

AZB
8044 Zurich

Current Concerns

The monthly journal for independent thought, ethical standards and moral responsibility
English Edition of *Zeit-Fragen*, Member of the European Working Group 'Courage to Take a Moral Stance'

POLITICS

Bosnia, Kosovo and Democracy

Placing the problem of Western intervention in the Balkans in the wider context of current political developments, David Chandler discusses the effects it has had not only on the region but also on democratic debates and institutions in the West.

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Bosnia, Kosovo and Democracy

Democracy in the age of humanitarian interventionism

David Chandler is a specialist on Eastern Europe. He is the author of the book 'Bosnia. Faking Democracy after Dayton' (1999). In the following interview he discusses the problem of Western intervention in the Balkans, and the effects that this has had on the region. He places Western policy in this conflict in the wider context of current political developments: a moralisation of politics and, at the same time, a factual weakening of democratic debates and institutions. This is coupled with a rather pessimistic understanding of humanity, which calls for more regulation of society through the state, more social control and policies that seek to settle conflicts by force. While concerned about these trends, David Chandler argues that they can be counteracted by opening up debates to disseminate proper information and encourage analyses that allow us to increase our understanding of developments today. He sees this as a way of rebuilding people's confidence in the capacity of democratic societies to find peaceful, constructive and rational solutions to the challenges we face. Each and everyone of us is called upon to participate in such debates and thereby make use of and safeguard our democratic rights.

Current Concerns: The Balkans are often seen as a way of escaping from international politics...

Current Concerns: The Balkans are often portrayed as a region plagued by instability and constant turmoil. From a historical point of view, what truth is there in this?

David Chandler: A lot of people see the Balkan region as a trouble spot, but I think it is very wrong to say that the people in the Balkans themselves are the cause of these conflicts.

Outside intervention

If we look at the history, we can see that the only times that there have been conflicts between different ethnic or national groups in the Balkans is when there has been outside intervention by external powers, such as the conflicts around the collapse of the old Ottoman Empire, where Russia, Prussia and Austria and also Britain and France were involved, or during the Second World War with German and Italian occupation. The problem has been that the Balkan region has been fought over by major outside powers, and those battles have been fought at the expense of people in the region. The same can be seen over the last ten years, in the crisis and the series of wars fought around the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia. It was outside intervention, the push by Germany to recognise Slovenia and Croatia that aggravated the situation when there was no collective federal solution to the economic, social and political problems for Yugoslavia. Once Germany and Austria had said that they would support Slovenian and Croatian independence, there was less incentive for these richer republics to negotiate with the poorer republics. Then there was further intervention by the European Union and the arbitration of the Badinter commission, the arbitration jurists, who said that Croatia would have to take the republic borders of former Yugoslavia regardless of the wishes of the substantial Serbian minority. The fact that those questions were not settled between people of the region led to conflict. Again, if you look at the situation in Bosnia, America and the international community recognised an artificial set of borders, while the people within Bosnia had no opportunity to say whether they wanted to be part of that state or not. The cycle of intervention from outside powers has made it more difficult for people within the Balkans and within the former Yugoslavia to sort out their problems themselves. When you know that an outside power is going to support you, there is less incentive to compromise. We can see the same in Kosovo, where once the international community were favourable or indicated to the Albanian separatists that they would support them, there was no incentive for them to negotiate with the Serbian authorities in Kosovo.

Current Concerns: What effects has intervention had on the whole process of democracy in the region? What effects have the negotiations (Dayton, Rambouillet) by the West had on the region? Was the war necessary?

Western intervention in the collapse of the former Yugoslavia has always been decided upon by Western leaders and Western institutions.

People not consulted and have no say

The people of Yugoslavia had never been consulted and never had a say in these events. The Dayton agreement, which ended the Bosnian war, was drawn up by the American State Department and negotiated with the Serb, Croat and Bosnian Muslim representatives in separate rooms. They tried to force them to accept it, they bribed them or they said to the Croatian government, you speak for the Croatian Bosnian people and we will let you have the Krajina. They said the Bosnian Serbs could not be allowed at the negotiations because they were war criminals and they made sure that Milosevic had to sign what was put in front of him

as a way of escaping from international sanctions. The same process of so-called negotiations we saw repeated at the Rambouillet and Paris talks, where the Kosovo Albanians and the Serbs were not consulted and had no idea what the peace plan, the imposed agreement, was that America was putting together. Both sides rejected it because the Albanians in Kosovo wanted independence and the Serbs wanted to maintain the territorial integrity. The international community then imposed it against both of them. In the case of the Serbs they imposed the threat of a military bombing campaign, which they then implemented after the breakdown of the talks. The fact that the conditions within those agreements were not acceptable to the Serbian government has been well documented in Zeitfragen and in other papers.

Little room for democracy

It must also be mentioned that apart from the peace talks and agreements themselves not being democratic, not being agreements between the people of Yugoslavia, the actual imposed plans also allowed very little room for democracy. The colonial governors, or so-called UN High Representatives, were given executive power in Bosnia and also in Kosovo, the power to make and impose the laws against elected representatives. For example, Kouchner, the High Representative in Bosnia, recently set up a transitional authority, supposedly putting Kosovo on the way to democracy, but the transitional council has got four hand-picked Albanian representatives, one Serb that does not want to be part of it and four UN appointees, and Kouchner has a veto and the final say. So basically, it's a consultation committee, it's nothing democratic, and there is no immediate plan to have any

elections in Kosovo, and if they did have any elections, then the Albanian community would vote for independence, and it would be clear just how undemocratic the international regulation is.

In addition to this, one of the reasons why democracy is undermined in Bosnia and Kosovo is that these states are entirely artificial. Most people in Bosnia do not support the state and do not see themselves as being part of that state. Most people who live in Kosovo equally do not support the constitutional framework that exists at the moment. So the policies that are being imposed by the international community have very little support on the ground from people within the former Yugoslavia and have done very little to bring about reconciliation between national and ethnic groups. On the contrary, the fact that a negotiated solution was not pursued has meant that hostility between the Serbs and Albanians will go on into the future. For problems that could have been resolved without bloodshed there is no easy solution now. But any future solution that there is can only be a solution that has to be agreed to and negotiated by the people of the region themselves.

Current Concerns: The politicians (Clinton, Albright) were in favour of going to war, they pressed for military intervention, whereas the armed forces were against such a solution. Why?

The irrational nature of these interventions, the fact that they are creating instability, is one of the reasons why military planners or military generals within the West, the American administration or even within Britain say that this is a crazy strategy. What is the military campaign about? There seems

to be little real basis to it. And what is the aim of it? If the aim is to bring about peace or resolve problems, it does not seem to be a sensible solution. And equally their concern is that there does not seem to be any traditional national, military interest. Why would the military get involved in an affair that does not seem to affect the military-strategic interests of Britain and America. Traditional geo-strategic concerns, traditional military concerns, are no longer dictating policy in international relations or towards the Balkans.

Policy dictated by liberal human rights interventionists

This militaristic policy is being dictated by liberal human rights interventionists, whose proponents were once against the Vietnam war, like President Clinton, Joschka Fischer or Tony Blair and New Labour in Britain. And the reasons why these people support the war is not to do with any geo-strategic interest in the Balkans but much more with trying to achieve a moral consensus at home and to appear to be doing the right thing.

Current Concerns: Is that the reason why liberal leftist politicians worked towards this brutal and destructive war?

It is difficult to understand the ferocity of the desire to expand the war in the Balkans and to see why liberal or left-leaning politicians should be so keen on waging such a destructive war, destructive not only for Yugoslavia or Serbia but for the whole of the Danube region. I think that the secret of it is the former demonisation of the Serbs and the Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic. They had to demonise the Serbian people and the people of the Balkans more generally in order to look good and have this civilising mission.

For a government like the British government that has very little cohering policy framework, very little in terms of a mobilising mission or an idea to sell to the British people about what New Labour stands for—everyone knows it is new, that it is not Old Labour, but it is difficult to make out what the new policies mean in practice—this was an opportunity to show that there is something new and something different by taking the moral high-ground and fighting for good against evil, not for profits or national interests but purely for values, and thus to cohere the British elite. Maybe we do not know what policy to have in health and education, but we have a set of values that we hold very dear, that we are willing to send our boys out to fight for. Those values are for peace and freedom and democracy. And because they wanted to show those values in practice they were so keen on bombing Serbia, on making a stand that was paid for in the blood of the people of the Balkans.

Since the war was seen in terms of good and evil, and Slobodan Milosevic and the Serbian people were portrayed as genocidal Nazis, it was very difficult to have a rational discussion about British government policy. When anyone raised criticism about the strategy, about the failure of a political solution, they were accused of appeasing ethnic cleansing and collaborating with a Nazi-like policy. This meant that in a fairly undemocratic way at home the war policies had a consensus because they were put across in such moralistic terminology.

I think that there is a cross-over between religion and politics today, that the traditional churches no longer have a faith in their religious beliefs and no longer want to uphold or defend the belief in God or certain traditional practices. There is a crisis of ideas within religion, and it is peculiar because at the same time religious ideas are being taken over by the political class within the West. Political leaders find it very difficult to rationally justify or portray broader frameworks for the policies that they are putting through and find it much easier to use the religious language of evil and good, of moral duty and moral justice as a way of trying to legitimise their policies, particularly in the international sphere. One thing that these very moral and preaching positions do have in common with the religious perspective, is that they are undemocratic and that the basis for these ideas is clearly something that is not debated or decided by the citizens of the country, just as divine rule was in the past when rulers said they had a direct ear to the all-powerful God. Nowadays, Western leaders take it upon themselves to define what is a morally right policy, what is a just war and what is not.

The whole framework of international law is now being pushed aside, the law that defends the rights of states to sovereignty and says that this sovereignty can only be undermined or that a state can only be attacked if it is a threat to other states, or if the UN security council for those reasons supports such a war. Now Bill Clinton or Tony Blair can say that they have a direct line about what a moral policy is and that they have a right to override international law and to override democracy and people's opinions within the Balkans and at the same time they avoid any democratic discussion within the West, within their own countries.

Current Concerns: Where do you think this introduction of what is a 'morally right policy' in international politics has led or is leading to?

International policy in the Balkans is not really determined by Realpolitik—it is not that America is following certain interests in certain bits of territory against Germany and Germany's interests.

Problems worsened when internationally politicised

Politics can swing wildly, from one month or one politician to the next, because it is a free-floating desire to do the right thing. Sometimes doing the right thing can be sending the bombers, another time doing the right thing can be organising a peace conference. Policy and practical interventions thus very soon lose any relationship to what makes sense on the ground, as can be see in relation to all sorts of policies in Eastern Europe. We have all these conferences of the OSCE on minority rights, for example. There is a whole network of legislation drawn up by Western institutions at Western conferences, where politicians and statesmen look very good with declarations of how they want to support the human rights of people in Eastern Europe. The policy at the end of the day is a huge mass of regulation and intervention that bears little relation to the extent of the actual problems in these countries. The fact that those problems become politicised internationally often makes the problems worse, because there is no need to compromise. If you are a small Hungarian minority in Romania, for example, you know that you can bring international pressure to bear when you want more schools in the Hungarian language or something like that. The whole moralisation of political questions, particularly in Eastern Europe, where the states are fairly weak and fragile, is a highly destabilising and destructive process.

Current Concerns: In what way is the intervention in the Balkans part of the new NATO doctrine?

A lot of people see the war over Kosovo as part of a broader new NATO strategy to impose American plans of domination, not only across the European continent but also as a way of managing the process of globalisation of open markets and a world order under the control of the single remaining super power. It is true that many American strategists see the world in that way, and it is true that America is the only remaining super power, and that Germany and Japan and France and Britain have no possibility of challenging America's dominance but rather work along the same framework as the American government. But having a plan is very different to imposing it, and it is very different to actually understanding how attempts to impose that plan work in practice. The main problem for the anti-war movement today is a certain laziness and a desire to find easy answers to what is going on in the world. It is very easy to say that all this is part of a grand plan devised by some American. I think if we are going to be serious about making an impact on people's understanding of the world, we have to begin to develop a framework of understanding the processes by which policies can be put into action regardless of their success. We have to understand why it is that the language of politics has changed fundamentally, why the role of international institutions has changed and also how they can change. We have to understand how this consensus has been won for a war, why there is a consensus around American ideas of human rights and democracy today, while there was not

is a consensus around American ideas of human rights and democracy today, while there was not that consensus yesterday. That is the important question.

In trying to understand these new processes that are taking place in domestic as well as international politics we should avoid easy solutions either from the past or from a descriptive analysis of desires or wishes. This also applies to the new NATO strategy. I think it is dangerous to see it as a conspiracy of certain individuals or the American government. The collapse of the old international order is not something that these individuals have somehow manipulated. It is a real factor that has shaped everything in terms of politics. The political institutions from after the Second World War were legitimised through those relationships at the time but those ideas can no longer be defended in the old way. They have to be defended in a new way; and the way that they operate, the way that international relations work, and the way the state relates domestically to its citizens has to be reordered.

Internationally, it is even clearer that that framework does not exist. I think it is very important that we have a very open-minded discussion and try to understand what is behind these developments, because otherwise we will always be surprised and it will be difficult to take a stance. Even in *Zeit-Fragen* I see articles about China and Tibet, but if that became an international issue, if NATO colonised Tibet, would you be for it or against it? We have to develop a new set of ideas to oppose this politics of intervention and of giving rights to people by denying their rights in reality.

Current Concerns: Where do you see the reasons for politicians wanting to place moral questions at the top of their agenda, the moralisation of politics?

Politics in terms of mass involvement along fundamental ideas of how to organise society does not exist any more today. Historically, democracy

and mass involvement in politics were a product of the struggle of the working class, when they forced the expansion of the suffrage, of the vote that enabled trade unions to have more powers and for Labour Parties, for Socialist Parties to be integrated within the parliamentary system. Mass involvement in politics was also closely related to a national conscription and even the development of national identities and nationalism. The threat to the status quo posed by collective organisation of the working class forced a division between the left and the right. The left interest was seen as aiming at organising society in a different way to the market by state intervention or different ways of regulating society. This was met by a right-wing response that defended the market and said that the market was going to achieve progress, or maybe the market plus some state regulation. This shaped the debate between left and right and different views of the progressive future. Throughout the Cold War we still had that framework of left and right, and it was institutionalised internationally



David Chandler

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with the struggle between the Soviet Union and America, which was reflected in domestic politics as all political parties took a stand within that Cold-War perspective and within the perspective of left and right. It was only after the Cold War that it became clear that there was very little content within those political positions. The positions of the left were artificially maintained during the Cold War, while they had really very little faith in an alternative to the market and the state providing solutions. And equally the right, which had been on the defensive, had very little faith in the market and progress through the market. So with the end of the Cold War there is a vacuum in terms of ideology where neither left nor right exist.

Current Concerns: What can be done about this situation? Is it possible to challenge this moral perspective?

I think there is no easy solution because the moralisation of politics is a reflection of the collapse of political collectivities, of political institutions that have existed and organised society internationally and domestically over the last two hundred years. However, to challenge the moral

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perspective, the moral view of politics in general today and also specifically the war in Kosovo is quite an easy matter because the real world is never the same as a morality play, there is never a black and a white, a good against evil.

Diplomatic or political solutions prevented

It must be clear to many people looking at the aftermath of the war against Serbia and the international administration of Kosovo that it was a very one-sided perspective that saw the Serbs as evil and genocidal and the Kosovo Albanians as good and to be protected and to be supported. In the real world, conflicts are not driven by evil. They are driven by real material needs and desires. Once we assume a moral perspective of good and evil, we tend to prevent a diplomatic or a political solution because we have to take sides. We say that neutrality like the tradition of the Swiss perspective on international relations is something that is no longer possible. Neutrality, diplomacy and a political approach is seen as a compromise, as appeasement and as support for evil. Such a very black-and-white approach that says that compromise and debate is a bad thing, that we should take sides even to the extent of going to war for one side against another side, can only lead to the extension of conflicts as opposed to trying to mitigate those problems.

For future stability in a region, people have to have some accountability of the policies that are carried out, but with a moral good-and-evil perspective there are very few limits to what policy is possible and very little consideration to the consequences of those policies. This is clear if we look at the military campaign around Kosovo, a campaign that killed more Albanian Kosovo

civilians than the previous two years of oppression under Serbian rule and that bombed Serbia back into a pre-industrialised age, a campaign that was highly destructive for other economies in the region that rely on the waterway of the Danube. Any campaign, any policy that was structured around a more rational understanding of the problems of the Balkans would have resulted in very different actions, in a very different international policy.

To challenge this moral perspective we have to go against the stream of current thinking because for many people and the media today it is much easier to see everything in a black-and-white way, it is much easier to say that these people are evil than it is to actually understand the processes that are behind conflicts and struggles and problems in the world. We have to have a very questioning and critical approach, particularly when it comes to international relations, when it comes to countries we may know very little about, that seem to be very far away. It is important that we do not just accept this fairly racial understanding of people in the Balkans or in Africa which sees conflicts as just driven by tribal ethnic interests. We should understand that what motivates people in different parts of the world is very similar to what motivates people in the West, as well.

Current Concerns: What possibilities are open to the individual in our societies in the face of this undermining of democracy, this irrationality now so widespread in politics? How can one strengthen people's awareness of democracy and the importance of taking part in the democratic process?

The active subjects exist, human beings are thinking, rational, acting individuals. The problem is that the self-consciousness or the understanding of humanity is much more limited today, that we are acting in a context without a political

framework, without an idea of how to take society forward. Political activity today often takes a very degraded or limited form. It is activity that is based on a very limited idea of what is possible, on a very atomised and fearful understanding of the world and a view that sees human beings as being of not very high value, whereas animals and the environment are seen as more important and as legitimate aims for campaigning activities. The question is how to change this understanding. I think that is only going to be done through trying to intervene in different discussions and debates with a perspective that starts from human needs and a confidence that we can understand society, that it is possible to act in different and more rational ways. We have to challenge the common consensus that humanity cannot do anything, that people in the Balkans are too stupid to make their own decisions about politics, or the idea that people in Britain are so stupid that they cannot bring up their own children without lots of advice and regulation by the Government.

I think that by making a stand in different areas and by putting forward rational alternatives it is possible to create more discussion and more debate because the problem at the moment is that there are very few people who even think that this is a problem. That is the first step. The first step is to say that today the limited and degraded view that we have of ourselves and other people as human beings is a major problem for how society is organised and for how policy is decided and acted upon. We can at least begin to create some discussion about the value of humanity and whether the environmentalists are right when they say that industrial development is bad or that there are no solutions to all these different questions. Are they right, or do we have the capacity to further develop science and to further develop new solutions? Are the humanitarian interventionists

right when they say that people in other parts of the world do not have the capacity to govern themselves? Are the feminists right when they say that the family is a bad institution because women and children will only be abused?

I think that people need to have the courage, even a few individuals, to stand up and question this consensus in these different areas, and then we will find that there are people that think like we do, that equally have had no avenue to be able to express that, no organisation that has really enabled them to work through those ideas. A lot of people have questions and concerns, but they feel that if they raise them publicly or talk to other people, that they will be seen as being strange or they do not really have the arguments that you need to be able to open up those discussions and to influence people and that is the role that Current Concerns or *Zeit-Fragen* can play. ●

Current Concerns: Dr Chandler, thank you very much for this interview.

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