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The Intrinsic Dilemmas of Humanitarian Intervention: Moving Beyond Self-Interest, Power Politics, and Normative Imperatives

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Abstract

Andrea Carati's *Giusto e impossibile: i dilemmi dell'intervento umanitario nella società internazionale* (2024) offers a broad and solid foundation for addressing the persistent dilemmas surrounding humanitarian intervention in international society, broadening the perspective beyond the exogenous tensions that have often been regarded as the main sources of this practice's inherent difficulties. The book explores the evolution of three paradigms – classical humanitarianism, the post–Cold War "new humanitarianism," and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) – to demonstrate their inability to crystallize into a coherent and enduring doctrine. Through a careful combination of normative analysis, historical reconstruction, and case studies, Carati highlights both the normative dilemmas and the operational challenges that make humanitarian intervention intrinsically unstable: the tension between human rights and sovereignty, the moral ambiguity of imperfect political obligations, the narrative simplification of victims and perpetrators, the problem of timing, and the translation of humanitarian aims into effective military operations.

Abstract (Italiano)

Il volume di Andrea Carati *Giusto e impossibile: i dilemmi dell'intervento umanitario nella società internazionale* (2024) offre una base ampia e solida per affrontare i dilemmi persistenti dell'intervento umanitario nella società internazionale, ampliando la prospettiva oltre le tensioni esogene che spesso sono state considerate le cause principali della criticità di questa pratica. Analizzando tre paradigmi – l'umanitarismo classico dell'Ottocento, il "nuovo umanitarismo" degli anni Novanta e la Responsabilità di proteggere (R2P) – l'autore mostra come nessuno di essi sia riuscito a consolidarsi in una dottrina stabile e universalmente legittimata. Attraverso una combinazione di analisi normativa, ricostruzione storica e studi di caso, Carati mette in evidenza dilemmi normativi e sfide operative che rendono l'intervento umanitario intrinsecamente instabile: la tensione tra diritti umani

e sovranità, l'ambiguità morale delle obbligazioni politiche imperfette, la semplificazione narrativa tra vittime e carnefici, il problema del "quando" intervenire e la difficoltà di tradurre obiettivi umanitari in operazioni militari efficaci.

Keywords: *Humanitarian intervention; International society; Responsibility to Protect (R2P); English School of International Relations; Sovereignty and ethics; Normative and operational dilemmas*

At a time of profound and uncertain transformation in global dynamics, the reflections offered by Andrea Carati in *Giusto e impossibile: i dilemmi dell'intervento umanitario nella società internazionale* (*Just and Impossible: The Dilemmas of Humanitarian Intervention in International Society* [1]) refocus attention on an issue perhaps less discussed today than it was a few decades ago, but that can continue to offer valuable insights into the current state of the international order. Therefore, humanitarian interventionism touches upon some of the enduring foundational questions in international theory, such as the relationship between the state and the individual, the degree of ideal universalism versus pluralism, and the extent to which common norms and goals are shared among key actors. Carati's book is certainly valuable in this regard, but it aims to go further by problematizing humanitarian intervention as such, through an effective and persuasive combination of normative analysis, case studies, and operational considerations. Its main goal is to demonstrate, by retracing the shifting and troubled trajectory of humanitarian intervention, that the challenges to its consolidation within international society stem not only from the well-known tension with the principle of sovereignty and its corollary of non-intervention, but also – and, from the author's perspective, above all – from other obstacles rooted in the "inherently problematic" nature of the practice itself (Carati, 2024: 9).

In the first part of the book, the author identifies three strategies adopted at different historical junctures in an attempt to develop

[1] All translations from Italian are by the author, unless otherwise stated.

a stable and coherent doctrine regulating the possibility for states to intervene beyond their borders for humanitarian purposes: the classical humanitarianism, formulated within the framework of the 19th-century European society of states; the new humanitarianism, the apex of the "golden age of humanitarian intervention" (Defarges, 2008: 21) that characterized the final decade of the 20th century following the end of the Cold War; and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), developed in the early 2000s as an effort to both systematize and mitigate the disruptive challenge that new humanitarianism was posing to the international order. All these three paradigms are analysed through a common framework designed to assess the answers they attempt to provide to three major political and normative questions:

> (1) the opposition between human rights and state rights; (2) the tension between particularism and universalism; and (3) the politicization of humanitarian action, as opposed to the principle of neutrality (Carati, 2024: 16).

As the first chapter of Carati's book clearly illustrates, the roots of the debate around these themes in political thought and practice reach back at least to the sixteenth century. Turmoil occurring within the borders of other states has in fact long attracted the attention of intellectuals and statesmen alike, motivated both by moral concerns and by considerations related to international security and systemic stability, especially following the establishment of the Westphalian order. The desire to foresee potential exceptions to the principle of sovereignty and to define their characteristics is therefore not a uniquely contemporary matter, and the historical reconstruction proposed by the author immediately reveals the inherent ambiguity of such efforts.

According to Carati's framework, 19th-century classical humanitarianism, the new humanitarianism of the 1990s, and the Responsibility to Protect of the 2000s all share a common inability to develop into a stable and fully legitimized doctrine. The differences between these three strategies are, of course, analysed in detail to show how, despite diverging historical contexts and differing normative responses, each strategy has ultimately met a similar fate, marked

by partial, provisional, and contested effectiveness. The discussion begins with a reconstruction of how, despite the prevailing nationalist and state-centric conception of individual rights, the concert of European great powers was able to enact humanitarian interventions – even if highly limited in scope and striving for neutrality – in response to particularly brutal conflicts (such as in the case of the Battle of Navarino in 1827, when a coalition of British, Russian and French forces confronted the Ottoman Empire which was harshly repressing the rebellion for Greek independence); however, this practice failed to become entrenched, ultimately succumbing to the growing tensions that culminated in the First World War. In a radically different context and on fundamentally different premises, the new humanitarianism of the 1990s was characterized by a universalistic and highly politicized conception of humanitarian intervention that placed the rights of individuals in direct opposition to those of the state, thus justifying even unilateral use of force as in the case of the NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999. This approach, too, did not survive the fading of the exceptional circumstances that had allowed its emergence, nor the mounting criticisms it began to face. Finally, the Responsibility to Protect doctrine, formulated to address these shortcomings by proposing a synthesis of respect for sovereignty, maintenance of order and international protection of fundamental human rights, left itself many issues unsolved. In the end, Carati concludes that even this attempt has not proven effective, as shown by the outcome of the NATO intervention in Libya in 2011 and by the noticeable absence in recent years of genuine humanitarian interventions, despite significant and alarming crises occurring in various regions.

Why, then, have none of the strategies devised to essentially address the same problem succeeded in establishing a consolidated, lasting, and widely legitimate practice within international society? The answer Carati offers in the second part of his work is that "humanitarian intervention, by its very nature, contains a set of problematic elements that make it an intractable object for formalization" (Carati, 2024: 183), beyond the various efforts to manage its conflict with the principle of sovereignty, which remains the primary focus of much of the existing literature.

Moving effectively between theoretical and empirical levels, the author hence identifies and examines two categories, normative dilemmas and operational challenges.

At the normative level, Carati identifies three main issues that give rise to structural contradictions and impasses. The first is the necessarily offensive nature of humanitarian use of force against actors who do not pose a direct threat to the interveners, that, however justified in many ways, remains difficult to reconcile with a system that fully legitimizes the use of force only in cases of self-defense. The second is "the gap between the set of obligations and duties that bind members of a political community and those that exist between members of different communities" (Carati, 2024: 201), which renders humanitarian intervention, recalling Vattel's classification, an "imperfect political obligation" (Carati, 2024: 209) that may be normatively desirable in some respects, but remains deeply problematic. The third challenge is the need to justify such interventions by constructing a rigid dichotomy between active and guilty perpetrators, on the one hand, and passive and innocent victims on the other: this distinction often fails to align with the complex realities on the ground, leading to ambiguous, contradictory, and potentially delegitimizing narratives.

After this wide normative insight, Carati accords equal importance to the operational dimension, expressing the conviction that current debates tend to focus almost exclusively on whether the political will to intervene exists, while underestimating the fact that "decision and capacity do not guarantee results" (Carati, 2024: 208). On the contrary, according to the author outcomes are likely to be undermined by temporal obstacles ("when" to intervene) and tactical challenges ("how" to intervene). Carati places particular emphasis on the dramatic nature of the temporal dilemma: acting preventively – or at least rapidly – would maximize the effectiveness of an intervention in terms of lives saved and suffering avoided, but such action is extremely difficult to implement due to the scarcity of real-time information from crisis areas – a factor that, in his view, results often unjustly overlooked in retrospective analyses of events such as Rwanda crisis in 1994 (Carati, 2024: 242-254) – and to the difficulty of adequately legitimizing preventive action. Even when a timely intervention would be achieved, however, tactical obstacles

would remain. According to Carati, "the fundamental obstacle that any doctrine of humanitarian intervention is bound to confront is the challenge of translating humanitarian aims into coherent military operations" (Carati, 2024: 255). This includes the difficulty of identifying clear targets, establishing precise rules of engagement, and effectively employing military means in the complex, fragmented, and often blurred contexts where atrocities are being committed. As the analysis comes to its conclusion, Carati's central thesis clearly emerges: the formulation of a coherent and stable doctrine of humanitarian intervention is, in itself, impossible. Its deep and inherent aporias indeed transcend historical and political contingencies, resurfacing with striking regularity whenever a new strategy is attempted. Carati thus concludes that, while future instances of humanitarian intervention cannot be ruled out, they will remain contested and lacking a robust framework, since "the tension between its just character and the impossibility of seeing it established as a consolidated practice is bound to persist, at least as long as the system of states does not entirely lose its pluralist nature" (Carati, 2024: 272).

In this outcome, the overall approach that appears to have inspired the writing of this essay emerge. Beyond its specific contents, based on theoretical and empirical elements, Carati's work reveals a perspective that effectively mobilizes assumptions, worldviews and intellectual tools that draw upon the traditions of classical Realism and, above all, the English School of International Relations (ES). The author hence succeeds in addressing a topic such as humanitarian intervention, in which «empirical and normative issues are inseparable» (Bellamy, 2013: 8), maintaining a balance between analytical objectivity and moral awareness, between the consciousness of fundamental ethical dilemmas and an accurate acknowledgment of the reality in which such dilemmas attempt to be translated into political practice. In doing so, Carati carefully avoids the traps of both a cynical realism focused on pure *machtpolitik* and material capacities, aimed at the utmost relativization of moral issues, and a noble but abstract and self-referential idealism, instead offering a perspective that, in some respects, recalls the "pluralism of the intellect and solidarism of the will" that, according to Nicholas Wheeler and Timothy Dunne, characterized the thinking of Hedley Bull on these matters (Wheeler and Dunne, 1996). This expression refers to the pluralism-solidarism debate within the ES, of

which Bull is one of the seminal authors, that finds in humanitarian intervention one of its primary subjects: at the heart of the ES's normative reflection indeed lies the tension between order and justice, which, according to Wheeler, is expressed "at its starkest" (Wheeler, 2002: 9) by dilemmas of humanitarian intervention. Carati's work undoubtedly addresses many of the central themes of the ES's thought, whose key concept of "international society" is indeed evoked from the title itself and serves as the framework for the entire reflection on the failure to establish a norm of humanitarian intervention that would find a stable application in practice: such an approach is evidently grounded in the key arguments of the ES societal approach.

As made explicit in the conclusions, it is from the pluralist condition of international society that, according to Carati, the impossibility of effectively stating a doctrine of humanitarian intervention stems. This is because such a doctrine's intrinsic aporias further clash, for example, with the lack of agreement among states on when and how to intervene, which fundamental human rights are worth enforcing, and what role should be assigned to a political obligation based on the unity of humankind even beyond – and in some cases in opposition to – the sovereign and national state architecture. In all this, according to the author, if some solidarist elements may, at times, have gained ground, they have either remained largely unfulfilled aspirations – as in the case of the new humanitarianism and its transformative objectives for the international order – or have resulted in forms of partial and contradictory translations, as in the case of the R2P. The insurmountable pluralism of international society is therefore both the framework within which the author situates his reflection and the conclusion toward which it inevitably tends. However, as already noted, Carati's thesis sets out to go beyond a debate that, like much of the literature on the subject, seems to focus primarily on the systemic obstacles faced by humanitarian interventions, deriving from the tension with the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention, from the interests of great powers, or from the "immaturity of an international community that remains too divided, incapable of embracing a truly cosmopolitan perspective on a global level" (Carati, 2024: 271). By problematizing the very object of humanitarian intervention and systematizing its normative tensions and operational dilemmas – without excessively questioning

its abstract moral value, but preventing this from obscuring a critical judgment of its intrinsic and persistent contradictions – Carati certainly engages with these debates, but also adds further elements, seeking regularities and thus arriving at conclusions that are in some respects discouraging, but undoubtedly analytically profound and historically transversal. Indeed, if it is perhaps true that, as suggested in a recent article by Olivia Nantermoz and Aslihan Turan, a kind of "*raison de l'humanité* has historically complemented and reinforced (rather than undermined) the workings of international society and its *raison de système"* [italics in the original] (Nantermoz and Turan, 2025: 197), Carati's essay effectively shows how its implementation into a doctrine that envisions the "use of force by a state or group of states aimed at preventing or ending serious violations of human rights of the citizens of another state" (Carati, 2024: 23) has always been – and, in his view, will always be – unstable, contested, and ultimately of very limited effectiveness in achieving its ultimate goal.

Despite the persistence of the widely discussed aporias and obstacles, it should be remembered that the conclusions proposed by the author do not close the door to the possibility of witnessing humanitarian interventions. Reflecting on the forms that these potential interventions might take is therefore significant, but we must be aware that, in the current scenario, this means attempting to offer answers about the future of international society, both in terms of order and in terms of justice.

In 2021, James Pattison undertook a similar exercise by reasoning about the future of the Responsibility to Protect based on the need to think in terms of "Nonideal Theory", that is a "normative theory in light of unfavourable circumstances and noncompliance" (Pattinson, 2021: 892). That in the framework of a "Post-Liberal Order" the circumstances are not favourable to norms such as the Responsibility to Protect – especially in its dimension of international intervention – is thus taken as a given, in the light of which Pattison develops three scenarios for the evolution of international society: "realist-nationalist", "pluralist-sovereigntist" and "lingering liberalism" (Pattinson, 2021: 895). These scenarios present different degrees of compliance and effectiveness in regard to R2P and its potential to influence state behaviour, but in any case, according to Pattison, this norm will inevitably face challenges and contestations.

In his view, if its original inspiration is to be preserved, it will be necessary to resist an excessively statist interpretation, such as that promoted by actors like China, while at the same time attempting to mobilise non-Western support for its international responsibility and possible intervention component (Pattison, 2021: 901-902).

It is certainly true that norms such as R2P are deeply challenged by non-Western actors – first and foremost the BRICS, but not only them – both in their normative assumptions and in practice (c.f. e.g. Foot 2016, 2020; Coleman and Job 2021). However, it is equally significant to reflect on the posture adopted by the West in the face of these challenges.

As Luca Scuccimarra already remarked some years ago, cosmopolitan ideas and values that had inspired and sustained R2P have been most deeply affected by the turmoil stemming from the 2008 economic crisis, and later by the rise of nationalist-populist movements, Brexit, and the Trump administrations (Scuccimarra, 2022: 89). All of this hence consecrated the emergence of a certain aversion towards multilateralism, international solidarity, and supranational obligations across relevant fragments of public opinions and in many governments' domestic policies and international posture, starting from the United States whose disengagement and disillusionment regarding its hegemonic role, through which various forms of humanitarian interventionism were largely supported, are evident (for a comprehensive overview on this subject cf. Colombo, 2025). In a world that, as Scuccimarra noted, seems to want to return to being "a rigidly segmented space of closed and self-centred communities" whose relations are governed by "negotiation or conflict" (Scuccimarra, 2022: 89-90), the space for an effective revival of R2P seems to shrink even further, especially in its second and third pillars of react and, perhaps even more, rebuild. Similarly, the likelihood that some form of "coalitions of the willing" might be formed, even on an *ad hoc* basis, to lead humanitarian interventions appears to decrease, even if the possibility to see them motivated by an increasingly narrow interpretation of humanitarian purposes, aimed solely at safeguarding the physical safety of victims of major atrocities without further ideological ambitions or long-term commitments, should be considered.

In any case, Carati's work reminds us that whenever the humanitarian dilemma arises and a decision must be made regarding whether, when, and how to intervene, the various conjunctures and configurations assumed by the international society will inevitably be combined with the deep aporias and contradictions that necessarily characterize the practice of intervention for humanitarian purposes, despite its moral justness or urgency. Ultimately, Hans Morgenthau's renowned warning reemerges. In *The Scientific Man Versus Power Politics*, the German-American realist thinker urged us to acknowledge "the tragic presence of evil in all political action" (Morgenthau, 1965: 214); however, Morgenthau believed that such awareness "at least enables man to choose the lesser evil, and to be good as he can be in an evil world", striving for a synthesis between politics and ethics even if it will always be, as is indeed well illustrated by the three strategies examined by Carati, "uneasy, precarious and even paradoxical" (Morgenthau, 1965: 214). Carati's analysis thus invites reflection, once again, on the validity of Morgenthau's insights, particularly on how the notion of the "lesser evil" can actually be articulated in a domain such as humanitarian interventionism where politics and morality are deeply intertwined and, often, at odds with each other.

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