’s *European Universalism*, Alan Badiou’s *Ethics* and Negri and Hardt’s *Empire*

Modern wars are increasingly justified *morally* - to a much greater degree than during the cold war, when appeals to power-balance, spheres of interest and the interest of the state often were sufficient. There has especially been a marked increase in wars for “humanitarian reasons”: Somalia, Kosovo, Congo, Sierra Leone - and Afghanistan and Iraq. These moral wars have usually been justified by appealing to either human rights or the principles of “just war”. An appeal to human rights as a legitimating reason for war is the basis of the current UN concept of the responsibility to protect⁶⁹. First appealed to by Bernard Coucher⁷⁰ the responsibility to protect is the duty to intervene militarily in order to end human rights abuses so grave that we “cannot stand idly by”. The just war tradition holds that there is such a thing as a just war, as long as the war fulfils certain criteria such as right cause, right intention, right authority, and proportionality. Michael Walzer *Just and Unjust Wars* (1977) is the best known example of this tradition, and it also started the process of viewing “humanitarian interventions” as a legitimate and moral type of war. Together, I will call these two discourses the interventionist paradigm.

Both the just war tradition and the human rights-paradigm have had its critics. The just war tradition has been criticised for “sanitising” war, and for giving statesmen infinite opportunities to morally justify offensive or imperialistic wars. The human rights-paradigm has been criticised on relativistic or culturalistic grounds for being western-centric, or of being a continuation of the colonial “white man’s burden”. Recently, some authors have criticised the interventionist paradigm from new perspectives. Immanuel Wallerstein released the pamphlet *European universalism: the rhetoric of power* (2007), which criticised the pretensions for universalism in the current paradigm. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire* (2000) sees just war and human rights as a way for the current world order (“The Empire”) to legitimise its hegemony. French philosopher Alan Badiou’s *Ethics* (1991)

addresses the same issues, with a critique of the current-day “ethicisation” of politics. All three books see human rights and the just war paradigm as ideology – as figures of thoughts that help reproduce an unfair world system. In this essay I will review their critique of the interventionist paradigm. Even though their criticism in many aspects are well-founded, I will argue that their view of interventionism lack some crucial differentiations.

Wallerstein: European Universalism

Wallerstein’s pamphlet attacks “European universalism” on three counts – western orientalism, the notion of truth in science and the “right” to intervene militarily by those who think they are protectors of universal values. All three are examples of appeals to a *particular* universalism that underwrites the current world order – and should be exchanged for what he slightly esoterically calls a “universal universalism”. In his first critique – of the right to intervene – Wallerstein refers to the debate between two Spanish 16th century scholars, Bartolome las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sépulveda on the rights of the Native Americans. Sépulveda justifies the subordination, occupation and forceful conversion of the Native Americans with four arguments: Their barbaric nature, the ending of customs that go against universal values, the defence of innocents among evil brothers, and the spreading of universal values. Every modern intervention has been waged with reference to these four arguments, Wallerstein claims: The barbaric nature of the African “savages”, ending customs like slavery, and more recently forceful democratisations and humanitarian interventions. With reference to these arguments, wars have been proclaimed morally good: they are just wars. Las Casas challenges all these arguments by appealing to us to answer certain questions: – who are the barbarians? Who has the authority over these barbarians? Would we not do more harm than good if we intervened? Would someone accept our universal values if they were accompanied with bombs and death? Las

⁶⁹ See: ICISS (2001), *The Responsibility to Protect: report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty*, <http://www.iciss.ca/report-en.asp>

⁷⁰ Former head of the Médecins Sans Frontières and the current foreign minister of France

Casas in effect invites us to take a keen look at our own culture and acts without immediately proclaiming our own culture superior. This is not a relativistic approach; rather he asks whether we ourselves live up to the principles with which we judge the Native Americans⁷¹. For Wallerstein, this essentially sums up the debate on interventionism: “Nothing has been said later that adds something decisive to the argument” (Wallerstein 2007 p. 13).

Wallerstein presents his book as an unmasking of particular universalisms and a roadmap for a new universalism. However, he seems to be endorsing the principles of what he argues against: The alternative to the interventionist discourse of Sepuvelda which Wallerstein proposes in the voice of Las Casas, is exactly the same principles that the just war tradition uses to challenge “unjust” wars. One could compare Las Casas to his contemporary Francisco de Vitoria, now seen as one of the founding fathers of the just war tradition, and find exactly the same arguments: wars should be proportional; wars should have a just cause; wars should be started by the right authority. While not offering us a critique of particular universalism as such, Wallerstein at least presents us with some words of caution. While Vitoria rejects many of Sépuvelda’s arguments, he accepts the arguments for ending barbaric mores and saving innocents. This he sees as an universal command: “*It makes no difference that all the barbarians consent to these kinds of rites and sacrifices, or that they refuse to accept the Spaniards as their liberators in the matter*”⁷². This certainty in our own moral integrity is echoed by just war theoreticians today. Witness David Mellow’s defence of the Iraq war:

[T]he approval of the people is arguably not always necessary to justify humanitarian intervention. [...] In a case of systematic large-scale government oppression,

killing and torture, military intervention represents a sufficient just cause even if the vast majority of the victims are opposed to that intervention.⁷³

Not all proponents of the just war tradition have taken the necessary heed to Las Casas cautious arguments, so it is well worth reiterating them. However, rather than offering us any real alternative, Wallerstein (maybe unwillingly) shows us that even “particular universalisms” can have critical potential if used with certain caution and a look towards our own as well as the other’s failings.

Badiou: The “ethicisation” of politics

For a more substantial criticism of the interventionist paradigm we may look to the Alan Badiou’s position in *L’ethic* (1991)⁷⁴. As Wallerstein, Badiou attempts to criticise human rights and interventionism not in the name of relativism, postmodernism or cultural differences, but in the name of a new, truer universalism. After the rapid decline of mass politics in the 80’s, politics have become less “political” and more “ethical”, Badiou claims. By “political” Badiou means collective projects which have a clear vision of how society should be changed for the better. This type of politics have been hollowed out by the thought that “there is no alternative” – what the French calls the “*pensee unique*”. The result is that politics are reduced to a science of management. “Ethics”, for Badiou, is closely linked to politics as management, and to individualistic free-market ideology.

Critical to this “ethicisation of politics”, Badiou defends the “antihumanism of the 1960s” – drawing on Althusser, Lacan and Foucault. According to Badiou the “ethicisation of politics” runs along two different main strands – a Kantian, universalist discourse of human rights, and an ethics of

⁷¹ Las Casas also appears in *Empire*. Here he is praised for insisting on that “humankind is one and equal”, though criticized for viewing humankind as essentially European. (Negri And Hardt: 2000, p. 116f)

⁷² Vitoria, *De Indis*: Q3/A5 in Syse et al. (2006) *The Ethics of War*, Oxford: Blackwell publishing

⁷³ Mellow (2006) *Iraq: A Morally Justified Resort to War*, *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 23:3

⁷⁴ A position he reiterates in the English edition (2001)

the Other⁷⁵, based on the works of Levinas. For Badiou, this ethics of the Other eventually reveals itself as “the final imperative of a conquering civilization: ‘Become like me and I will respect your differences.’” It is however the universalist discourse of human rights that is most relevant here, as it is closely linked to the interventionist paradigm. The universalist position posits a universal human subject that has certain “rights”. This human subject, however, must be based on the least common denominator. Human rights views humans as little more than animals: “bipeds without wings”. Human rights are the ethics of the suffering man, the man needing shelter from weather and some food for subsistence. Consequently, the starting-point for this type of ethics is that the denial of these basic needs is seen as a self-evident “Evil”. “Good”, on the other hand, is simply viewed as the absence of evil, and the ‘rights’ of human rights are rights only to non-evil. To proceed in this order, from evil to good, also means that everything political – for Badiou this means collective projects aiming towards something positively good - is seen as suspect, seen as leading to totalitarianism.

The ethics of the suffering man is also an ethics for the well-to-do, writes Badiou, as it hides beneath it the picture of the non-suffering man, “the good-Man, the white-Man” (Badiou 2001: 13) The ethics of human rights is thus fundamentally un-political, as it hides the concrete situation in a mesh of self-advertising good-will of the civilized against the un-civilized.⁷⁶ Medical ethics, for instance, helps to hide the needs of the particular person in talk of rights (to non-evil). The doctor should instead act in the singular situation, using his Hippocratic Oath as the only guideline.

For a better understanding of this critique

of human rights, one has to refer to Badiou’s philosophical system. Badiou’s ontology consists of two “spheres”, events and the realm of being. In the realm of being the world is seen and defined as a collection of manageable, finite facts and we are defined by our own needs, aims and desires. The realm of being is non-political, dealing with questions of management rather than transformation. Events, on the other hand, are located outside being – when something happens in the field of art, politics, science or love that is incompatible and foreign to stable world of being, it is an event. Events cast the world in a new light and demand our militant adherences to the “truth” of the event. The event is incomprehensible and unnameable in the world of being, as it is only known through trajectory of effects persons acting on the “truth” of the event creates. A “truth” is by definition Good, Evil is created by “truths gone awry”.

As the truth is unknowable in the world of being – how does one decide to follow and act on a truth, other than by religious zeal? Truths have one important criterion that makes it possible to discern them: they are “generic” – they are universal and available to everyone. That this criterion is hardly satisfying has produced a lot of criticism of Badiou’s work⁷⁷. However, the two-sphered ontology is important for the critique of the interventionist paradigm: Human rights operate wholly in the sphere of being, and as such is not universal, not larger than the desires, needs and aims of the different actors, or interested in challenging the stableness of being manifested as the (unjust) world order. Human rights discourse merely seeks to gloss over the worst manifestations of the world order in order for us to alleviate our consciousness (the realm of being is

75 Badiou does not comment on the just war tradition in *Ethics*. In *Century*, however he reads the just war tradition as a continuation of one of the 20th century’s main thoughts, the thought that “Bad violence must be followed by good violence, which is legitimated by the former. What is proposed is a bellicose foundation for peace; the good war will put an end to the bad war”. This orientation was above all held by Hitler. Alan Badiou (2005) *Century*, Polity Press: Cambridge, UK

76 It might be worth remembering one of the first great humanitarian happenings – the first Live Aid. Where Geldof and his associates saw a natural disaster, in reality the Ethiopian governments agricultural reforms and war against the Tigray rebels contributed massively to the famine. In this way, the famine got turned into something non-political, where the beneficent “white-Man” had to manage the situation for the poor Ethiopian children who didn’t even know it was Christmas (Geldof, B and Ure, M (1984) *Do they know it’s Christmas*)

77 See for instance: Peter Osbourne (2007) *Neo-classic Alain Badiou’s Being and Event*, *Radical Philosophy*: 142, or James D. Ingram (2005) *Can Universalism Still Be Radical? Alain Badiou’s Politics of Truth*, *Constellations* 12 (4)

necessarily self-interested). An ethics of truth, a militant following of thoughts that are both universal and larger than oneself, is the only possibility for a genuine change in the structure of reality, Badiou holds. A problem with Badiou's account is, however, that it seems interpret politics as religion – as blind adherence to faith.

Negri and Hardt: Empire

Negri and Hardt's *Empire* (2001) is relevant here not only because of how they criticise the interventionist paradigm, but also because they explicitly criticise the just war tradition. For Negri and Hardt the current world system has many similarities to an old-fashioned empire. *Empire* is striving towards a lack of boundaries, both *spatially*, by encompassing "the whole civilized world", *temporally*, by presenting the current situation as an eternal situation, and *socially*, by striving to encompass all fields of life inside imperial control. However, while old empires were based on a notion of state-sovereignty and authority, *Empire* is global and polycentric – without borders and without a single sovereign authority. Furthermore, the authority of *Empire* is no longer based on a system of control, like Foucault's Panopticon-system, but exercises control by internalising its authority in every aspect of life. *Empire*'s subjects are disciplined through "biopower": Internalisation of empire into life itself.

An important part of *Empire* is its self-justified right to police inside its borders – since *Empire* is global, this means policing the world. The interventionist paradigm, and especially the just war tradition, is both a sign and a justification for this function of *Empire*. As empires of old, the *Empire* is always dedicated to an eternal peace, yet its practice is always "bathed in blood". (Negri and Hardt 2000; XV). Since *Empire* presents itself as the guarantor of eternal peace, war has to be reinterpreted as something else. It is here the notion of just war comes in handy. Just war gives "first, the legitimacy to military apparatus insofar as it is ethically grounded,

and second, the effectiveness of military action to achieve the desired order of peace (s.13)". Just war essentially reduces military action to police operations. The enemies of *Empire* is absolutised as a threat to the ethical order, yet banalised, as an object of routine police repression (ibid). Witness the similarities to these remarks by James Turner Johnsen, the editor of *Journal of Military Ethics*:

The traditional idea of just cause allows use of force to punish evil, and this would surely apply to Saddam Hussein's regime. Another of the core just war concepts is that the aim of such force include the establishment of peace. Here a further dimension emerges: the obligation to replace the evildoer's government with one that exercises sovereign authority for good ends that can create an order that serves justice and peace. Thus regime change means not only getting rid of Saddam but also creating a democratic Iraq that can serve as a model for the region.⁷⁸

Most of Johnson's colleagues opposed the war in Iraq. However, the quote above suits Negri and Hardt's critique nicely. As we can see, the concept of just war is a part of the justification of *Empire*, reinterpreting military power as police power within the framework of a global, peaceful order of justice. The just war tradition is moreover a *sign* of the changing of the guards, from the old, spatially limited empires to the new globalised *Empire*. It is a breach with state-sovereignty principles, and a break with the multi-polar world of sovereign states (Negri and Hardt 2000; p. 12ff, p.35f) – thus doing ideological work to clear the way for a truly global empire. Walzer's *Just and Unjust Wars* (1977) is a clear example of this⁷⁹. Despite some difficulties, Negri and Hardt's account of the Just war tradition is a poignant criticism of its conservative and ideological aspects.

⁷⁸ Johnson, JT (2002) *Using Military Force Against the Saddam Hussein Regime: the Moral Issues*, 4/12 2002, <http://www.fpri.org/enotes/america/war.20021204.johnson.militaryagainsthussainmoralissues.html>

⁷⁹ Walzer himself has been criticised for not being able to break away from the old (Westphalian) system of sovereign (European) states. See for instance Luban, D. (1980). *Just War and Human Rights*, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 9(2): 160-181.

as an example, – *still* it seems like opposition to imperialism might manifest itself as an apology (Wallerstein, Noam Chomsky), or a defence (Badiou, Norwegian Communist Party, the ANSWER coalition) of this brutal man.

The three books reviewed show convincingly how one should always be alert to the ideology of humanism. To closely examine the bloated western discourse on ethics might be fruitful in order to unmask ideology, but it should never mask the slaughter or suffering of whole peoples. The Bush administration's attempts to hijack the discourse on intervention should not lead us to the conclusion that one should never intervene. Sometimes interventions, even military interventions, can be justified.

It can be justified by reference to the Hippocratic oath, as Badiou mentions, to help anyone that asks for help to the maximum of your ability (Badiou: 2001 s.15), or with reference to Las Casas main principle of a treating humankind as one and equal. Even "truths" or "universal universalism" could (sometimes) be used to justify a military intervention.

Interventions

The three books reviewed are important as they try, and sometimes manage, to make us see what lies beneath the often “evident” truths about human rights and interventionism. They show how human rights and the tradition of just war can function as legitimating discourses for a world order that in many respects is fundamentally unjust. However, all three books seem to share a singular and undifferentiated conception of intervention, and a very selective use of empirical examples. In effect, the three books seem to accept what some people see as the Bush administration’s hijacking of the concepts of humanitarian intervention and just war⁸⁰. By reading interventions in Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan - and the non-intervention in Rwanda - as more or less analogous situations, they actually gives the Bush administration *right* in positing the Iraq war as a benign or humanitarian war, and not as it probably was, an imperialistic war shrouded in a cloak of benign or humanitarian motives. They equivocate where differentiations should be made – for instance: Is the intervention called for by the people(s) in question? It was certainly not the case in Iraq or Afghanistan, but it was desperately called for in Rwanda, though the plea was tragically overlooked. Are the target of the intervention a political entity with support from (parts of) the people? Both the Ba’ath regime and the Taliban had some support in Iraq and Afghanistan, while the situation was different in for example war-weary Sierra Leone. Here British forces intervened (somewhat unwillingly) in a war having more the character of a gang war than a civil war. The target of the intervention was here small groups of armed men with access to funds from diamond-trading, with no support at all in the population. The British restored some sort of order, and the order has lasted, producing the unlikely result of making Tony Blair somewhat of national hero in Sierra Leone.

Wallerstein, for instance, shows the weakness of making the difference between different situations naught by making S epulveda the proponent of every western military intervention. Wallerstein seems to think that one is always looking among S epulveda’s arguments in order to go to war, especially the search for barbarians. Every military intervention seems to ask of us: Who is the barbarians? Wallerstein gives the former Yugoslavia as an example: Who were the barbarians here? Was it the Serbs? The Bosniaks? The Albanians? To this there is no good answer, Wallerstein seems to be saying. However, the question of who are the barbarians was not asked until very late in the process, nor was a search for a viable justification for a war prevalent. The intervention in Kosovo, like the non-intervention in Rwanda, was marked more by reluctance to act, reluctance to choose side under the cover of neutrality, a search for a justification to not act⁸¹ rather than attempts to justify a war.

Negri and Hardt seem to have some of the same problems. They seem to see every conflict, every breach of peace as a possible subversive act against Empire. However, the wars that one could want to intervene in often only hurts the oppressed “multitude” – like in Sierra Leone. The ideology of interventionism might hide the facts of the current unjust world order *for the west*, but interventions might make people in warring states able to shift their focus from day-to-day survival to, who knows oppositions to Empire. Badiou, too, is unable too see how you sometimes have to help “deliver someone from evil” *before* you can join them in a political project towards some good.

Opposition against imperialism or “Empire” also has a different side: A tendency to support anyone bearing the blunt end of a Western military action. For instance, Slobodan Milosevic is clearly responsible for a number of hideous crimes, take Srebrenica

⁸⁰ Of course, this is anachronistic, as only Wallerstein’s book is written *after* 9/11. However, Bush’s ability to so easily use an interventionist discourse came partly from the ideological groundwork done, partly by members of his own administration, after the first gulf war in 1992. So while not knowing Bush II’s presidency (yet), Badiou (2001) and Negri and Hardt (2000) should know the interventionist discourse a la Bush, before it became manifest in the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia.

⁸¹ See for instance Vetlesen, A.J (2005), *Evil and Human Agency*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

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