

Contemporary Issues in the International Relations of the Developing World
OPI-Oxford Centre for International Studies Seminar Series
Hilary Term 2000 Week Eight

‘The Politics of Humanitarian Ideas’

Thomas Weiss, The Graduate Center, City University of New York

The growing importance of humanitarian intervention as a legitimate function of foreign policy, has challenged traditional Westphalian conceptions of unlimited state sovereignty. However, humanitarian values have not superseded traditional conceptions of vital interests, but have become increasingly central to their definition. Power and interests continue to motivate state action but humanitarian ideas have become critical in determining how those interests are perceived. Humanitarian ideas have influenced international politics and resulted in a tension with ideas of non-intervention. A resolution is developing by precedent: intervention is tolerated more readily than in the past. However there is a continued resistance that may only be overcome if nation states accept more formal responsibility internationally for their citizens and if consultative arrangements for humanitarian intervention are expanded.

In Secretary-General Kofi Annan’s speech to the opening UN General Assembly session, in September 1999, he was exceptionally forthcoming on the norm of humanitarian intervention: ‘States bent on criminal behaviour [should] know that frontiers are not the absolute defence... that massive and systematic violations of human rights – wherever they may take place – should not be allowed to stand.’ The statement presented a landmark in the history of non-intervention, as an organising principle of international relations since Westphalia. It displayed the extent to which humanitarian ideas had pervaded not only organisations like the OSCE and the occasional foreign policy of western leaders, but in the United Nations itself, described by former Under-Secretary-General Brian Urquhart as ‘the last bastion of national sovereignty’.

There are four decisive ways in which humanitarian ideas have influenced international politics, particularly in the 1990s.

- Humanitarian values have influenced the composition of national interests. For instance, most states acknowledge that eliminating ethnic cleansing as a policy option is in their vital interests. As opposed to humanitarian ideas superseding national interests, the latter are being redefined to include human rights.
- Humanitarian ideas have proved critical when states need to set priorities among conflicting norms. Specifically, they are proving key in resolving the conflict between sovereignty and human rights. An attempt at reconciliation between the two conflicting norms is well conceptualised by Francis Deng, who assumes the centrality of the Westphalian system, but seeks pragmatically to reconcile the possibility of international intervention with traditional state sovereignty in what he calls ‘sovereignty as responsibility’. In other words, to the three traditional attributes of sovereignty (territory, a people and authority), humanitarian ideas have added a fourth: respect for a minimal standard of human rights.
- Humanitarian ideas have facilitated new coalitions. The media and the public can demand that something be done, the military can respond to these demands, and

relief agencies can ask for help because they may require the war-fighting and logistic capacities of the military. Hence both sub-state and transnational entities can redefine state interests.

- Humanitarian ideas have also become embedded in institutions. New institutional structures in governments, intergovernmental agencies and NGOs are all organisational manifestations of the impact that humanitarian ideas have had on international politics.

Notwithstanding the unprecedented level of humanitarian interventions and the support that they have received from diverse quarters, humanitarian ideas remain contested territory. Hence, Annan's statements in the cited speech, as well as on other occasions, are as much a product of his own intellectual leadership, as the precedent set by military interventions on humanitarian grounds in the 1990s. The reaction to these speeches, even within the UN has been volatile. Attitudes towards the Secretary-General stance have been summarised by one ambassador and a senior staff member in very similar ways. The West (including Central Europe) and much of sub-Saharan Africa are essentially enthusiastic. Large developing countries (including Nigeria, South Africa, Egypt, India and much of Latin America) are lukewarm, favouring support being contingent on state consent and a reformed council. Russia, China, the Middle East and pariah states and are hostile.

There is indeed a contradiction between non-intervention, as affirmed in Article 2(7) of the UN Charter, and the theoretical and practical imperatives of humanitarian action. The staying power of non-interventionist orthodoxy manifests itself in Security Council resolutions, where the exceptional character of each UN intervention is habitually stressed. But one solution to this contradiction is already evident. It is found in the powerful precedents of international intervention in Northern Iraq, Somalia, Bosnia, Rwanda, Haiti, Albania, Kosovo, and Timor. All these suggest that Chapter VII action to enforce humanitarian decisions can no longer be seen as exceptional. The UN Charter's contradiction between sovereignty and justice is being resolved in favour of the latter, because humanitarian ideas have helped redefine statehood in terms of an additional attribute: responsibility.

Westphalian interpretations of sovereignty are being challenged. However, a new structure to replace the old is yet to emerge. While there is growing consensus that states must be held accountable for certain kinds of behaviour that were hitherto contained within the black box of state sovereignty, definitive and standard criteria to identify such behaviour remain elusive. Even if such standards were established, it would be impossible to impose standards about when states 'must' and will definitely intervene. One way out of the dilemma would be to get state authorities to take the fourth attribute of responsibility for, and obligations to, their citizens more seriously, rather than attempt to establish common standards or define a 'space of victimhood'. While the record of humanitarian intervention has been mixed, each precedent has helped lower the threshold at which humanitarian violations would be tolerated internationally. At present the 'humanitarian glass is nine-tenths empty', but promises to be fuller someday.

Discussion

The coalition of resistance to humanitarian ideas was raised in the course of the discussion. One participant summarised members of this coalition as individuals in developed countries sticking to narrow definitions of national interest and thereby resenting national expenditures on humanitarian intervention as a deflection from the really important security issues, those wishing to preserve international order, and developing countries fearing encroachments on their domestic legitimacy and authority. To these, the speaker added another variable explaining the resistance of developing countries: the double standard exercised by the developed countries in the practice of humanitarian intervention. Hence the support for the expansion of the Security Council, so that more countries are consulted before international intervention. Another participant raised the question: have humanitarian ideas merely provided developed countries with pretext for more arbitrary use of force? And surely support for humanitarian ideas is not simplistically divided between progressive developed countries and reactionary Third World states, given, for instance, that the US is as concerned about its own sovereignty as any developing country? The speaker agreed that the developed countries and international organisations have sent mixed messages on their national and international commitments to humanitarian ideas. But genocide for instance, has found a place in the vocabulary of states in way that it did not occupy earlier and more people are willing to intervene than they used to be. The humanitarian glass is at least one-tenth full and that already represents a long way from the traditional Westphalian model.

Amrita Narlikar
St. John's College, Oxford