Book review: 'A Foreign Policy For the Left'

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Michael Walzer, A Foreign Policy For the Left

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In Foreign Policy, ideas and ideologies matter. In his essay, the American philosopher, Michael Walzer, proposes a seminal reflexion for a renewed understanding of *what should be* a foreign policy for the 'left'.

Walzer's definition of the left is broad and ambiguous. He encompasses '*anyone self-described as a leftist one'* (p. 10), and so doing, includes the old and the new left, anarchists, communists, socialists, social-democrats and left-leaning liberals.

The 'left' refers to a specific political culture that takes its roots in the labour movement of the XIXth century's industrial revolution. Originally, parties and movements from the left differ over their ends, and especially the issue of the abolition of the State. They also differ on the means, which are, on the one hand, the use of revolutionary violence, or on the other hand the change through democratic process, institutions and reforms. The large majority of contemporaneous leftist parties share reformism as the main tool for change and accept the existence of the State. The heterogeneity of these ideologies makes the attempt to unify them under a common flag quite controversial.

Walzer's essay starts with a strong assertion: the left has always had difficulties dealing with foreign policy. The left mainly constructed its identity and policy agenda on domestic reforms, especially on social justice. Despite the reference to 'internationalism', the left mainly adopted what Walzer calls a 'default position' on foreign issues.

Because he considers that leftists are '*more at home in the homeland'* (p. 1), he proposes answering five critical foreign policy questions: the use of military intervention; the position in regard of 'American imperialism'; the question of global justice; the reflection on a world government; and the issue of Islamic revival.

On Military Intervention

Pacifist and anti-militarist views are dominant on the left. Military interventions are perceived as the expression of imperialism. In a continuity of his thought on just and unjust wars, Walzer considers that military intervention is legitimate, for moral reason, to prevent human massacres: '*non-intervention in the face of mass murder or ethnic cleansing is not the same as neutrality in time of war. The moral urgencies are different; we are usually unsure of the consequences of a war, but we*

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know very well the consequences of a massacre' (p. 62). Consequently, he supports the *Responsibility to Protect* doctrine. However, he condemns the use of military intervention to serve the ends of regime change, such as in Iraq in 2003. One might regret that he does not discuss the 2011 intervention in Libya, which was based on R2P principles but also paved the way for subsequent regime change.

Just war and military intervention should end when mass killing are stopped. However, he highlights three scenarios in which a foreign intervention should be pursued. First, when the extent of massacres leaves no basis for institutional and human reconstruction, like in Cambodia. Second, when the intensity of ethnic division makes the return of violence possible after the external intervention, like in Rwanda or in Kosovo. Third, when the State has totally disintegrated, like in Somalia.

Recently, the Syrian war and the opportunity of a military intervention has divided the left. He regrets the absence of unilateral intervention at the very beginning of the 2011 civilian war. What he calls the 'dangers of multilateralism' have caused the direct intervention of regional powers and have contributed to transform the conflict into a war by proxy.

On American imperialism

Walzer criticises the marxist and post-marxist approaches to *imperialism.* Anti-imperialism has been one of the main 'shortcuts' of the left (p. 31), which leads to a permanent opposition to American policy abroad. Rejecting the concept of *empire* developed by M. Hardt and T. Negri, he chooses to refer to the gramscian concept of *hegemony* to characterise the US influence in world politics. *Hegemony* is understood as '*a looser form of rule, less authoritarian than empire (...) and more dependent on the agreement of others*' (p. 81).

Walzer develops three main reasons for refusing the argument of American imperialism. First, the US government lacks the will to be an *empire*, due to budgetary constrain and the unwillingness of domestic public opinion. President Donald Trump's discourses and the renewal of the 'isolationist' discourses seem to confirm this argument. The second reason that goes against the idea of an American imperialism is that '*(the US) public commitment to democracy makes imperial rule very hard to justify or manage'*: the US government is bound by norms and institutions (p. 84). Third, the contemporary multipolar international system makes it quite impossible to impose imperialist policies without opposition from other States, and especially aspiring great powers.

Finally, he pinpoints the contradiction of a certain section of the left that has accepted the realist argument that spheres of influence are the natural product of military and economic power. He denounces the defenders of the Russian policy of extending its sphere in Georgia and Ukraine : '*It is especially strange that many leftists, after arguing against every US claim to a sphere of influence in the Americas, hurried to defend Russian President Putin's claim to a similar sphere in eastern Europe'* (p. 23).

Walzer does not evoke the particular case of the Chinese foreign policy of the 'new silk road', which might be viewed as a new attempt of *hegemonic* competition.

On Global Justice

For the philosopher, the left has always sought to build a theory of global justice. This project is not necessary, and the left should focus on the minimalist account of 'justice-right-now'.

The philosopher claims that global justice is based on two pillars: a humanitarian project and a political project. Regarding the humanitarian project, he considers that it is a universal moral duty to help, each according to their ability. Agents may be States and International Organisations, as well as NGOs and all individuals.

On the political project, he criticises the neoliberal paradigm of a global economy based on the '*laissez-faire trinity: the free movement of capital, commodities and labor'* (p. 107). In the absence of a world government, the crucial agent of 'self-help' is the state. He believes in a 'bottom-up' approach to justice in which '*each collective self must determine itself by itself'* (p. 112). At the domestic level, justice is achieved through '*local battles, necessarily fought by particular people in particular times and places'* (p. 114). This approach contradicts *universalism*, which states that principles may be applied to humankind independently of social contexts. His articulation between global justice and domestic justice lacks precision and may appeared contradictory in many ways. A policy may appear fair at a local level and unfair at the global one.

On World Government

Walzer emphasises the main priority for world governance: state-building that can allow the delivery of public goods. There is no need for a global government where the State is decent and competent. International institutions, such as the UN Security Council, the International Criminal Court and the IMF should provide regulations, act effectively in emergencies and fill the gaps opened up by State's failure and incapacity.

He rejects the leftists that oppose the nation-state and claims for 'no-border': '*The people who talk about transcending the state system are mostly those living in securely established states with recognized borders'* (p. 117).

Turning to the EU, he argues that the left should accommodate national feelings to fight back nationalist zealotry. *Internationalism*, which accepts the existence of nations, should be preferred to *cosmopolitanism* that aims to abolish boundaries and create a supranational government.

On Islam

The most original and controversial part of Walzer's essay deals with the left's attitude toward Islam. He argues that a section of the left is more afraid of being accused of Islamophobia than opposing Islamic zealots (p. 140). Some leftist movements have been in support of Islamism, justifying it as the expression of poverty, oppression, and an anti-imperialism struggle against the US, Israël and the Western model.

He recalls that some English leftist groups marched in London during the protest against the Gaza War in August 2015, in support of Hamas (p. 146). He also criticises

the Feminist philosopher, Judith Butler, who stated in 2006: '*understanding Hamas and Hezbollah as social movements that are progressive, that are on the left, that are part of the global left is extremely important'* (p. 148). According to him, a 'better left' should label the zealots as enemies and promote liberal Islamic philosophers and reformers' views. He condemns the 'civilizational clash' rhetoric and calls for an 'ideological clash' which does not target the faithful but the extremists.

Conclusion

Walzer takes clear positions on a large variety of issues that are in debate. He rejects some ideas that permeate the left: the importance of military humanitarian intervention against naive anti-militarist thoughts; the support of Western values and model against the caricatured criticism of American imperialism; and the crucial role of State in global governance against the 'no-border' promoters.

Walzer's contribution is a highly valuable one. He fills a gap in the ongoing reflection on the future of the left. Political scientists, philosophers and intellectuals have mainly debated the domestic reasons of the fall of leftist governments globally and the parallel surge of populism. Few have interrogated the foreign policy dimension as a crucial component for an ideological renewal.