

AD-LIBBING ON THE JUSTIFICATIONS FOR INTERVENTION

Achim D. Köddermann

“Who should, under which circumstances, intervene in Iraq?” Before settling the question I will give a brief account of my experience and reflections while introducing the moral issue of intervention to my Spring 1998 Ethics class. I hope to expand, briefly, on the essay by the editor of *Educational Change* which appeared in Spring 1997.¹ While presenting the formal distinction, between *de jure ad bellum* versus *de jure in bello*, I find the students indifferent to the issue. Drawing the attention of the class to the current political crisis in Iraq, which brings the U.S. to the verge of an armed conflict, does not help much either. In part, this is due to the inadequate background of the students.

So I attempt to interest my students with something analogous to my experience at the University of Denver during the Gulf War. Members of the faculty from all sections of the University were “pooled” to form a forum which served as an informative and discursive market place of ideas. This provided a ground that led to informed dissent or consent within the framework of the choices and interests of the participating students. However, in my class apathy carried the day.

No interest was sparked until a striking footnote was introduced in the form of the following consideration: “Assume that one-third of you will be drafted.” Not surprisingly, only a non-traditional student in this class, a “biker” and Vietnam veteran, could make the class understand what war potentially means, and then concern arose. This concern was different from the view on the Panama affairs taken in Anthony Roda’s “Preface” to the Spring 1997 volume of *Educational Change*. Questions of “right” or “wrong,” and for whom, seemed to play no role in the discussion; the good of the *polis*, be it in Aristotelian or Platonic terms, was of no concern. Not out of civic concern, but inspired by Realpolitik or non-enlightened “angst,” the

class, i.e. the "public" responded, collectively yet in pursuit of very private preoccupations. Nothing was felt of the civic engagement that I read in John Marciano's² account of past experiences in higher education. In reading Book I of Plato's *Republic* with current students, I find it difficult to start any discussion. Unanimously the class agrees: "obviously" might is right; who could think otherwise? An almost blind acceptance of Machiavelli's most immoral version of a *Prince* passes unchallenged. The conclusion, with side remarks addressing the moral conduct of the president, is that it is bad to get caught. What counts is the outcome, without differentiation of motives or justifications.

What, then, is the "mission" of an educator in the debate concerning a "just war" against Iraq? By clarifying positions, we can show incompatibilities and alternatives. We can distinguish seven stages of justification for intervention, each on morally "higher" ground, while integrating the lower options.³ What is at stake is the justification of intervention, which since the Peloponnesian War, can and has been justified simply because one can wage war.

The *might is right* position is still as anti-social as it was in ancient Greece. Since Aristotle we should know that we are political beings. Macchiavelli himself was able to see this and warned of excessive use of power. Why shouldn't our students see this?

- ▼ The next justification, *self-preservation*, has slightly more moral undertones, since it claims that states, like people, have a right to self-defense.
- ▼ With the third justification, *consent of the subject state to such an intervention*, which was given in the Bosnian conflict, we have reached a higher stage: implied is the concept of equality that allows free choice. How the consent was obtained, however, has little to do with independence. And didn't South Vietnam call for help from the U.S.?
- ▼ At the next level intervention is justified because, *amidst*

chaos and genocide, choice would be an illusion and intervention establishes the *preconditions for choice*.

- ▼ Wouldn't it be nice if "our" intervention were *approved by the world community*? Sure, "we" do not depend on it, but who doesn't like approval? Shuttle diplomacy is a quest for such approval. "Realpolitik" is slowly replaced by a moral claim to the next higher, global stage.
- ▼ Implicitly, all nations appear to agree on something which does not have its justification merely in its use (consequences): some actions are just not right, and should be globally banned, like the use of land mines (which the U.S. did not banish because of their usefulness!), or weapons of mass destruction. The "Preface" to the Spring 1997 volume of *Educational Change* spoke about the right of peoples to self determination, thus suggesting the same justification. However, this would require the principle of group rights; a provision not foreseen in the present framework with the emphasis on individual/sovereign distinction and the individual's human or legal rights bestowed by international law.
- ▼ The reasons why nobody seems too happy with the implied morally "highest ranking" seventh option, global world government, stem from the above dichotomy: even a benign dictatorship seems to fall under the circumstances described in step 1, might is right; why then all the moral pretense?

First, we would have to give up the widely used, never observed notion of absolute state sovereignty. This political fiction is especially absurd in the case of Panama since its sovereignty served U.S. interests. However, not only Panama, but states in general were never truly "independent" or autonomous. Today, with global consequences of "sovereign" actions ranging from environmental pollution to potential chemical warfare, the fiction underlying the otherwise attractive stage three on the scale of intervention, legitimized by a cry for help, becomes absurd. Who would have the right to cry for help, the dictator or those legitimately carrying out genocide or aggression

themselves? Victims seem to have no rights to intervention under the current regime of world politics.

Second, in response to Roda I hope not to have to return to the fiction of stage 7, a benign, utopian world dictatorship; nobody would aspire to such a *world government* or enforced *new world order*. Such a world order would rely on enforcement by a largely unfair, *self-interested* Security Council of the U.N. or the U.S. government, both equally driven by self interest. The judges commanding intervention should be impartial. Instead of the last stage as "global fiction" the new, emerging force within the U.N., NGO's (non-governmental organizations) should carry future initiatives. Such interventions should never be unilateral, but should be carried by an expressed, not implied, international moral consensus, based on a rational decision. The question who carries it out, and how, becomes then a question of political formality. However, before we can discuss the possibility of group rights and justification of intervention by shared civic values, we might have to practice them at home. Without a sense of civil responsibility, driven by empathy with the suffering of fellow human beings, I cannot expect my students to develop civil courage, and I cannot hope to solve the problems of the world with the help of U.S. morality. Am I asking for predetermined harmony, or for ethics in education?

State University of New York, Oneonta

ENDNOTES

1. Anthony Roda, "The Demos and the Dictator," *Educational Change* (Spring 1997), pp. i-xv.
2. John Marciano, "Civic Illiteracy and Education," *Educational Change* (Spring 1997), pp. 1- 10.
3. See Gene M. Lyons and Michael Mastanduno, "State Sovereignty and International Intervention," in *Beyond Westphalia?: State Sovereignty and International Intervention*, ed. by Gene M. Lyons and Michael Mastanduno (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 261.

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