Humanitarian intervention and hegemonic power

A Gramscian perspective

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Politicians and the public alike have struggled with the question of whether and if so, under what circumstances, it is legitimate to use armed force to stand up to human rights abuses in a foreign country. The concept of humanitarian intervention is based on an understanding of human rights as universal values which apply to all humans regardless of what political entity they belong to. Proponents of humanitarian intervention suggest that a state forfeits its right to sovereignty if it fails to protect its own citizens from human rights abuses. This argument is based on a set of beliefs which appear to have originated in the Western world. To what extent could we consider the notion of universal human rights and humanitarian intervention expressions of American and European cultural and ideological dominance?

In order to answer this question, we turn to Antonio Gramsci and his understanding of hegemony in relation to coercive power and consensus in the cultural and ideological realm. We will then proceed to test these ideas by applying them to NATO’s humanitarian intervention in Kosovo in the spring of 1999.

Gramsci, neo-Gramscianism and humanitarian intervention

Antonio Gramsci was an early twentieth-century Italian Marxist thinker. In order to understand why the working classes failed to rise up against the bourgeoisie, Gramsci developed the concept of hegemony. He made an important distinction between ruling by coercion and ruling by consensus. Coercion is the tool of the state or political society, consensus that of civil society. He believed the bourgeoisie was able to dominate the working classes by establishing a hegemonic culture which dictated the norms and values in society. By propagating this culture as the common good, the bourgeoisie was able to secure the consent of the working classes to the social order that it had created. This is what Gramsci called the “common sense of an epoch”, a tacit acceptance of the existing social order. Hegemony, then, has a normative quality, in that it requires the promotion and widespread acceptance of certain norms and values. Hegemony is established first and foremost in the cultural and ideological realm and only later enforced by coercive power (such as police action).

In more recent years, scholars have tried to apply Gramsci’s ideas to international relations and international political economy. In 1981, Robert W. Cox published an article entitled “Social forces, states and world orders: beyond international relations theory,” in which he argued that Gramsci’s ideas can be used to explain the relative stability of certain world orders, such as the Pax Britannica of the mid-nineteenth century and the Pax Americana of the mid-twentieth century. Hegemony, he wrote, consists of “a fit between power, ideas and institutions.” British hegemony was founded firstly on naval superiority and secondly on broad acceptance of norms of free trade. American hegemony after the Second World
War rested on a set of alliances and an international economic order, the Bretton-Woods system, strengthened by institutions like NATO, the UN, the IMF and the World Bank. In a later article, Cox wrote that “historically, to become hegemonic, a state would have to found and protect a world order which was universal in conception (...) a globally conceived civil society.”

A number of other scholars went on to apply Gramsci’s ideas to the modern world order. The central theme in this body of work is the importance of the cultural and ideological leadership of the hegemonic power (the US and its allies) and the relationship between political society and civil society. A number of neo-Gramscian scholars have drawn attention to the possibility of a global civil society that would entail increasing consensus on morals, values and rights. These values might include democracy, free trade, and human rights. This idea became especially pertinent with the end of the Cold War, which many observers hailed as the triumph of liberal values, and the ensuing period of globalization. If we accept this premise, the concept of humanitarian intervention becomes an assertion of a certain world order, one that is based on values articulated and spread by the Western cultural and intellectual elites. Where consensus on these values fails, armed force may be used to bring the offender back into the fold.

“A world order which was universal in conception?”

With this in mind, I propose to consider how humanitarian concerns assumed an expanding role in US foreign policy during the 1990s and specifically NATO’s intervention in Kosovo in the spring of 1999. The first question we might ask is to what extent the international order in this period could be considered “a world order which was universal in conception.” On November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall collapsed. One month later, US President George H.W. Bush and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev met in Malta and announced the demise of the Cold War order. As far as many Western observers were concerned, these events heralded a new period in history which would be characterized by the universal acceptance of Western values.

Neither Bush nor his successor Bill Clinton showed any sign of retreating into isolationism after the demise of the Soviet Union. George H.W. Bush and his Secretary of State James Baker stated that it was now time to build a “democratic peace” based on political and economic reform in Russia and the other newly independent states. The Clinton administration coined the phrase “democratic enlargement” to summarize its foreign policy goals: to promote democracy and free trade and contain regimes that represented a threat to these values. This was not just empty rhetoric. In 1991, the US led the largest military alliance since the Second World War against Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. Admittedly, this coalition did not include the Soviet Union, but Moscow did support all UN resolutions condemning its former ally, a significant departure from its Cold War policies towards the “Third World”. In his first term, Clinton provided billions of dollars in aid to the new democracies in Eastern Europe and Boris Yeltsin’s Russia to stimulate economic reform. Russian properties were rapidly privatized, and trade between Russia and the US grew rapidly. By most appearances, a new world order, led by the US and based on the principles of liberalism and multilateralism was being established.
One distinct characteristic of the new world order was the rise of humanitarianism. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted in 1948. As the title suggests, the claim to universality was present from the beginning, but it began to be asserted more aggressively after the end of the Cold War. During the 1990s, the UN increasingly labeled humanitarian emergencies around the world as threats to international peace and security and increasingly began to accept that in some cases the international norm of state sovereignty might be subordinate to the norm of human rights, thereby paving the way for military intervention. From a Gramscian perspective, this represents growing consensus on a set of values with a distinctly Western origin. This consensus was not accidental but was pioneered by international institutions and NGOs, increasingly embedded in international agreements like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and backed up by Western military power. It was far, however, from a complete hegemony as it was continually being constructed and negotiated.

The case of Kosovo

In 1998 and 1999, violence flared up between Slobodan Milosevic’s Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the separatist Kosovo Liberation Army. The Yugoslav army launched a campaign of terror that resulted in the deaths of thousands of civilians and the displacement of several hundred thousand refugees. After several attempts at negotiating a peace agreement, in March 1999 NATO commenced air strikes on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. President Clinton proudly called the intervention in Kosovo “the first ever humanitarian war.” So in what ways did this humanitarian war reflect the hegemonic ambitions of the United States and its allies? For the sake of brevity, only two main issues will be addressed here: the role of international institutions and international civil society.

As we have seen, the most important instruments of hegemony are international institutions and international civil society. Both of these played a major role in the decision to intervene in Kosovo and in the way the intervention was carried out. International institutions include organizations like the UN and its various organs, the EU and NATO as well as international agreements like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and, on the economic side, the IMF, the World Bank and development aid organizations like USAID. To begin with the United Nations, the Security Council never authorized the use of armed force against Milosevic. It did, however, unanimously pass Resolutions 1160 and 1199 condemning the violence in Kosovo and calling upon Milosevic to cease hostilities while identifying the conflict as a threat to international peace and stability. NATO argued that these resolutions gave it a firm mandate to intervene in Kosovo. After the bombing began, Russia, Belarus and India proposed a resolution to the Security Council condemning NATO’s actions and demanding an immediate end to the campaign. This resolution was defeated by 12 votes to 3. In other words, the majority of nations quietly acquiesced with NATO’s actions. The unanimous adoption of Resolutions 1160 and 1199 reflects an international consensus that Milosevic had crossed the line in Kosovo, and the failure of Russia and other countries to effectively oppose NATO’s actions demonstrates the weakness of potential counter-hegemonic forces.

International institutions did not address only the political aspects of the conflict; they were also concerned with the economic implications. In April 1999, the IMF published a paper entitled “The economic consequences of the Kosovo crisis,” which made a preliminary
assessment of the effects of the crisis on neighboring countries. The report expressed concern over the possible impact of the crisis on the region, especially the destabilizing effects of refugees, damage to trade and investment and postponement of economic reforms. While the bombing was still underway, representatives of thirty-three counties and seven international agencies met to discuss both short-term and long-term measures to ensure the stability of the region. On June 10, 1999, the day the air campaign was suspended, the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe was created, an initiative of the EU. Partners included the EU, the UN, NATO, the IMF, and the World Bank as well as all the regional countries except Milosevic’s Yugoslavia. The Pact was designed to promote the stability of the region, stimulate economic reconstruction and facilitate eventual integration into the EU. Plans for such a Pact had existed for some time before the Kosovo crisis, but it does demonstrate the degree of involvement of the international community in dictating the economic future of the region. Indeed, it does not take a large stretch of the imagination to draw parallels to the reconstruction of Europe and the introduction of the Bretton Woods system after the Second World War. International involvement with the Balkans was not limited to defending human rights; it also included a prescriptive vision for the political and economic future of the region.

International civil society is represented by the media, NGOs and individual activists. Much has been written about the “CNN effect,” the influence of real-time media on political decisions. Instant television coverage of, for example, a humanitarian crisis abroad can put pressure on politicians to act faster or make decisions they otherwise might not have made. The wars in Yugoslavia received a disproportionate amount of coverage compared to other international crises during the 1990s. Records of press briefings show that White House reporters did not shy away from asking critical questions about the limited military means employed and the insufficiency of NATO’s tactics in achieving the stated goal of reversing the humanitarian crisis. However, no reporter questioned the validity of standing up for human rights although some did question the legitimacy of using armed force. On the whole, the media reaffirmed the humanitarian norms and values that NATO professed to defend in Kosovo.

Likewise, NGOs played a major role in drawing attention to human rights abuses in Kosovo and elsewhere and calling on their governments to engage with these crises. Their activism helped to inform the public and put pressure on politicians to act. The presence of NGOs on the ground in Kosovo meant that massacres like the ones at Gornje Obrinje and Racak were quickly investigated and reported, forcing the international community to pay attention to Kosovo. The majority of NGOs, including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, stopped short of condoning a military intervention. The important point, however, is that NGOs and human rights activists actively and tirelessly promoted human rights as a norm so that it became increasingly internalized in international society.

NATO’s actions were supported by a relatively strong, though incomplete, consensus among international organizations and civil society. International political and financial institutions were deeply involved both in the decision to intervene in Kosovo and in the subsequent effort to rebuild the region after a decade of war. Even if elements of civil society like the media and most NGOs did not necessarily support the NATO campaign itself, they did generally support the humanitarian objectives. In other words, there was consensus on the norms and values if not on the means employed. The same was true for the Security
Council, which explains why there was unanimous support for resolutions 1160 and 1199 condemning Milosevic’s actions but not for NATO’s actions to punish him. It was not the values but the means that were a matter of debate.

Conclusion

The liberal world order that was taking shape in the 1990s was not “universal in conception.” It was not complete, nor was it unchallenged. But the intervention in Kosovo shows that there was certainly a hegemonic element to the international order envisaged by the United States and its allies. The conflict in Kosovo represented a transgression against the values of the post-Cold War world order. NATO acted as a police force to punish this behavior and defend the stability and credibility of the new world order. Any intervention that claims to be based on humanitarian grounds carries a normative quality. It is an ideological intervention as much as it is a military intervention. Humanitarian intervention is made possible by increasing consensus on liberal values such as democracy and human rights. From a Gramscian perspective, however, this growing consensus can be seen as an expansion of American hegemonic power. Although this perspective may have its shortcomings, which, for the sake of brevity, are not discussed here, it does teach us the danger of underestimating the dimension of power that underlies seemingly uncontroversial values like human rights.

Rob van Leeuwen studied History and Southeast Asian Studies at Leiden University. This article is based on his MA thesis ‘Just War or just war? Constructivist and Gramscian insights into the conflict in Kosovo and NATO’s decision to intervene’.
