



# Humanitarian Imperialism: Using Human Rights to Sell War

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## **Humanitarian Imperialism: Using Human Rights to Sell War** Jean Bricmont , Diana Johnstone

Since the end of the Cold War, the idea of human rights has been made into a justification for intervention by the world's leading economic and military powers--above all, the United States--in countries that are vulnerable to their attacks. The criteria for such intervention have become more arbitrary and self-serving, and their form more destructive, from Yugoslavia to Afghanistan to Iraq. Until the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the large parts of the left was often complicit in this ideology of intervention--discovering new "Hitlers" as the need arose, and denouncing antiwar arguments as appeasement on the model of Munich in 1938.

Jean Bricmont's **Humanitarian Imperialism** is both a historical account of this development and a powerful political and moral critique. It seeks to restore the critique of imperialism to its rightful place in the defense of human rights. It describes the leading role of the United States in initiating military and other interventions, but also on the obvious support given to it by European powers and NATO. It outlines an alternative approach to the question of human rights, based on the genuine recognition of the equal rights of people in poor and wealthy countries.

Timely, topical, and rigorously argued, Jean Bricmont's book establishes a firm basis for resistance to global war with no end in sight.

## **Humanitarian Imperialism: Using Human Rights to Sell War Details**

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## **Linda says**

Serious look at the human rights discourse that dominates the reasoning for one country to intervene in the affairs of another.

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## **Sham Al-Ghazali says**

I am oozing with glee at the fact I can now destroy shitty little Leftists who believe in liberating others I just.... just read it. No questions.

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## **Ed says**

According to Richard Falk, a lawyer and specialist on international law, "Intervention is like the Mississippi River; it flows North to South. Terms like "humanitarian intervention" and "the responsibility to protect" are now ineradicable parts of the Western discourse on policy toward the global south, establishing a new norm in international affairs. This book is a necessary left-wing counter to the increasingly accepted justifications the supposed need for invasion and occupation to defend human rights. Their view is that the U.S. system of capitalist democracy is the model to which all other nations should conform; Bricmont's point that it is important to those in power to confine public debate with the narrow limits of whether tactics are effective--should we use Tomahawk missiles launched from ships or Hellfire missile fired from drones--and not to challenge the aims and strategies of the armed intervention itself.

Particularly germane just now with the debate on dropping high explosives on Syria in retaliation for the use of poison gas by the Assad regime in rebel controlled territory which looks to be a tough sell in Congress, among the American people and internationally.

Ably translated by Diane Johnstone who knows a quite a bit about the subject herself.

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## **Zid says**

A must read for any serious adult.

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## **Ramin says**

This is a clearly written, and well researched and documented, book. It should be required reading for all so-called "liberals" and "progressives" in the West, especially the U.S. (but also Canada, UK, France, and

Germany).

Jean Bricmont discusses and criticizes the arguments people have used for "humanitarian war". Importantly, he exposes the hypocrisy, naivete, and disingenuousness of people who make such arguments. He shows that, especially in recent years, in the run-up to (and during) the wars in the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and Iraq, supposed concern for human rights and democracy has been exploited to build support for war and occupation--including support from people and organizations who would otherwise be against such things. Such professed concerns have also been exploited by Hitler and Stalin, but these were dismissed as obvious propaganda. Almost all wars have had disastrous consequences for many people. Slobodan Milosevic and Saddam Hussein may be gone, and some things have improved, but millions of people are either dead or suffering as a result of these wars and occupations.

He shows that in such conflicts, the West (especially the U.S.) is rarely interested in democracy or justice or human rights or social and economic equality, and concerns for these ideals are belatedly asserted to reduce opposition for what could be described as colonial (in the 20th century) or imperialistic actions. He argues (fairly convincingly) that the U.S. has neither the right, the duty, nor the ability to establish "democracy" in other countries. Many people, especially in the U.S., think that we have all the answers, and we just need to send in the troops to solve major problems that have been festering for decades, if not longer. Many people seem to want to undermine international law, or they support "international" law if it is dominated by the U.S.

I agree with many of the things Bricmont writes, but if he wants to reach "liberal" Americans, he needs to change his tone a bit. I think he underestimates the extent to which Americans are more conservative, neoliberal, jingoistic, and arrogant and (I think it's fair to say) narcissistic than their West European counterparts, with whom he's more familiar. The problem is, many people are not willing, or at least not used to, understanding the perspectives of others. Another shortcoming, but a minor one, is that some of his quotations are too long and are not sufficiently integrated with the rest of the text.

In any case, this book is definitely worth reading. It might not change people's minds, but I hope it will at least encourage people to question their assumptions and to question the motives of advocates of war. "Liberals" and "progressives" have allowed the political and economic elite to frame the debates to their own advantage, and this must change.

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## **Grégoire says**

Jean Bricmont writes about interventionism in other countries on behalf of defending human rights. He argues that the West (European Empires first, the US then) switched from bringing progress to defending human rights in order to pursue its domination over other countries. The main cases are the Belgian colony of Congo, and the US war in Iraq.

He gives hints for the antiwar movement when confronted to such question as "You're against the war in Afghanistan, so you want all women to wear burkas!?" Bricmont also studies the dubious content of contemporary left and green parties, international NGOs, etc. in relation to the wars in Yugoslavia, Iraq and Afghanistan.

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## **Bruce Sanders says**

This book argues that though there may be barbarism occurring in the third world, military interventions do more harm than good and in fact often only increase the barbarism. Further, it argues that apologists for humanitarian intervention are often little more than 'useful idiots' of the imperialists who use humanitarian intervention as an excuse to dominate and exploit third world countries. This book does a great job of analyzing the arguments in favor of humanitarian intervention, of exposing the fallacies, lies and hypocrisy that often accompany those arguments, and illustrating how neo-colonial imperialism works, how it defeats insurgencies, and ultimately how it controls third world countries. This book is deep, thoughtful and well-reasoned. It will be especially eye-opening to the typically clueless American who thinks America is only a well-intentioned altruistic force for good in the world.

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## **Paul Rhodes says**

Well, this book did not deliver on its promise, namely to articulate a third way between the Scylla of Cultural Relativism and the Charybdis of a forced universalist morality. Mr. Bricmont makes it perfectly clear that he is a universalist, just not an imperialist one, and he wants a universalist morality that does not lead to wars in its name. Okay, good, I would like that, too, but once you have an absolute goal, then you have a justification of any sacrifice for the sake of that goal. This is, of course, a huge philosophical problem, and not just philosophical. All Bricmont does is show that what the U.S. has done is pretty much the opposite of the lofty ideals the U.S. professes and thereby reveals the U.S. to be a most bloody hypocrite. This is exactly the sort of thing Noam Chomsky has been doing for decades, and it should surprise no one that the German Edition (at least) of this book has a foreword by none other than Chomsky himself. But showing the United States to be a hypocrite does not invalidate the idea of humanitarian interventionism. Abuse of an idea does not invalidate the idea itself. And so the Enlightenment lives another day to fight more bloody wars all for the sake of human rights.

To say that the book is more or less a re-hash of what you can find in almost anything that the political Chomsky has written in the last fifty years is not to dismiss the book, of course. I really, really like Chomsky, but Bricmont, I have to say, is the much better writer and is able to make the same points that Chomsky makes with greater economy and, therefore, greater force.

But one point that Bricmont does not make with force, great or otherwise, is his suggestion for a third way between relativism and imperial absolutism. Yes, he does come up with a third way but seems to realize that it is so laughable that, like a guilty Straussian, he wants to bury it between the lines. His Third Way is what I'd like to call a libertarian Hegelianism. The developed countries developed to the End of History on their own, so let the other countries do so as well, and, presto, we have on the one hand upheld a definite telos and so avoid the trap of cultural relativism and on the other hand established a principle that lets us remove the adjective "imperialist" from absolutism.

It's neat but Hegelianism does not work that way at all. Hegelianism allows development to go only if the End of History has not been reached. See, one cannot philosophize until one knows the point of history, and one cannot know this until history has reached its end. Until then every thing must be allowed to happen, like wars, mass murder, torture, crimes against humanity, etc., because everything is part of the necessary dialectic of the Unfolding of the World's Spirit.

But once the End of History has arrived, then one immediately understands what once looked like a tale told by an idiot. One understands the dialectic of history in a truly scientific manner and, therefore, can tell others who have not reached the End of History what to do to get there. Well, if the developed countries of this world are truly at History's End, then they are the rightful guardians of the world and as such have the right to tell the undeveloped and underdeveloped countries what to do, and instead of Humanitarian Intervention, we have Hegelian Intervention (which students of Hegel know is simply Napoleonic Conquest that is conscious of itself as Unfolding Spirit), and Mr. Bricmont would still bitch. And if no country is at History's End, then no one can philosophize, no one can make prescriptions because History remains an inexplicable tale told by a babbling idiot. In that case, Mr. Bricmont should just shut up.

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### **Jack Fraser says**

A short, clear, practical analysis of arguments for and against humanitarian interventions. Bricmont cleverly uses primary sources and statistics to back up his points without relying wholly on them. Unsurprisingly the book is heavily focused on the Iraq War, but its arguments are universal and applicable to Libya, Syria, etc. Readable and relevant.

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### **Martina says**

Those writers who claim, that well, at least in our system you are free, are made more guilty by that privilege.

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