Oxford Research Group
Breaking the cycle of violence

About Us   **Research & analysis**   **News & events**   **Blog & podcasts**   **Index**   Search

The Cosmopolitan Military: An Interview with Jonathan Gilmore

20 November 2017

Jonathan Gilmore, an expert on applied global ethics, discusses how cosmopolitan thought has influenced the way militaries perform civilian protection, and whether we may witness the emergence of an armed forces to serve a global human community.

Q. Your book, *The Cosmopolitan Military: Armed Forces and Human Security in the 21st Century*, **was recently published which discusses "the extent to which a cosmopolitan approach to security has permeated into the practice of the military". What were your reasons for writing this text and what are the main intellectual influences and schools of thought that you draw upon?**

The book came out of a long-term interest in the humanitarian intervention debate and the question of what the international community could do to prevent gratuitous violations of human rights. As a teenager during the 1990s, news reports from Bosnia and Rwanda had quite a profound influence in drawing my attention to both the problem of 'mass atrocity crimes', as they're now known, but also the politics of international response. The book itself is based on a frustration with the state of the humanitarian intervention debate, even as it progressed into language the Responsibility to Protect (R2P).

I felt that the debate had become preoccupied with questions of legitimacy, legality and whether norms of humanitarian intervention were becoming increasingly accepted in international relations. Whilst these questions definitely important, I felt that fewer questions were being asked exactly how armed humanitarian interventions should be carried out in practice. There seemed to be an implicit assumption that national militaries, trained and equipped primarily for Cold War era manoeuvre warfare, could be used to

protect civilians from massacres and ethnic cleansing. The actual experience of interventions during the 1990s and since, seemed to suggest otherwise. I felt that there were some important questions that weren't being asked, about how militaries should *do* humanitarian intervention.

In terms of the intellectual backdrop to the book, as the title suggests, it's influenced by a cosmopolitan ethical outlook. Quite simply, it works from the proposition that we are a species-wide moral community and that we have responsibilities to help other human beings in dire need. The book explores how cosmopolitan ethical commitments might be translated into practice. At the same time, the book tries to escape from some of the pathologies of liberal cosmopolitanism that emerged during the War on Terror. By failing to examine the realities of violence, intervention and military practice, I felt that some currents of cosmopolitan thought had ended up inadvertently preparing the ground for destructive forms of militarism during the 2000s. I wanted to suggest that 'doing' cosmopolitanism would actually require a much more fundamental re-thinking of militaries and their modes of operation, rather than assuming that the existing tools would fit the job in hand.

The book also draws significantly on the solidarist branch of the English School, particularly the sense that states could be a vehicle for greater cosmopolitan-minded action in world politics. The book takes on a similar challenge, by exploring the intersection between a state-centred and profoundly non-cosmopolitan world, and the practices by which cosmopolitan aspirations of human security might be reached. In the era of humanitarian intervention, national militaries, often seen as bastions of national identity and servants of national security in a world of states, were also increasingly at the sharp end of the cosmopolitan project.

Domestic and International Drivers of Conflict

The Integrated Review: Lessons Learned From Remote Warfare

WarPod Ep #8 | International Engagement in the Sahel

Most read

The Role of Youth in Peacebuilding: Challenges and Opportunities

Making Bad Economies: The Poverty of Mexican Drug Cartels

ORG's Vision

Remote Warfare: Lessons Learned from Contemporary Theatres

Q. The concept of human security arguably emerged after the Cold War due to a convergence of factors. Though this term has certainly entered mainstream policy discourse, one of the criticisms that writers have raised of human security is that it has a highly contested meaning and there seems to be a lot of flexibility in its use. What do you understand human security to mean?

I'd certainly agree that it is problematically flexible and has indeed been co-opted into quite mainstream accounts. Part of my book examines the role played by human security language in War on Terror counterinsurgency. However, I'm not sure that either the mainstreaming of the concept or the ongoing contestation of it are intrinsically a bad thing. Both of these features of the debate have the potential to push forward more nuanced accounts of security and innovative security practices, though there will always be a need to look critically at the claims made about the nature of human security and the practices with which it becomes associated.

I feel that human security has significant value in helping to re-frame security thinking away from military issues and the defence of the state, toward a consideration of the range of other security threats that human beings face on a daily basis. My understanding of human security is of a broad concept that asks pressing questions about what it takes to secure the 'vital core of all human lives'. This draws out security threats that may have been previously overlooked and invites greater reflection on what it actually means to be 'secure'. In the context of my work, I've used human security as a lens through which to consider how militaries might be organised, configured and trained, if they were moved away from their traditionally exclusive association with state security.

Q. One of the criticisms you've made of contemporary security and defence doctrines is the dominance of inter-state war thinking, which essentially sees the state as the central reference point for security. Why do you feel that this prioritisation of the state in military doctrine is so problematic?

If the role of a national military is limited to simply defending the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the state, the prioritisation of the state in military doctrine isn't problematic. However, the roles of national militaries and the security priorities of states themselves have expanded significantly beyond this. When we think about roles like peacekeeping and the protection of non-civilians, these reflect security responsibilities to a wider human community, not simply to the state. The problem with the dominance of inter-state war thinking, is that it has a significant impact on the way in which national militaries are trained, equipped and configured. They are primarily orientated toward defending the state against military threats from another state, and their ethos of service is intrinsically linked to defending a specific national community.

The dominance of inter-state war thinking gives rise to enemy-centric practices of warfighting, which are aimed at the destruction and military defeat of an identifiable enemy. This is a problem when we consider the more nuanced techniques and modes of operation that might be required in human-security related operations – conflict/dispute resolution, dialogue and cultural understanding for instance. Success in peacekeeping and civilian protection requires more than destroying or coercing an identifiable enemy. It thus becomes questionable whether militaries so heavily influenced by inter-state war thinking, can be readily adapted to undertake roles outside of high impact warfighting. This was as much a problem for Western militaries attempting

'gentler' forms of counterinsurgency during the War on Terror, as it is for the evolution of national militaries towards more explicitly cosmopolitan-minded human security goals.

Q . The War on Terror contained a lot of humanitarian justifications for the use of military force. The campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq are perhaps the most salient examples. Do you think that the failures of such campaigns could have been avoided if greater emphasis had been made by intervening forces to move beyond the enemy-centric approach to warfare and engage with local populations in order to gain their trust and consent for intervention?

It's possible that adopting a more population-centric approach and engaging with local populations from the outset, could have reduced the level of violence in Afghanistan and Iraq following Western interventions there. It may have led to greater restraint on the part of Western militaries when making decisions on the use of force, equipped them with a better understanding of local contexts, and potentially created a less fertile environment for the insurgencies to develop. In many respects, the US turn towards a counterinsurgency techniques in Iraq and Afghanistan from 2006-2007 onwards reflects a partial and ultimately flawed attempt to do this.

However, these interventions can't be divorced from the War on Terror context and the political objectives at stake. The militarised response to 9/11 was always fundamentally flawed and unlikely to succeed whatever approach was taken at ground-level. Although humanitarian objectives were invoked, the displacement of an unfriendly regime and propping up its more compliant successor were the primary objectives in both cases. The simplistic 'good' versus 'evil' narrative to which both campaigns were linked, was always likely to

lend itself to 'enemy-centric' warfighting approaches and to obscure the diverse local political contexts with which Western soldiers interacted. It was a failure at the strategic level, in terms of the aims and objectives sought, as much as a case of mistakes in military practice at the operational level.

Q. You've discussed the concept of Global Community Policing as an alternative to warfighting which could also serve as way of implementing cosmopolitanism principles. What would this practice consist of?

Rather than a specific list of activities, Global Community Policing is a series of guiding principles that would be used to inform military practices customised to suit particular conflict contexts. It borrows from some of the principles associated with domestic community policing. Principally, the movement away from reactive forms of law enforcement, to negotiated order through close engagement with the local community.

In the context of a protection of civilians operation, the activities of intervening military forces should be primarily directed at protecting and improving the wellbeing of the local population. Global Community Policing seeks to position local civilian populations as active participants in such a mission and the key security referent, rather than passive victims or potential threats. In practice, this might include working to develop a wider range of platforms for dialogue and liaison, through which local populations might shape the direction of the operation. On an individual level, it might involve positioning skills in negotiation and cultural knowledge as key professional attributes of a solider, on an equal level as warfighting competencies. As with domestic community policing methods, the goal is to provide intervening forces a better understanding of local social, political and cultural contexts, and create the potential for a more legitimate and consensual form of military operation.

Global Community Policing requires increased levels of contact between local populations, and a movement away from 'bunkerised' operating bases, patrolling using armoured vehicles and the use of air power. These kinds of technologies, used extensively during the War on Terror, very visibly demonstrate the higher valued accorded to the lives of the intervening soldiers, than the civilians they are entrusted to protect. To me, this seems very much at odds with the objectives of humanitarian interventions or civilian protection missions. Global Community Policing techniques may well present more potential risks to intervening forces, but it more closely reflects the idea of trans-border moral equality upon which humanitarian interventions should ultimately be based.

Q. Another concept you've discussed is this idea of "remote cosmopolitanism" which you've characterised as "the pursuit of the kinds of stability or civilian protection operation that might be indicative of cosmopolitan-mindedness, but involving minimal ground-level force commitment by Western states and an extensive dependence on local proxies". How have we seen the concept practiced by states and how effective has it been?

Elements of the 'remote cosmopolitan' approach have been evident since the emergence of the humanitarian intervention debate in the 1990s. At the core of this is the desire, particularly amongst Western states, to insulate their military personnel from the risks associated with warfare. Advances in air power, targeting technology, remote sensing and precision guided weapons have allowed for the creation of greater distance between military interveners and the intended beneficiaries of the intervention – vulnerable civilian populations.

During the humanitarian intervention in Kosovo in 1999, the major contribution from NATO came in the form of air strikes, with significant ground level responsibilities left to the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) as almost a proxy provider of civilian protection, despite their status as an active party to the conflict. Although a fuller international ground level force (KFOR) was subsequently deployed, there were indicators of a desire amongst Western interveners to have 'less skin in the game'. The Libya Intervention of 2011 demonstrated the problem of 'remote cosmopolitanism' much more directly. NATO's intervention was carried out almost exclusively from the air, and the coalition of rebel groups fighting under the NTC banner were effectively co-opted as local agents of civilian protection.

The problem in both cases is the choice of military approach revealed a relatively thin commitment to the wellbeing of vulnerable non-citizens. Moral solidarity might have been expressed in Western policymaker's rhetoric, but asymmetry in the value of human life between Western military personnel and local civilians was demonstrated very visibly in the preference for remote techniques of armed intervention. At a practical level, this also gravely limits the amount of influence international interveners can have on the ground level dynamics of civilian protection, and it stands to limit the overall effectiveness of intervention.

In Libya, the fragmentation of the rebel factions into rival militia groups, themselves frequently complicit in serious human rights abuses, reveals the dangers of co-opting parties to the conflict as agents of civilian protection. Although a more direct ground-level intervention might not have prevented the fragmentation of the rebel coalition in Libya, it would have been considerably

better placed to help stabilise the security situation and provide a stronger
protective environment for the civilians living there.

**Q. A long-standing proposal to aid the international response time to
emerging conflicts and mass atrocity crimes is the formation of an
international standing army. The United Nations has often been described as
a promising candidate for this. Do you feel that the UN is currently the best
candidate to host this international standing army and what are some of the
major obstacles to its establishment?**

The UN has significant benefits as a location for an international standing army,
when compared to say regional organisations. The kinds of alternative military
practice that my book advocates are already to some extent reflected in UN
peacekeeping. In terms of legitimacy, the UN is also perhaps the most
inclusive representation of the 'international community'. More significantly, a
multicultural UN force developed from scratch, would be detached from
nationalist or regional associations and loyalties, and be able to foster an
authentically international ethos of service.

There are, of course, very significant obstacles to the creation of such a
standing force. Despite a wide range of proposals for an independent military
capacity since the creation of the UN, there seems to be a limited appetite
amongst its member states to translate these into practice. There are
significant practical questions regarding the funding of such a force, its basing
arrangements, and its command and control mechanisms. In the background
to this is arguably a deep concern amongst member states about giving up
their monopoly on the possession of legitimate military forces. I think that the
advocates of a UN standing force are not blind to these constraints and they
don't actually foster the illusion that these changes could be achieved

overnight. Their strategy seems to be to have well-developed and fairly rigorous proposals for such a standing force, inn anticipation of a time when the political climate within the UN might be more open to them. Given the significant changes that have occurred in the UN over the past 25-30 years, I don't feel that the case for a UN standing force is as far out as it might seem at first hand.

Q. Recently there has been a resurgence of populist nationalism in Europe and the US. How much do you feel that this will effect cosmopolitan visions of a global moral community and what you describe as "the development of a deeper cosmopolitan consciousness amongst publics worldwide"?

This is a problem I currently wrestling with and the end of the book alludes to these kinds of challenge. Living in Britain, 2016 certainly wasn't a great year to be a cosmopolitan. The task of re-orientating militaries along cosmopolitan lines was always in tension with the strong association of military forces with nationalist sentiments, both within the militaries themselves and in wider societal attitudes. On the face of it, the populist moment of 2016 is unlikely to provide a particularly welcoming context for suggestions that our militaries should be reformed to make them more effective at helping to protect non-citizens.

However, recent populist nationalism doesn't provide any particularly useful vision of the future or a forward-looking project that might help to guide foreign policy and address the multiple challenges that the world faces. Protecting civilians in armed conflicts is one, but global inequality, climate change and migration, are amongst many other issues that ultimately require multilateral action and an ethical perspective that looks beyond the narrow interests of the 'nation'. The populist nationalism that has emerged over the last few years

seems more like a reaction against increasing globalisation and harks back to an idealised time that probably never really existed, than a coherent vision for the future. The quite profound flaws of Brexit and the Trump Administration are already becoming readily apparent.

At the same time, cosmopolitans can't ignore the challenge of populist nationalism and they must accept that the path to a cosmopolitan future will encounter resistance, backward steps and might not be quite the linear vision of progress that they might have imagined. Localised forms of loyalty matter and immediate everyday political concerns will often seem more pressing for many than the wellbeing of distant strangers.

There's thus an important challenge of how to reconcile more localised points of loyalty with a cosmopolitan-minded outlook. I find encouraging openings for this in the work of Richard Shapcott, Toni Erskine and Andrew Linklater. My current research is trying to take their theoretical work and explore empirical spaces of 'everyday cosmopolitanism', where the boundary between nationalist outlooks and the sense of being a citizen of the world crosses. Watch this space!

Image credit: US Navy/Wikimedia.

Jonathan Gilmore is Lecturer in International Relations at the University of Manchester. His research explores on the ways in which cosmopolitan ethical commitments feature in the rhetoric and practice of contemporary foreign and security policy, with particular reference to

stabilisation, peacekeeping and civilian protection operations. His recent work has been published in *Security Dialogue, International Affairs and the European Journal of International Relations*. His book *The Cosmopolitan Military: Armed Forces and the Protection of Human Security in the 21st Century*, was published by Palgrave-Macmillan in 2015.

Share this page

✉   **f**   🐦

Contact

Unit 503
101 Clerkenwell Road London
EC1R 5BX
Charity no. 299436
Company no. 2260840

Email us

020 3559 6745

Follow us

🐦   **f**

Registered with
FUNDRAISING REGULATOR

Useful links

Login
Contact us
Sitemap
Accessibility
Terms & Conditions
Privacy policy