Human Rights as Swords of Empire?

Abstract

This essay asks how it is that liberals justify military humanism in the name of protecting freedom, human rights and democracy, even when it is pursued unilaterally by a self-appointed imperialist power. We will focus on the justifications put forward by Michael Ignatieff, the Director of the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at Harvard University, whose prominent writings in the New York Times Magazine in the run-up to the war and during it exemplify the ‘military humanism’ that Ulrich Beck diagnosed. In self-consciously embracing both the ‘military humanism’ currently espoused by many advocates of human rights and American imperialist politics, Ignatieff starkly reveals the dangers that reside in liberal nationalist conceptions of world politics and human rights when these are articulated by a self-appointed hegemonic power. While cosmopolitan justifications of military intervention may have played a prominent role elsewhere (pre-eminently in Europe during the war on Kosovo, and perhaps more generally in human rights organizations), in the USA liberals have been wont to appeal to a cosmopolitan military humanism in support of an imperialist republican nationalism. This point is important, because the implications of the liberal hawks’ justification for the American-led war on Iraq, like their neo-conservative counterparts, are deeply inconsistent with cosmopolitan principles in the crucial dimensions of morality, legality and politics; because they threaten to erode multilateral institutions like the UN, and to legitimize ‘regime change’ and ‘pre-emptive war’ by an imperial power. We will argue that even if the US could accurately be viewed as a republican Empire morally motivated to spread democracy and human rights abroad it could not do so morally, without undermining the development of international law in a cosmopolitan direction, and without further entrenching imperialism, which stands as one of the greatest impediments to human rights and democracy today. Our analysis is premised on a ‘critical cosmopolitanism’ that we think is required to underpin any genuinely universal respect for, and protection of, human rights and popular sovereignty.
Sword of Empire by Christopher Nicole is an excellent example of a well written historical novel. The writing style allowed me to feel the sway of the time and place. This is a true page turner which will keep you glued to its pages. I love a book that transports you back to a historical place and time and captures your imagination.
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