

The Violent Folly of Humanitarian Interventionism: Western Delusions

By [Jean Bricmont](#)

Global Research, May 28, 2008

Counterpunch.org 28 May 2008

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

One can understand why some people might have sincerely thought that the Iraq war would be a “cakewalk”. First, consider WW2 ; the US mercilessly bombed Germany and Japan, including their civilian populations, then occupied those countries militarily, imposing almost total control. Yet, today, Germany and Japan are among the world’s most faithful allies of the US. How deep this alliance really is and how long it will last remains to be seen, but for the moment it is a reality.

Now, consider the Cold War. Remember that, once upon a time, governments from Poland to Bulgaria were hostile to the US. Now, they want nothing more than integration into Nato, advanced US anti-missile shields and participation in the occupation of Iraq. Or consider, even more surprisingly, Vietnam, where US investors are now welcomed with open arms, while, in a not so distant past, the US was ferociously bombing Vietnam, killing millions of people and poisoning the environment.

Even after the bombing of their little country in 1999, the Serbs behaved as desired, by voting out Milosevic and by accepting, at least for a while, pro-Western governments approving implicitly if not explicitly the bombing of their own country.

All this led to a worldview, dominant in the West, particularly among intellectuals, and even (if not especially) among liberal or leftist intellectuals, which may be called the Great Western Delusion. According to that view, the world, especially the Third World, is full of people oppressed by their own governments, run by political dictators and economic mismanagers, and those people only look forward to being helped or supported or liberated (if necessary by military means) by the good, democratic, liberal, open market West. This leads to a large part of the left supporting “democratic revolutions” in Ukraine, Belarus, Lebanon, Zimbabwe, among other places, as well as supporting human rights in China and Tibetan independence.

The reason it is a delusion is that it misses the fundamental change in the 20th century, at least the one which has had the greatest long lasting impact. This is not the history of fascism or of communism, which indeed belong to the past, but decolonization. Not only did this movement free hundreds of millions of people from a particularly brutal form of racist domination, but it inverted what had been the dominant trend in the history of the world since the end of the 16th century, namely the movement of European expansion. The 20th century marked the decline of Europe, and the replacement of Europe by the US as the center of the world system is likely to be short lived.

Once we understand that, it is rather easy to see the source of our contemporary delusions.

Germany and Japan were, before the war, imperialist powers and, partly for that reason, fiercely anticommunist. So, what the US offered to their elites, after the war, was basically to continue doing what they had been doing before, namely fighting communism, but by relatively peaceful means, and under American leadership. That was a “way out” for the defeated powers that was far more acceptable to them than the Versailles Treaty had been for the Central powers after WW1. It explains why the American policy in Germany and Japan after WW2 has been relatively successful and has led to a rather stable alliance, at least so far.

Similar considerations apply to the “victory” in the Cold War. The Achilles’ heel of the Soviets was always their control over Eastern Europe. Indeed, most of the populations there felt “European” and all their elites were looking with envy towards the “civilized” West and away from the “barbaric” East. So that their “control” was, for the Soviets, a constant source of troubles (starting in East Germany in 1953, then Hungary 1956, Prague 1968, Poland etc). And of course, it is in those countries that the US were most warmly welcome after 1989. But that warmth basically extends to Western Ukraine and stops there. The Russians, as well as the ex-soviet Asian republics don’t feel all that Western and know that they’ll never be considered as part of “the West”.

And this is true a fortiori for China, Latin America or the Muslim world. There is nothing “positive” that the US could offer, as a compensation for the war, to Iraq and Afghanistan today. While travelling in Syria in 2002, a small businessman (pro-Western in some sense) told me that “80% of the people in the region would want Saddam to go, but if it is the US that eliminates him, they’ll have 100% of the people against them ; indeed, we have had the Turks, then the British and the French, now the Israelis ; we don’t want colonialism any more”. He was perfectly right and this obvious truth was rarely understood in the West at that time, even among antiwar people (who often favored Western intervention, but of a milder, non military, form than Bush).

One of the main weaknesses of the contemporary Western left is precisely that it does not sufficiently take into account, in its worldview, the demise of colonialism when it vigorously embarks on pro-democracy or pro-human rights or pro-minorities campaigns in the Third World. The most recent example of such a campaign is the agitation around the Olympic games in China, particularly virulent in Paris, which is nowadays the capital city of such “humanitarian” imperialism (which has replaced there both marxism and fake 68 revolutionarism). The issue is not whether the “Free Tibet” movement is legitimate or not, or even whether the Dalai Lama is a former slave owner and a stooge of the CIA, but is far more basic: what are “we” (the Western left) hoping to achieve there ? China is not Serbia and is not going to be bombed into submission. We are more economically dependent on them than they are on us, so that economic sanctions (another favorite tool of the humanitarian left) won’t work either.

China remembers its subjugation to foreign powers and its dismemberment just as much as we remember WW2 and the holocaust. China also says “never again”. It obviously sees (rightly or wrongly) our current agitation about Tibet as a continuation of our past policies. And that is true of all the Chinese, irrespective of their political beliefs. The best thing we could do for the Tibetans would be to reassure China that we don’t have imperialist ambitions in that part of the world. But all the agitation about Tibet, as well as the installation of US military bases in Central Asia, go exactly in the opposite direction.

Of course, each time we intervene we will find people, dissidents or minorities, who are apparently “on our side”. But most often, as, for example, the Kosovo Albanian nationalists as well as the current rulers in Iraq, that is just because they are happy to use US power to achieve their goals. But those goals, creating an ethnically pure state in Kosovo or installing an Islamic state in Iraq, do not necessarily coincide with those of US rulers (who also suffer from Western delusions) and even less with the broader goals of the Western left.

The “support to minorities”, constantly used by imperialists to weaken rival states, is one of their most irresponsible policies. Indeed, what happens to those minorities when the empire withdraws and leaves them to live with their neighbours that considers them as traitors? What happened to the Hmongs in Laos, after the American withdrawal ? Or to the pro-German groups in Eastern Europe after the defeat of Germany ?

What the Western left should do is to encourage a realistic view of the world situation and a foreign policy based on such realism. Now, “realism” usually sounds like a dirty word to leftist ears. But it all depends what a realistic analysis leads to: if one thinks that one is all powerful and if that is indeed the case (as it was with West vs the Rest of the world during past centuries), a realistic policy may be one of brutal plunder. But if one is not as strong as one thinks, then, more realism should lead to a more prudent policy. If Hitler had been a “realist” he would not have launched WW2 and he would certainly not have invaded the Soviet Union. If the US had been more realistic it would not have escalated the Vietnam war in the early 60’s, nor would it have invaded Iraq in 2003. Besides, realism would certainly lead the US to drop its constant support for Israel that brings no oil, costs a lot of money and creates an enormous amount of animosity towards the US.

The irony is that the most progressive position (at least objectively) in those matters is often the one of the capitalists who, most of the time, favor open trade rather than boycotts or sanctions (or wars) on humanitarian grounds. Of course, one could favor limitations of the capitalists’ power, uncluding trade, on social or economical grounds, but, as far as international relations are concerned, the left should support a similar position, which is also the one of the non-aligned movement, namely mutual cooperation and the rejection of unilateral (non UN based) sanctions.

The problem of the US and Western elites is not only that they are willing to pursue violent policies in favour of their interests, but that they also pursue violent policies against their interests, because of their unbounded arrogance. We no longer control the world and great miseries follow from the non acceptance of this fact. Far from encouraging our “humanitarian” interventions, the left should foster a more realistic appraisal of the relationship of forces in the world and a policy based on dialogue, respect for national sovereignty and non intervention.

Jean Bricmont teaches physics in Belgium and is a member of the Brussels Tribunal. His new book, *Humanitarian Imperialism*, is published by Monthly Review Press. He can be reached at jean.bricmont@uclouvain.be.

The original source of this article is Counterpunch.org
Copyright © [Jean Bricmont, Counterpunch.org](http://Counterpunch.org), 2008

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Jean Bricmont](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca

www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca