

Book Reviews

From Kosovo to Kabul. Human Rights and International Intervention
David Chandler, Pluto Press.

It's called 'From Kosovo to Kabul', but could have been 'Bosnia to Baghdad', or any number of other places that the 'New World Order' has seen fit to impose itself, or, indeed, to ignore. Chandler has written a searing attack on the rhetoric and justification of the post-1989 'New World Order', the 'humanitarian intervention', the 'just war', and the international agency-based state-building that has characterised much of our foreign news coverage in the past decade, from the Balkans to Central Asia and the Middle East. His concern is primarily with the legal and international relations aspects of these problems. The essence of his argument is twofold. Firstly, that by justifying military intervention by the appeal to ethical values rather than multilateral consensus (whether this really drove American or European intervention in any number of conflicts is of course another issue), the door is open for the mighty to ride roughshod over the consensus of the international community, or indeed those directly effected by the intervention. The 'New World Order' becomes an updated version of 19th century imperialism in practice - like much imperialism, often justified with an appeal to the rhetoric of 'civilising' unruly natives. Secondly, by making 'statehood', the right of groups to self-government, dependent on adherence to a particular set of values and practices determined by international agencies and western powers, the New World Order effectively strips people of the right to self-determination. They can self-determine only to the extent that they satisfy their western paymasters and regulators.

The result of these practices hardly need recounting. Outside military intervention in the name of Human Rights occurs on a massive scale in every continent except North America itself (not because of the unblemished human rights record in North America). The international order, including the United Nations, invests a huge amount of effort in the maintenance of regimes and states where there exists very little collective identification with, or participation in, their governing bodies by the inhabitants of those lands. A certain kind of 'Human Rights' are enforced, but not perhaps in the kind of politics envisioned by Tom Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft, or many since. At the same time, as the intervention of aid agencies is increasingly politicised, connected with particular 'Rights' agendas rather than in the strictly neutral tradition of organisations such as the Red Cross, it becomes increasingly difficult for any kind of aid to be advanced without being drawn into broader political agendas, and secured by the might of the world's leading military powers. Chandler insists that the only way to preserve security and democracy is by multilateral agreements, perhaps under the auspices of the United Nations, between sovereign powers - even if the consequences

sometimes appear unpalatable to outsiders.

This is not necessarily an argument that all on the Left would appreciate, even if much of Chandler's ire is directed at the United States. Many on the Left have long espoused the universal application of universal values, often with the assistance of outside military intervention. Much of the impetus for the new rhetoric comes from those who see themselves as being on the liberal Left. It is of course not really a new problem. Chandler rightly dates the shift towards interventionist aid at least as early as the Biafran war and the emergence of *Medecin sans Frontieres*. In truth the rhetoric justifying intervention from Left and Right, and indeed its legal underpinnings, has shifted around over the past few decades and longer without, perhaps, the reality of military intervention, and the real reasoning behind it, altering much. However, Chandler's assaults on the manner in which debates are framed today are telling. Interventionism fuelled by a concern for Human Rights and the habit of helping that has developed among western publics leads to a world where domestic public opinion in America and Europe can sway international military action, rather than what actually might be desired in the effected regions (though we know western leaders can ignore domestic opinion); policies that in fact bolster western elites and do little to remedy the root causes of conflicts are presented as being in the cause of a universal humanity; and the new arbiter of what is good in the world becomes an elite coterie of aid agencies and lawyers, with a strictly legal definition of what humans should enjoy by right (if this really were the case, perhaps it would be progress!)

We have become used to thinking in Human Rights terms. It is a language that everybody employs when it suits them, and that usefulness can of course be both its strength and weakness. A socialist (and this one has been in favour of some of the interventions that Chandler describes, and against others) would argue, of course, that much broader issues than an abstract set of legal rights is at stake; but this does not get us around the conundrum of when it is right to fight, when it is right not to fight, and when it is right to fight to force an end to fighting. Neither does Chandler provide an effective answer to these questions. He does himself a disservice at times, condemning the simplicity and hyperbole of others, but pulling the same tricks himself. It is not helpful, for example, to refer repeatedly to the 'carpet-bombing' of Afghanistan; that presents an entirely misleading view of the American campaign there. (So-called collateral damage there and elsewhere has in fact been characterised by a disturbing degree of precision). Chandler may also have written his book somewhat too early. The clearly mendacious manner in which war against Iraq is being justified looks very Old World Order in practice. But there are a lot of assumptions questioned, and matters to ponder, in this important book.

Paul Warde