



Nonintervention and Communal Integrity

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Communal Integrity

Michael Walzer holds what I shall call the communal integrity thesis: military intervention is wrong in all but a few unusual cases because it offends “the rights of contemporary men and women to live as members of a historic community and to express their inherited culture through political forms worked out among themselves. . . .”¹ Intervention is wrong even when a state’s political institutions or practices violate whatever moral standards are appropriate to them (or, in Walzer’s language, when a state is “actually illegitimate,” p. 214). For even an actually illegitimate state may be “presumptively legitimate”—that is, there may still exist “a certain ‘fit’ between the community and its government” such that the state may be regarded as “a people governed in accordance with its own traditions” (p. 212). As long as there is such a “fit,” foreigners must refrain from intervening: this is “simply the respect that foreigners owe to a historic community and its internal life” (p. 212).

Surely the obvious objection is that the *absence* of “fit” is far more pervasive than Walzer allows. Particularly in the third world, one finds today a relentless pattern of authoritarian rule, usually carried out by so-called modernizing elites drawing support from industrial rather than traditional sectors of society, and often sustained by infusions of foreign capital, technology, and military aid.² Walzer’s conception of

1. Michael Walzer, “The Moral Standing of States,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 9, no. 3 (Spring 1980): 211. Subsequent page references to this article are given parenthetically in the text.

2. This is well illustrated in the literature on the sources of bureaucratic au-

the roots of authoritarianism seems grievously unrealistic: "the history, culture, and religion of the community may be such that authoritarian regimes come, as it were, *naturally*, reflecting a widely shared world view of life" (p. 225; italics added). One wonders whether Filipino or Chilean dissidents would accept such a benign account of their present oppression.

Now Walzer permits no general exception to the nonintervention rule where "fit" is missing: unless a government grossly mistreats its people, foreigners are to presume that the government is legitimate and therefore, refrain from intervening. The reach of the nonintervention principle, as he interprets it, is therefore greater than what is justified by the communal integrity thesis. The only explanation that Walzer provides of this additional reach is that foreigners are in no position to judge accurately whether "fit" is present; they will lack the necessary historical and political understanding (p. 212). In some cases this may be right, but surely not in all. Where "fit" is missing and can accurately be judged to be missing, and even if we accept the communal integrity thesis, there is nothing in Walzer's view to justify the "presumption of legitimacy." To that extent his defense of the nonintervention rule collapses.

The more serious difficulties with Walzer's view, however, lie with the communal integrity thesis itself. We must keep in mind that this is a thesis about *why* intervention in most cases is morally impermissible. As I believe Walzer would agree, the interest of this thesis lies in its reference to communities; it is the normal functioning of relatively

thoritarianism in Latin America, where it appears quite clearly false that authoritarian regimes arose from indigenous political processes, reflecting widely-shared, traditional values, and without significant external influences. See Guillermo O'Donnell, *Modernization and Bureaucratic Authoritarianism* (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1973), and O'Donnell, "Corporatism and the Question of the State," in James M. Malloy, ed., *Authoritarianism and Corporatism in Latin America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977), pp. 47-89. O'Donnell's thesis has been criticized on several grounds, but none of the criticisms, if true, would undermine the observation offered above. See David Collier, ed., *The New Authoritarianism in Latin America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), especially the essays by Albert Hirschman and Robert Kaufman.

self-enclosed political processes, reflecting “the conflicts and harmonies, the historical choices and cultural affinities, the loyalties and resentments” (p. 212) of a “historic community,” that the nonintervention rule is supposed to protect and in terms of which it is justified.

I do not believe that the communal integrity thesis survives careful scrutiny. Concern for the history and culture of a society, appropriate as it is, does not support the nonintervention rule; and the most plausible arguments that Walzer himself elicits for this rule make no essential reference to the communal qualities of political life.

Walzer says that domestic political processes deserve the “respect” of foreigners because people have a right to a form of government that they can “call their own” (p. 226). As he observes, this is not necessarily a right to participate in political decision-making or to have one’s interests taken into account in the conduct of government. (There may be such rights, but they are different from the right to communal integrity.) Nor is it a right to political institutions that meet appropriate standards of political morality. What, then, is the force of saying of a government that it is one that people can “call their own?” On Walzer’s view, it appears to be necessary and sufficient for a government to be one that people can “call their own” that it (a) be operated by compatriots, (b) not owe its power to prior military intervention by a foreign power, and (c) not engage in practices that “shock the moral conscience of mankind.”³ People can call such a government “their own” in the sense that its leaders are compatriots and it gained power without outside help; but why should *this* win for the government a moral claim on the respect of foreigners? In his article, Walzer explains that such a government is, at least, the result of a domestic political process with a distinctive culture and history. We must grant that local culture and history provide a distinctive structure within which the play of political and social forces determines that this rather than that type of government will emerge. But why shouldn’t we say that the relative power of these forces, and for that matter the distinctive structure within which they operate, are arbitrary from a moral point of view? Walzer has not shown that the outcome of such a com-

3. Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), p. 107.

petitive process, simply because it is a *domestic* competitive process, deserves the “respect” of foreigners.

Of course this is not necessarily to say, as Walzer accuses his critics of supposing, that there are no *other* reasons to refrain from intervening. It is only to say that a government that people can “call their own” (but over whose decisions they have no influence) is not for *that* reason immune from justified intervention. Unwittingly, Walzer himself shows how difficult it is to sustain such an argument. His detailed discussion of why intervention is wrong suggests that the controlling considerations have little to do with communal integrity.

We must presume, Walzer writes, “that if a particular state were attacked, its citizens would think themselves bound to resist, and would in fact resist, because they value their own community in the same way that we value ours. . . . it is the expectation of resistance that establishes the ban on invasion” (p. 212). If the willingness of citizens to fight could be understood as an indication of free consent to the existing government, or as an acknowledgement of an obligation to obey it, then it might be argued that it is wrong to intervene even in a society whose institutions are actually illegitimate because its citizens will show by their actions their endorsement of their institutions. But it would be dangerous for Walzer to make this argument, since it would invite the objection that participation in modern wars is more often coerced than voluntary. Therefore, the willingness to fight—or even the act of fighting—does not necessarily indicate endorsement of the established government. And in fact Walzer does not make this argument. He writes that if the citizens “are prepared, *for whatever reasons*, to fight, an attack upon their state would constitute aggression” (p. 213; my italics). It turns out that the motivation for fighting is irrelevant, and Walzer appears to shift to the quite different argument that it is wrong for foreigners to threaten the lives of citizens by making war on them (for the same reason, I suppose, that it is wrong to threaten the life of *anyone*).

This interpretation of the argument against intervention is strengthened by Walzer’s concession (in fn. 26) that some nonmilitary forms of intervention may be morally permissible when military forms are not, even though in both cases the result may be to disrupt

the traditional ways of life of a historic community.⁴ If so, there must be a special feature of military intervention that sets it apart and explains the presumption against it. That feature, plainly, is that military intervention is *military* rather than that it is *intervention*. Then the argument against military intervention must be that it requires fighting; fighting results in killing; and, in the nature of the case, killing is unlikely to be justifiable. This is indeed a plausible argument. But it has nothing to do with communal integrity.

Anticipating this objection, Walzer supplies an interesting example to show that the supposed right to communal integrity has independent force. This is the example of Algeria: he asks us to consider whether the Swedish government has a right to introduce into the Algerian water supply a wondrous chemical that would wipe out of Algerian minds their own political and religious culture (and the supposedly associated predilection for illiberal military dictatorship) and replace it with the political beliefs characteristic of Swedish social democracy. He argues that the Swedes should not use the chemical "because the historical religion and politics of the Algerian people are values for the Algerian people . . . which our valuation cannot override" (p. 226). I agree that the Swedes should not use the chemical, but not because doing so would offend the Algerian's right to *communal* integrity. Consider another example: suppose that Mayor Koch could introduce a chemical into the water supply of New York City that would eliminate the desire to spray-paint graffiti on subway cars. Should he do so? I am certain that he should not: doing so would offend a kind of right to *individual* integrity (roughly, the right not to have one's motivational and cognitive capacities interfered with in ways that do not respect one's nature as a rational being). This is a right that Algerians no less

4. Walzer writes that his arguments against military intervention also "rule out any external determination of domestic constitutional arrangements," although he does not "mean to rule out every effort by one state to influence another or every use of diplomatic and economic pressure" ("The Moral Standing of States," p. 223 n. 26). If communal integrity were actually the basis of the theory of nonintervention, it is difficult to imagine why the application of the rule should be even *this* limited. Surely economic pressure (for example, cutting off a regime's credits at the International Monetary Fund) can wreak havoc in a state's social and political structure.

than New Yorkers possess, and it is quite sufficient to explain why the Swedes should not use their wondrous chemical. Walzer's fanciful example does not show that the right to communal integrity has independent force in the argument against intervention, and we are left with the more mundane but infinitely more persuasive argument that military intervention is wrong because it involves unjustified killing.

Walzer is unsatisfied with this argument, not because he rejects it, but because he thinks it fails to take account of "the very nature of political life" (p. 228). He represents himself as a defender of politics against "the traditional philosophical dislike for politics" that he detects in his critics (p. 228), which is reflected in a willingness for philosophical reasons "to press international society toward a kind of reiterated singularity—the same government or roughly the same sort of government for every political community" (p. 216). Now this is surely a red herring. For my part, I made it clear in *Political Theory and International Relations*, which Walzer cites, that the moral standards applicable to the political institutions of diverse societies may themselves be diverse.⁵ (Even if this is wrong, one is obviously not committed to advocating the oppressive monotony of a world of identical states, but only to endorsing a common set of moral standards that might be satisfied in different ways in different social, cultural, and economic settings.) Also, as Walzer notes, I have not advocated the use of military force to move national societies toward conformity with *any* particular moral principles, and in fact have argued that there may be reasons to avoid military intervention even in societies that fail conspicuously to meet whatever moral standards are appropriate.⁶

The real issue is what these reasons are, why we should "respect" the political processes of other societies, with their "inevitable compromises, and . . . frequent brutality" (p. 229). For Walzer, the answer is that people have rights to be governed by "a state of their own," even if "their own" state excludes them absolutely from participation in its political processes and purchases their obedience by raising the cost

5. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 81n, 98, 104-105, 122-123.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 89-92.

of rebellion to intolerable levels. For me, it is that the prospects of reform intervention in unjust states are normally uncertain whereas the costs in blood and treasure are certainly extreme. It does no service to politics to defend it, no matter what its nature. It may be, as Walzer sometimes seems to suggest, that people get the politics they deserve (whatever the views of meddling philosophers); but a politics worthy of philosophical defense must surely be more than this.