

From Portside

An interview with Jean Bricmont

Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan : have the advocates of intervention in Libya not learnt the lesson ? Jean Bricmont, who wrote a book about humanitarian imperialism, tells us why the right to interfere is incompatible with world peace, and that it goes against humanitarian principles. Unless, of course, those principles are just an excuse.

Interviewer: Gregoire Lalieu

Can you remind us of what humanitarian imperialism consists of ?

It is an ideology which aims to justify military interference against sovereign countries in the name of democracy and Human Rights. The motive is always the same : a population is the victim of a dictator, so we must act. Then all the usual references are trotted out : the Second World War, the war with Spain, and so on. The aim being to sell the argument that an armed intervention is necessary. This is what happened in Kosovo, Iraq or Afghanistan.

And now comes Libya's turn.

There is a difference here because a United Nations

Security Council resolution makes it possible. But this resolution was passed against the principles of the Charter of the United Nations themselves. Indeed, I see no external threat in the Libyan conflict. Although the notion of the " responsibility to protect " populations had been evoked, many short cuts were taken. Besides, there is no proof that Gaddafi massacres his people just for the sole purpose of slaughtering them. It is a bit more complicated than that : it is an armed insurrection, and I know not of any government that would not repress an insurrection of this kind. Of course, there are collateral damage and civilian casualties. But if the United States knows a way to avoid such damage, then it should go and tell the Israelis about it, and apply it themselves in Iraq and Afghanistan. There is also no doubt that coalition bombings will cause civilian casualties. From a strictly legal point of view, I think the U.N.S.C. resolution is questionable. It is, in fact, the result of years of lobbying for the recognition of the right to interfere, which proves here to be legitimized.

And yet, many - even among the parties of the left - deemed it necessary to intervene in Libya in order to stop the massacre. Do you think it is an error of judgment ?

Yes, I do, and for several reasons. First of all, this campaign ushers in the reign of the arbitrary. Indeed, the Libyan conflict is not exceptional. There are many other conflicts anywhere in the world whether it may be in Gaza, in Bahrain, or in the Congo, which happened some years ago. As for the latter, it occurred within a context of foreign aggression on the part of Rwanda and Burundi. The enforcement of the international law would have saved millions of lives but it was not done. Why not ?

Besides, if we apply the underlying principles of interference behind the aggression against Libya, it

means that anyone can intervene anywhere they want to. Imagine that the Russians intervene in Bahrain or the Chinese in Yemen : the world would be a general and ongoing war. Therefore one major feature of the right to interfere is the infringement of standard international law. And if we had to change international law to new laws justifying the right to interfere, it would result in a war of all against all. This is an argument to which the advocates of the right to interfere never give an answer.

And lastly, such interventions strengthen what I call the "barricade effect" : all the countries in the sights of the United States will start to feel threatened and will seek to increase their armaments. We all remember what happened with Saddam. Moreover, Gaddafi had said to the Arab League : " We have just lost a member state of the league and none of you have done anything. But it can happen to you too, because even though you are all U.S. allies, so was Saddam in the past. " Now the same thing is repeating itself with Gaddafi and the threat which hangs over many states is likely to relaunch the arms race. Russia, which is not an unarmed country, has already announced that it would reinforce its troops. But it can go even further : if Libya had the nuclear weapon, it would have never been attacked. Actually, this is why North Korea is untouchable. Therefore, the left which supports the intervention in Libya should definitely realize that humanitarian interference is inevitably going to relaunch the arms race and lead to long-term wars.

And yet, wouldn't the armed intervention against Gaddafi be a lesser evil ?

One has to consider the consequences. Now that the Western forces are involved, they will obviously have to go all the way, overthrow Gaddafi and bring the rebels to power. Then what is going to happen ? Libya seems to be divided. Is the West going to occupy the

country and embark on an endless war similar to the ones in Iraq or in Afghanistan ?

Be that as it may, let us suppose that all goes well : the members of the coalition remove Gaddafi in a few days, the rebels take power, and the Libyan people is united. Everyone is happy and then what ? I do not think the West will go : " Well, we did it because we are nice people and fond of Human Rights. Now you can do whatever you please. " What is going to happen if the new Libyan government is too Muslim-like or does not properly limit migration flows ? Do you think the West will let them do ? It is obvious that after the intervention, the new Libyan government will be caught up in the interests of the West.

If military intervention is not the solution, then what is ?

It would have been better if we had honestly attempted all peaceful solutions. It might not have worked but here, there is a blatant intention to reject these solutions. And by the way, this is an abiding feature of humanitarian wars. Concerning Kosovo, there were very detailed propositions on the part of Serbia in order to come to a peaceful solution but they were rejected. The West has even imposed conditions that made any negotiations impossible, such as the occupation of Serbia by N.A.T.O. forces. In Afghanistan, the Taliban proposed to try Bin Laden by an international court if they are provided with evidence of his involvement in the W.T.C. attacks. The U.S. refused it and bombed the country. In Iraq, Saddam had accepted the return of the United Nations inspectors as well as many extremely restrictive conditions. But it was never enough. In Libya, Gaddafi accepted a cease-fire and proposed to have international observers sent out there. The observers were not sent and it was said that Gaddafi did not respect the cease fire. The West also rejected Chavez's offer to mediate in Libya, even though it was backed up

by many Latino countries and the Organization of African Unity as well.

In that connection, I am angry when I hear left-wingers in Europe expose the horrible Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas which supports dictator Gaddafi. They got it all wrong ! The leaders in power in Latin America have important responsibilities. They are not just small leftists chattering in their corner. And the major issue for these leaders is the interference of the U.S. : the less it can do whatever it pleases, wherever it pleases, the better it will be for all those countries which try to free themselves from tutelage by state power, and also for the whole world.

Does the systematic rejection of peaceful solutions mean that humanitarian interference is an excuse ?

Yes it does, but if it works well with the intellectuals, I am more doubtful about the reaction of the peoples of Europe. Will they support their leaders during the aggression against Gaddafi ? People consider the wars for security to be the most legitimate ones : for instance, if there is a threat against our populations or our way of life, etc. But in the context of an overall climate of islamophobia (that I disapprove, but it does exist) here and in France, you try explaining that we are fighting in Cyrenaica for rebels whom we see screaming " Allah U Akbar ". This is contradictory ! At the political level, most parties support the intervention, even the parties of the left. The most moderate ones only supported the implementation of a no-fly zone, but if Gaddafi sends his tanks to Benghazi, what are we to do ? During the Second World War, the Germans lost quite quickly control of the air space but they held out for several years yet. Insofar as the objective is to overthrow Gaddafi, the moderates should have suspected that it would go even further than the establishment of a no-fly zone. Unable to take genuine and alternative

stands, the left finds itself trapped by the logic of humanitarian interference and is compelled to support Sarkozy. If the war goes well and quickly, the position of the French President will undoubtedly be secure for the 2012 presidential elections, thanks to the left which would have contributed to it. The left, unable to assume a coherent attitude against wars, is compelled to tag along behind the interventionist policy.

And what if the war does not go well ?

It is regrettable, but the only French party that set against the intervention in Libya as regards French interests is the National Front. It particularly alluded to human migration flows and took occasion to distinguish itself from the U.M.P (Union for a Popular Movement) or the S.P. (Socialist Party) by claiming that it had never collaborated with Gaddafi. If the war in Libya does not go according to plan, it will benefit the National Front for the French presidential elections in 2012.

If humanitarian interference is just an excuse, then what is the objective of this war ?

The uprisings in the Arab world surprised the Westerners, which were not well informed enough about what was happening in North Africa and the Middle-East. I do not dispute that there are good experts on the issue, but they are seldom listened to at some level of the government, and by the way, they are complaining about it. So now, the new governments in Egypt and Tunisia might not align themselves with the interests of the West any longer, and consequently become hostile to Israel.

To take control of the area and protect Tel Aviv, the West is likely willing to get rid of governments that are already hostile to Israel and the West. The three main ones are Iran, Syria and Libya. The latter, since it is the weaker one, is attacked first.

Can it work ?

The West longed to rule the world but we can see since 2003 with the Iraq fiasco that it cannot. In the past, the United States took the liberty to overthrow rulers that it had brought to power, such as Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam in the 1960s. But nowadays, Washington cannot do that any longer. In Kosovo, the United States and Europe have to compromise with a Mafia-like regime. In Afghanistan, people say that Karzai is corrupt, but they have no other option. In Iraq, they also have to accept a government they are far from being fully pleased with.

The problem will certainly arise in Libya too. An Iraqi once told me : " In this part of the world, there are no liberals in the Western sense of the word, apart from a few rather isolated intellectuals. " Since the West cannot rely on rulers who share its ideas and who fully defend its interests, it tries to impose dictators through force. But it obviously creates a discrepancy with people's desires.

Besides, this approach proves to be a failure and people should not be fooled by what is occurring.

The West, which thought it could be in control of the Arab world with puppets such as Ben Ali and Mubarak, would suddenly think : " We had it all wrong, now we are going to support democracy in Tunisia, Egypt and

Libya. " It is all the more absurd since one major demand of the Arab revolts is the right to sovereignty. In other words, no interference ! The West has to relinquish its desire for world domination : the Arab world, just like Africa and the Caribbean, does not belong to it. Actually, the regions in which the West most interfere are the less developed ones. If their sovereignty is respected, those regions will be able to develop, just like Asia did, and certainly so will Latin America. The policy of interference is a failure for everyone.

Then what is the alternative?

First of all, one has to know that the policy of interference requires a huge military budget. Without the support of the United States and its outrageous military budget, France and Great Britain might not have become involved in it. And it is much less the case for Belgium. But all these means which are put at their disposal are not heaven-sent. The budget is based on loans from China that lead to U.S. deficits and all kinds of economic issues. We rarely think about it. Moreover, we are constantly told that there is no money for education, research, pensions, etc. And, all of a sudden, a huge sum comes out of the blue to wage war in Libya. And it is a limitless sum since no one knows how long the war will last ! In Afghanistan, money is already spent fruitlessly. There is a need to adopt a new political approach and to me, Switzerland is a good example. Its military budget is only devoted to the protection of the Swiss territory. The Swiss have a coherent non-interventionist policy because, as a matter of policy, the Swiss army cannot leave the country. You can say that Switzerland is letting Gaddafi kill the insurgents, nevertheless, it has never committed any genocide nor any other massacre, even though we can criticize its policy on other matters (banks or immigration). And secondly, if all the countries followed the example of Switzerland for the reasons I stated earlier, the world would be much better.

Wars and embargoes have always had disastrous consequences. I think the best alternative is to cooperate with all the countries of the world regardless of their systems of government. Through trade (not the arms trade of course), ideas spread and things can evolve, without wars. We can of course discuss its forms : fair trade, ecological trade, etc. Nevertheless, trade is a much less bloody alternative as opposed to sanctions and embargoes, which are the soft version of humanitarian wars.

*Translated from the French by Sheila Carby for
Investig'Action*

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Jean Bricmont From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Jean Bricmont (born 1952) is a Belgian theoretical physicist, philosopher of science and a professor at the Universite Catholique de Louvain. He works on renormalization group and nonlinear differential equations.

He is mostly known to the non-academic audience for co-authoring *Fashionable Nonsense* (also known as *Intellectual Impostures*) with Alan Sokal, in which they criticise relativism in the philosophy of science. Jean Bricmont also collaborates with activist Noam Chomsky and campaigns on a variety of progressive causes.

In 2005 he published *Imperialisme humanitaire. Droits de l'homme, droit d'ingerence, droit du plus fort ?*, published in English as *Humanitarian Imperialism* in 2006.

In 2006, he wrote the preface to *L'Atlas alternatif - Frederic Delorca (ed), Pantin, Temps des Cerises*. He is a member of the Division of Sciences of the Royal Academy for Sciences, Letters and Arts of Belgium.

In 2007, he wrote an article in French discussing the possibility of a US invasion of Iran. "Pourquoi Bush peut declencher une attaque contre l'Iran."