
Reviewed by Jessica Whyte

In 2015, I interviewed this book’s author, Rony Brauman, about his role in the establishment of the political foundation Liberté sans Frontières (LSF). LSF was founded in the mid-1980s by the French leadership of the humanitarian organisation Médecins sans Frontières to challenge the influence of Tiers-Mondisme [third worldism] in the aid sector. In summing up the politics of LSF, and his own politics at that time, Brauman told me about five conditions the right-wing French philosopher Alain Besançon set out when he was approached to join LSF’s board. “We are pro-European, pro-American, anti-communist, anti-Soviet and pro-Israeli”, Besançon stipulated. “We said ‘fine, it’s perfect’”, Brauman told me, “this is what we think.” These commitments flowed into LSF’s campaign to revive the language of human rights, much disparaged on the left, and to defend intervention in the territories of post-colonial states, in the name of humanitarianism. Brauman’s personal story is inextricable from the story of the development of French humanitarianism (he was MSF’s President from 1982 to 1994) and the development of “humanitarian intervention”.

Today, on what is increasingly looking like the other side of the “heyday” of humanitarian militarism (65), Brauman has lost faith—not in humanitarianism itself, “I practice my humanitarianism without being a believer!” (105) he says here, but in the extravagant claims and “magical concepts” (79) that accompanied the moralized wars of the 1990s and early 2000s: “humanitarian intervention”, “state-building”, the “responsibility to protect” (R2P), etc. etc. etc. This short book, comprised of a series of interviews with Brauman conducted by the journalist and researcher Régis Meyran, is both an extended meditation on the idea of the “just war” and an indictment of the lies and propaganda campaigns that were used to sell recent wars in Libya, Somalia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Some of these lies, such as Iraq’s “weapons of mass destruction”, are now infamous, but another example stands out: on 21 February 2011, Al Jazeera reported that the Libyan Air Force was bombing protestors in the capital, Tripoli. The same day, Nicolas Sarkozy, Barack Obama and David Cameron each declared that Libya’s authoritarian leader Muammar Gaddafi had to go. Brauman cites a depiction of this scene of bombing portrayed by the French “New Philosopher” Bernard-Henri Lévy (BHL) who played a key role in orchestrating France’s recognition of Libya’s “National Transitional Council”. “It’s always good to know when things started,” BHL wrote, before recounting his experience of watching the bombing of
Libyan protestors on television from an airport in Cairo. Brauman recounts the intricate detail in which BHL depicts the scene of carnage: “on one side, the deadly weapons . . . on the other, the human anthill running in every direction” (28). The only problem, Brauman notes, is that this scene did not take place. “[T]here was no bombing in Tripoli”, as even the US Secretary of Defense acknowledged in Congress (28). If the book has a central thesis, it may well be that (not unlike BHL himself) the language of “humanitarian intervention” was more effective in promoting war than in protecting the victims of state violence, let alone building stable post-war societies.

How, then, does Brauman understand the “just war” that gives the book its title? “By ‘just war’, ” Brauman says at the beginning of the book, “I mean wars ostensibly motivated primarily by humanitarian concerns, that is, the protection of civilians populations.” Such a definition is not uncontroversial, but it does reveal that the political ideal of justice has increasingly been interpreted in humanitarian terms. “Humanitarian” warfare, as the international relations theorist Maja Zehfuss argues, carries with it a paradox that is often elided in the atmosphere of moral urgency that accompanies the demand for such interventions: all war kills, maims and destroys the infrastructure on which civilians depend for their survival; thus, “the notion of pursuing the intended good—the protection of human rights and lives—through war risks undermining itself” by threatening the lives of the very people it claims to protect.

In a similar vein, Brauman argues that the turn towards humanitarian war has made it easier, not more difficult, for states to wage war; “while claiming to protect civilians”, he argues, “the UN is rehabilitating war, when in fact it was created to prevent it” (3). Here, we could recall the shockingly anachronistic question asked by then-UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in his 1998 lecture on intervention: “[w]hy was the United Nations established, if not to act as a benign policeman or doctor?” Much of Brauman’s book is about those interventions that took place during Annan’s tenure at the UN, during which time the Secretary-General worked hard to legitimize intervention on humanitarian grounds, while allowing the UN’s foundational promise of peace between equal sovereign states to fade from view.

In describing the history of the just war, Brauman has recourse to what he calls the “classic criteria of ‘just war’ that have been around since Thomas Aquinas” (5). No doubt, Aquinas has played a significant role in recent discussions of military conduct. Obama’s aides explained the former US President’s direct involvement in approving “kill lists” for drone strikes in Pakistan by noting that, “a student of writings on war by Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, he believes that he should take moral responsibility for such actions”. But there is far less continuity between Aquinas’s theology and contemporary just-war theory than Brauman (and much
just-war scholarship) supposes; notably, Aquinas had very little to say about the conduct of war and was more concerned with the salvation of souls than with what modern thinkers would term the “humanization” of warfare. Brauman, however, who has spent much of his life on battlefields, is more interested in the recent history of armed conflicts than he is in mining medieval Christianity for a set of moral principles that could tell us when and how to fight them.

His grounded approach marks a refreshing break with much contemporary just-war theory in the analytic tradition, which aims to establish a moral framework capable of distinguishing between what the analytical just-war theorist Jeff McMahan calls “objectively just” and “objectively unjust” wars by abstracting from the facts of contemporary armed conflicts. For Brauman, facts matter—and so do the “alternative facts” that have helped build the cases for recent wars. Questions about the danger faced by civilians, about whether a massacre is really imminent, or whether alternatives to war exist (and whether they were tried) are not questions that abstract moral reasoning can answer. Consequently, such reasoning can never give us a definitive account of when it is “just” to go to war. In fact, Brauman rejects the very notion of “the just war”; there may be justified wars, he suggests (he is not, he makes clear, a pacifist) but no war, by definition, is just.

Brauman also rejects the fantasy that war is predictable and its results calculable, which is presupposed by just-war criteria such as “proportionality” or “reasonable chance of success”. Such calculability is now central to the apparatus of humanitarian warfare. It finds its apotheosis in the software Bugsplat—one of a suite of “collateral damage” estimation technologies and methodologies developed by the United States Military to assess possible bombing targets. However, “surgical” air-strikes may be, Brauman argues, “we cannot determine their effects with any mathematical certainty” (17). Nor can we determine the overall consequences of war; today, Libya, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq all stand as testaments to the delusions of those who really believed these wars had a “reasonable chance of success”—or even that they were already “mission accomplished”.

Nonetheless, for all of this, Brauman’s own just-war criteria raise a critical question: who decides? For all his contemporary scepticism, Brauman was a supporter of the NATO intervention in Kosovo, and he does not resile from that position today. Given that this intervention lacked United Nations authorization and was illegal under international law, this presents Brauman with the challenge of developing a just-war criterion of his own that dispenses with “right authority”, while not simply giving carte blanche to powerful states to impose their military might on others. He recognizes that so-called just-war criteria often function as post-facto justifications for war, rather than reasons for it. But this occludes the real problem: given that there is little evidence that any state ever wages war
without believing it is in the right, who decides on which side justice lies? It was the impossibility of answering this question in a world of independent states, without a world state or universal church to judge, that led to the modern bracketing of the just war.

While Brauman recognizes the problems entailed when a state or group of states holds itself up as “universal moral authority” (25) he nonetheless speaks to, and as part of, a “we” that he rarely defines. On one occasion, this “we” is described as “we (Westerners)” (43), a second time as “we (the outside participants)” (45), but often it just hangs there, unexplained, to designate a subject whose views on justice should apparently be of material weight in determining when wars are waged. Given his recognition that wars in Iraq and Afghanistan reflect “the ease with which we still divide the world into civilized and barbarian, into ‘us’ and ‘them’” (84), it is this “we” and its presumed authority that remains in need of critical questioning.

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References


