Heroic Narratives Surrounding Humanitarian Intervention

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'Heroic Narratives Surrounding Humanitarian Intervention Obscure the Brutality of the Resort to Force'

"The fascination with intervention stories is produced through the process of identification with, or as, the heroes of intervention. Intervention stories are premised on the notion of an international community facing new dangers, acting to save the oppressed and to protect values such as democracy and human rights" (Orford, 1999: 709).

This essay shall discuss how the heroic narratives surrounding humanitarian intervention actively and intentionally obscure the brutality of the resort to force. The Just War tradition was originally developed to limit the devastation of conflict between two opposing forces by 'enabling moral judgment in wartime' (Orend, 2006:10), and was rarely applied to interventions carried out on 'humanitarian' grounds. However, since John Stuart Mill and Hugo Grotius questioned 'the unchallenged norm of non-intervention among post-Westphalian states' (Wheeler, 2000: 45), interventions, supposedly in response to mass or gross human rights violations by sovereign states against their own citizens, have become a frequent occurrence, especially since the end of the Cold War. It should be noted that the focus shall be exclusively on 'humanitarian military intervention', which will be defined as:

'the threat or use of force across state borders by a state (or groups of states) aimed at preventing or ending widespread and grave violations of the fundamental human rights of individuals other than its own citizens, without the permission of the state within whose territory force is applied' (Holzgrefe, 2003:18).

This essay suggests that humanitarian intervention is located firmly within a familiar heroic narrative, in which the international community is the bearer of progressive human rights and democratic values to local people in need of those rights and values in the post-Cold War era. The stories that explain and justify the new interventionism have increasingly:

'become part of everyday language through media reports and political sound bites. As a result, these strategic accounts of a world of sovereign states authorizing the use of high-tech violence become more and more part of the stories that we are all inside, that we live daily' (Cover, 1983:5).

The fact that these heroic narratives have become 'stories that we are all inside, that we live daily' actually serve to further obscure, or even more dangerously normalize, the brutal resort to force. Furthermore, it shall discuss how heroic narratives oversimplify very complex situations and thus obscure the resort to force and also how the language used in these narratives intentionally sanitizes the realities of the brutalities of war in humanitarian intervention.

Heroic narratives in relation to humanitarian intervention invite the reader to identify with a central figure, or hero, with whom the qualities of agency are associated. As Orford (1999) suggests, the characters who are given agency and with whom identification is invited:

'include the UN, the Security Council, the 'international community, NATO and the US'. Whilst these 'characters' remain largely interchangeable they are portrayed as 'the heroic agents of progress, democratic values and peace

and security, who shape target states through their interventions' (Orford, 1999:692).

Thus images of threats of violence and instability 'serve to announce the attractiveness of such heroes as guarantors of stability, bearers of democracy and protectors of human rights and of the oppressed' (Orford: 1999:694). These heroic narratives have become commonplace in the media and thus intrinsically embedded in the minds of a large (primarily Western) audience. It is through the role of protector, or savior, that many would naturally choose to identify with as ''stories about Security Council or NATO actions involve detailed descriptions of powerless, victimized states and peoples in order to facilitate the reader's identification with the heroes of the intervention' (Orford, 1999:699). This essay shall discuss how these heroic narratives serve to intentionally obscure the brutality of the resort to force by oversimplifying very complicated situations, and turning them into stories, within which there are clear heroes and villains.

Whilst, in the interest of brevity, this essay shall not focus on the colonial/feminist critiques, it is inherent to illustrate their presence in the narratives in question. Whilst the heroes are not human, 'they are nevertheless imagined as having the characteristics attributed to white men' (Orford, 1999:692). The international community very much plays the role of a masculine, active hero while states targeted for intervention appear to occupy the position of the secondary, passive victim. Through the language used in the heroic narratives, it is unquestionable that there is a strong Western superiority embedded within them; even the notion of 'responsibility to protect' implies that those who need protecting are powerless and therefore often labeled as victims. These heroic narratives may also portray the governments of 'such states as corrupt, nepotistic, overreaching, and authoritarian, and the people of those states are portrayed as being engaged in savage ethnic or religious conflict' (Orford, 1999:699). As these heroic narratives encourage identification with the 'active hero', it often appears that the origins of crises, from which the people of that particular country need to be saved, lie with 'defective governance or an inability of peoples to govern themselves' (Orford, 1999:699). It is all too commonplace in these narratives that 'the people of states in Africa, Asia, South America and Eastern Europe are portrayed as unable to govern themselves' (Orford, 1999:696). Whilst the notion of a lack of responsibility in the creation of crises shall be discussed in depth further on, there is a strong colonial overtone in the notion that the 'natives' are incapable of maintaining law and order and thus require humanitarian military intervention to save them from themselves. Indeed 'any attempt to act out or imagine ways of being in the world that differ from those desired by the US or the international community is presented as a threat to the control, virility and freedom of action of the hero' (Orford, 1999:703). Furthermore as Orford (1999) discussed, security texts (or heroic narratives) produce images of people who live in states targeted for intervention as 'starving, powerless, suffering, abused or helpless victims, often women and children, in need of rescue or salvation' (Orford, 1999:697).

Thus, by encouraging readers to identify with the 'white, male hero', this does not allow for consideration of the 'effects of the hero's actions on the human targets of intervention, or to treat the targets of intervention as having legitimate agency' (Orford, 1999:702). This unquestionably obscures the brutality of the resort to force as it masks humanitarian military intervention (which is sometimes needed) as a duty to save those who cannot save themselves. As mentioned, there are often cases where humanitarian military intervention has been required to indeed uphold the human rights of those suffering; but the colonial and gendered overtones of the heroic narratives do not encourage the readers/audiences to develop an understanding of the plight of the victim as this would reveal too much about the realities of resorting to force. 'The image of the 'starving African' portrayed in so many media stories symbolizes the way in which developmentalism produces the Third World as a problem in need of a ready solution: international intervention' (Escobar, 1995:25). As international intervention is presented as a solution, it does not account for the brutalities, which may, and often do, occur as a result of the resort to force.

Having discussed the way in which colonial views and masculinities have been entrenched in heroic narratives, it is important to understand that heroic narratives can also serve to obscure the origins of crises in which interventions are required. As discussed by Orford (1999), the resort to force as a response to humanitarian crises continues to mean that insufficient attention is paid to the extent to which the international community and their policies themselves contribute to creating the condition that lead to such crises. According to Woodward (1995), the representation of the intervention in Kosovo as the actions of an international community interested in protecting human rights and humanitarian values served to 'obscure the extent to which the international community itself contributed to the humanitarian crisis that emerged' (Woodward, 1995:41). This relates to the colonial overtones

discussed above implying that the countries requiring intervention are incapable or unwilling to govern themselves effectively and it is the role of the international community to come to their rescue. The assumption that international actors played no role in causing the crisis is central to establishing the fault of the target state. 'There is thus no suggestion in representation of heroic invention by the international community that international actors may have had any role to play in contributing to the crisis' (Orford 1999:699). Whilst it may appear that lack of responsibility taken by the 'hero' does not directly obscure the resort to force, the international community (easily interchangeable with NATO or the US) have assumed the role of 'good cops' and as Orford (1999) suggests they envisage their duty as bringing calm professionalism, order, peace, and security to 'emotional, fearful and hysterical peoples'. Thus it can be concluded that powerful states often fail to acknowledge their own role in the creation and perpetuation of human suffering around the goal, which is severely underrepresented or indeed ignored in the heroic narratives in question.

One of the most obvious ways in which heroic narratives surrounding humanitarian interventions actively obscure the resort to force is through the language they use. NATO's intervention in Kosovo shall be used as a case study throughout this section and whilst there were numerous questions surrounding the legality and legitimacy of the intervention, those have intentionally not been addressed. It has already been alluded to that the international community often have their own national interests to consider when intervening militarily. 'Depending on the circumstances {we have} the obligation to rescue victims of tyranny or anarchy, if we can do so at a reasonable cost to ourselves' (Teson, 2003:94). It is that crucial qualifying factor 'at reasonable cost to ourselves' which is often ignored or misrepresented in the heroic narratives in question. Take for example a section of a speech, which former British Prime Minister Tony Blair made prior to the humanitarian intervention in Kosovo in 1999:

'This war will not be fought for Albanians against Serbs. It will not be fought for territory. Still less for NATO aggrandizement. It will be fought for a fundamental principle necessary for humanity's progress: that every human being, regardless of race, religion or birth, has the inalienable rights to live free from persecution. We must act: to save thousands of innocent men, women and children from humanitarian catastrophe, from death, barbarism and ethnic cleansing by a brutal dictatorship; to save the stability of the Balkan region" (Blair, 22 January 1999).

This speech is a classic example of a heroic narrative, which does indeed obscure the brutality of the resort to force. Tony Blair discusses how thousands of innocent men, women, and children need to be saved. However, there is no mention of the aerial bombardment campaigns, which NATO embarked upon in Kosovo. Armed intervention and aerial bombardment in particular can often impede humanitarian relief and 'is indiscriminate in its targets, generally proving counterproductive to the tasks of democratization and peace-building' (Orford, 1999: 681). It is also vital to note that 'at the outset of the twentieth century, the number of civilians killed in war was low relative to the numbers of soldiers killed: one civilian per every eight soldiers. By the end of the century, the ratio had been reversed: now eight civilians get killed for every soldier that falls in battle' (Kaldor, 2001:8).

According to former United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan (Williams, 2000), what really matters in interventions is the outcome for humanity, not simply the net outcome for one's own countrymen. He discusses that if every life is equal to every other life, then a leader should not be more willing to fight wars abroad simply because his own nation's civilian population will be at little risk during the conflict. Crucially, the members of one's own community should not be prioritized over the members of other communities. From the heroic narrative above, presented by Tony Blair, the impression given is that humanitarian military intervention will be fought for 'a fundamental principle necessary for humanity's progress'. Sadly, however, what happened in actuality appears to be neither morally sound, nor humanitarian. As outlined by Primoratz (2007) in the case of military intervention in Kosovo, Western powers tried to achieve their objectives by means of air power alone, and had their aircraft fly at extremely high altitudes, where they were not in danger of anti-aircraft fire. This tactic had the predictable result of inflicting much 'collateral damage' on civilian population. This development led some commentators to wonder whether 'the principle of civilian immunity had been replaced by that of Western combatant immunity' (Primoratz, 2007:4)

This leads into a discussion on some of the phrases used often in war, and in this case humanitarian military intervention, which intentionally and actively obscure the brutality of the resort to force. 'The phrase 'collateral damage' is one of those euphemistic phrases that help to sanitize the horrible reality of war. It has taken its place

along with 'surgical strike', 'revisiting the area' (i.e. renewed bombing), and 'neutralizing assets' as part of the linguistic camouflage that contemporary war-fighters use to disguise the human and moral costs of what they do' (Coady, 2007:136). The way in which the phrase 'collateral damage' has become common in its usage and devoid of true meaning is one of the clearest ways in which 'humanitarian' interventions unequivocally obscure what the resort to force often means; killing innocent civilians.

With reference to the humanitarian military intervention by NATO in Kosovo and Serbia in 1999, codenamed Operation Allied Forces, 'NATO aircrafts conducted over 38,000 combat sorties, including 10,484 strike sorties' (Amnesty International, 31) whilst 800,000 refugees fled Kosovo (Chesterman, 2001: 224) and into neighbouring states, creating a humanitarian crisis of displaced peoples. The aerial bombardment gave rise to a number of cases wherein the collateral damage seemed to be disproportionate. 'The combination of zero casualty rates among NATO forces, an unprecedented amount of precision guided weaponry, some high profile targeting mistakes, and at least 500 civilian casualties in a war promoted as 'humanitarian' resulted in charges of war crimes against NATO' (Carmola, 2005:64). Although NATO was cleared of the charges of war crimes, Amnesty International maintains that they believe 'whatever their intention, NATO forces did commit series violations of the laws of war leading, in a number of cases, to the unlawful killing of civilians' (Amnesty International, 32). These claims are far removed from the heroic narratives the international community would like its audience to believe. In one of the most notorious examples, as described by Carmola (2007), civilian passengers died when their train crossed a bridge that was bombed by a precision-guided missile, dropped from a NATO jet. The bridge was considered to be a military target whose destruction was seen as necessary to halt transportation of military equipment from Serbia to Kosovo, and once the bomb was programmed, it was not deflected, even though the pilot supposedly caught sight of the train approaching the bridge, with a little time to spare.

It is unquestionable that 'one cannot easily assess the value of innocent human lives as opposed to capturing a particular military objective' (Kretzmer, 2007:100); however that is not the issue in question. The advancement of technology and the increase in the use of precision-guidance technologies means that, 'Western countries now have options to achieve military objectives at far less risk and cost to themselves. This has been a major factor in encouraging them to resort to armed humanitarian intervention more often, for less reason' (White, 2007:185). Whilst this is clearly the opinion of one individual, it does prove that behind the heroic narratives and stories of upholding human rights for those who are unable to help themselves, there is a much darker side. Although 'heroes' who are rescuing innocent people from unimaginable conditions are in fact causing 'collateral damage', this fact is often omitted on the news, a clear demonstration of heroic narratives intentionally and actively obscuring the brutality of the resort to force.

In conclusion, from the evidence presented, it appears that heroic narratives, through their use of language in particular, intentionally obscure the resort to force that is used during humanitarian military interventions. In the last decade, the number of occasions when states have actually used force to intervene on humanitarian grounds has been 'far greater than previously imagined possible (Ramsbotham & Woodhouse, 1996:21) and it has become evident that 'using force to save lives usually involves taking lives, including innocent ones' (Valentino, 2011:64). However, it is the power and normalization of the heroic narratives surrounding humanitarian intervention, which have obscured the harsh realities of war. As discussed, there is a tendency to oversimplify complex situations by identifying with the active 'heroes' who often absolve themselves of responsibility, which are just some of the reasons why there is 'still a great deal of uneasiness surrounding the notion of military humanitarianism' (Wendt, 1999:11).

Regarding Kosovo, although there was undoubtedly a humanitarian crisis, the methods chosen by NATO to solve this were flawed due to the lack of priority for humanitarianism over the safety of their own troops and arguably did not meet the criteria of proportionality by doing more harm than good. NATO's decision to use remote bombing rather than land invasions endangered civilian populations, contributed to a mass exodus of refugees and could be called 'humanitarian bombing' (Thakur, 2011) which is an example of the way in which language is repeatedly used to obscure the realities of force. Therefore, NATO's intervention in Kosovo in 1999 was not as humanitarian as the heroic narratives preempted them to be. When Tony Blair declared that 'we must act: to save thousands of innocent men, women and children', there was no acknowledgement that these innocent men, women, and children could be killed from aerial bombardment, by the very heroes who were coming to their rescue.

In short, this essay has demonstrated the way in which heroic narratives 'enable the 'conversion of ordinary lives into a set of problems to be solved' and the fact that they have become normalized 'stories that we are all inside, that we live daily' actively and intentionally obscures the brutalities of the resort to force.

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