

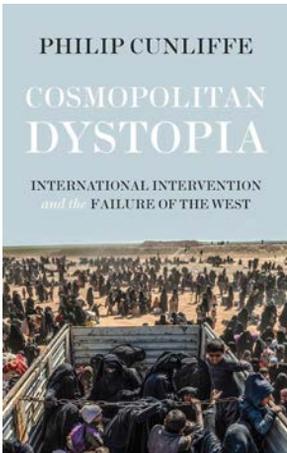
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 Book review

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**COSMOPOLITAN
 DYSTOPIA:
 INTERNATIONAL
 INTERVENTION AND THE
 FAILURE OF THE WEST****



Philip Cunliffe, *Cosmopolitan Dystopia: International Intervention and the Failure of the West*. Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2020, 228 p.

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International Relations (IR) at the end of the second decade of the XX century. Various aspects of international order creation or transformation, positions and policies of great powers, and the perspectives – or even mere existence – of the so called Liberal International Order remain, in an era marked by a perspective-shifting global pandemic, among the most vibrant IR topics. Philip Cunliffe, Senior Lecturer in International Conflict at the University of Kent, is among the authors whose works, such as *Politics Without Sovereignty: A Critique of Contemporary International Relations* (co-edited with Christopher Bickerton and Alexander Gourevitch, 2007) or *Legions of Peace: UN Peacekeepers from the Global South* (2013), have already attracted a significant amount of attention for their sharp and innovative assessment of issues of sovereignty, intervention, and the nature of international political order. In 2020, Cunliffe published yet another

monograph: *The New Twenty Years' Crisis: A Critique of International Relations, 1999-2019*, in which he confronts the classical text by Edward Hallett Carr with the challenges of contemporary global politics. Here we will briefly address some of the key contributions he has put forth in *Cosmopolitan Dystopia: International Intervention and the Failure of the West*, published by Manchester University Press.

The crux of Cunliffe's argument is centered on the underlying political forces shaping world ordering process brought about by globalization. When dealing with the issues of political order, Cunliffe is dominantly focused on war and the use of force; particularly their transformations – and rightly so. He states: “If wars had previously been defined in liberal terms of antitotalitarianism and anti-communism, they had also been justified in unabashedly national terms too – defending national rights and honour, self-defence and sometimes even plain unadorned national self-interest. In the post-Cold War era, the use of force was still defined in liberal terms but also terms that were at once more cosmopolitan (justified on behalf of others) and humanitar-

ian (protection and alleviating suffering rather than defending liberty)” (p. 5). Unsurprisingly, he identifies human rights as the key component of contemporary forceful political reordering, espoused by a “cosmopolitan vision of politics”: the “liberalism of fear”, founded on the post-war liberalism of Berlin, Shklar, or Aron. These thinkers were “wary of grandiose attempts to counter totalitarianism that might risk mimetically replicating its crushing uniformity”, which made their “political vision and hopes for liberalism [...] restricted, with the most that could be hoped for being the cautious, prudent relief of extreme human suffering in a world that was irredeemably conflicted, plural and fallen [...]” (p.8). This represented a seemingly small but crucial step from utopia to dystopia.

In the author's words, “After thirty years of perpetual warfare by Western states under the banner of human rights, human rights can no longer claim to be innocent either” (p. 9). His argument is obviously quite provocative: the position of human rights and policies based therein is almost villain-like in this narrative. These bold positions are convincingly supported throughout the book,

which consists of four central chapters, apart from the Introduction and the Conclusion. Of course, the discussion about human rights in this context cannot be divorced from the discussion about intervention. Cunliffe identifies four focal problems with regard to the existing definitional problems of humanitarian intervention. He designates them as “four problematic ‘c’s’”: *cases*, *casuistry*, *causes* and *concept-stretching*, which have hampered the intervention debate in more ways than one, contributing to “rampant definitional gerrymandering in which the concepts are brazenly fixed in advance in such a way as to ensure desired outcomes” (p. 12).

Chapter 1, entitled *Inverted revisionism and the subversion of the liberal international order*. In it, Cunliffe sets forth the argument that “swaying pillars and crumbling masonry of the liberal international order are not the result of a siege by illiberal barbarians, but rather the temple is crumbling because its foundations were mined and the explosives were laid by liberals themselves” (p. 20). He finds that the aggressive use of force, which has recently been posing a revisionist challenge and subverting international status quo,

although occasionally mimicked by authoritarian great powers such as Russia and China, is essentially a key feature of western democracies’ international behavior. From Panama in 1989, to Kosovo/Yugoslavia in 1999, to Iraq in 2003 to Libya in 2011, the post-Cold War era is marked by military interventions unilaterally or multilaterally pursued by countries of the West. While both Western democracies and their authoritarian challengers have been known to break or circumvent global norms in their intervening endeavors, key difference between such attempts is the fact that, due to their superior international position, Western countries have been able to “reshape international institutions and concerns to better accommodate their interventionist impulses” (p. 36). Touching upon the long thread of theoretical accounts of revisionism (from Carr to Hedley Bull to Barry Buzan), Cunliffe then presents his own notion of contemporary great power revisionism, called *inverted revisionism*. It differs from all typologies offered heretofore, as it pertains to “historically unprecedented moment of status quo great powers pathologically gnawing away at the very order that they created – a revision-

ism that is ‘internal’ to the status quo (hence ‘inverted’)” (p. 48). Internalizing the concept of inverted revisionism makes following his arguments put forth in the subsequent chapters much more straightforward.

In the following chapter, under the title *Through the looking glass: the new critics of intervention* Cunliffe recognizes the problem within the existing notions of intervention – that all the emergencies and exceptions have been treated as essentially the same, and he considers this unacceptable. All this begs “an alternative understanding of intervention – one that attempts to systematically examine it as a politics of exceptionalism. What does the international order look like in which recurrent humanitarian emergencies are entirely normalised?” (p. 22). It is acknowledged that, “for the doctrine to function, there need to be states that are exempt from it” (p. 125), and an innovative theory of exceptionalism is offered and outlined in chapter 3, *What should we do? The politics of humanitarian exceptionalism*. The research challenge here is not only to define the particular sort of humanitarian exceptionalism which stems from contemporary cosmopolitan liberalism; one also has to try and locate it

within a specific actor of global politics. In Cunliffe’s words, the exceptionalist sovereign is most clearly embodied in “the US imperial state, theoretically articulated by neoconservative political theorists, jealously and resentfully mimicked by the likes of Russia” (p. 144). As the *locus* of power which legitimizes all or most atrocity-preventing actions, while at the same time being (self) exempt, the US is in a paradoxical position of being both an enabler and spoiler of the order.

Chapter 4 bears the title *Failed states, failed empires and the new paternalism*, and deals with ways in which humanitarian exceptionalism has “neither superseded sovereignty nor the state, but rather reconstituted it, leading to a more hierarchical international order and inflecting a new kind of sovereignty, less defined and restrained by the demands of political representation and lacking any clear limits on its legal jurisdiction and power” (p. 23). In other words, perhaps the changing nature of sovereignty has led to the change in practice of intervention, but exceptionalist practices have, in turn, clearly changed the character of state sovereignty. This solicits treating responsibility to protect as a

full-fledged theory. Conducting a policy based on the responsibility to protect does not, however, provide any guarantees that the actor – even as powerful as the US – will be able to fully determine political outcomes, since, as the examples of both Iraq and Kosovo have shown, “state-centred imperialism is unviable” (p. 147). This propelled the great powers to come up with “an alternative to formal empire that is much more viable, cost-effective and politically legitimate: neo-trusteeship, whereby formal legal independence is seen as compatible with international tutelage, supervision and even military occupation – a more thorough-going subversion of self-determination than bullets and bombs could ever achieve” (p. 147). Responsibility to protect, as the underlying theory of cosmopolitan humanitarianism, is thus revealed as a doctrine only functional within a context even darker than Hobbes’s state of nature: “rooted in a grim disorder of mass murder and abuse, there is no political transformation onto a higher plane as with Hobbes’s social contract” (p. 172).

The concluding chapter of the study is adequately entitled: *Waiting for the Americans*. The belief in US omnipotence

is widespread and goes back at least to the onset of the Cold War. However, it peaked in the post-Cold War period and contributed to the proliferation of the liberalism of fear, which, according to the author made it abundantly clear that the very concept of human rights, and not its manipulation, is the problem. “The era of humanitarian intervention and the responsibility to protect”, claims Cunliffe, “helped to globalise the liberalism of fear, reorganising various civil wars, secessionist movements, revolutionary upsurges and insurgent movements around the prospect of support from a liberal international community ultimately centred on US power and exceptionalism” (p. 179). What is needed espouses Cunliffe’s firm revolutionary and subversive take on contemporary global politics: to keep on trying to fix global grievances with tools such as humanitarian intervention as we know it is to keep normalizing those very grievances in the long run; “what is needed is not a more finely poised balance between ethical aspirations and political realities, but a re-posing of fundamental and ultimately political questions regarding the nature of rights and the structure of political authority and

representation” (p. 184). To get a hint at what exactly such a revolutionary undertaking would entail, one would have to look into Cunliffe’s other works, or look forward to his future reflections on the key issues of contemporary international order.

Cunliffe’s book is probably one of the most important books on international political order published since the beginning of the 21st century. His discussions of crucial global issues, such as intervention, use of force, origin and nature of norms, diverging interests of great powers, and the position of lesser actors in the international arena, offer many valuable insights; the scope and intellectual consequences of the book, however, go much beyond all this, successfully providing historical and contemporary context and implying the conceptualization of the nature of international relations *as such*. At the same time, although it reads mostly as a theoretical treatise, its potential practical impact is tremendous. And here, in the author’s uninhibited subversiveness, lies the potential danger of the study’s socio-political impact: in the world in which academia is increasingly intertwined with political structures in numerous ways, a book

that challenges conventional wisdom and suboptimal behavior of political elites might not be the most convenient a read. All those among policy practitioners, students and scholars of IR, however, who want intellectual as well as socio-political status quo shattered – or at least severely challenged – should have no dilemma: *Cosmopolitan Dystopia* will give them exactly that.