

Moral Responsibility in International Relations: the US Response to Rwanda

Written by Cathinka Lerstad

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Moral Responsibility in International Relations: the US Response to Rwanda

<https://www.e-ir.info/2013/05/06/moral-responsibility-in-international-relations-the-us-response-to-rwanda/>

CATHINKA LERSTAD, MAY 6 2013

The English School offers an account of international relations that captures the interplay between morality and power; the empirical and the normative; the pluralist and the solidarist; order and justice; theory and history.[i] It thus provides a holistic framework for analyzing the central question to any normative theory, namely the moral value to be attributed to particularistic political collectivities against humanity taken as a whole, or the claims of individual human beings. This question remains at the heart of international relations as one of the most challenging moral questions of our time.

The international community has in recent decades made great strides in a solidarist direction.[ii] Corroborating the conditionality of state sovereignty, it is now widely accepted that there exists some sort of collective moral “responsibility to protect” in situations where the state fails in its obligations to protect its own people. The question of whether the expanded notion of moral responsibility animating “the responsibility to protect” is becoming solidified as a norm in international relations has consequently emerged.

What this discussion commonly fails to adequately consider, however, is the primary moral duty of the government of potential intervening countries to their own citizens and the dilemma this creates for the consistent implementation of the nascent R2P norm. While there is universal agreement that, in the face of severe human rights violations, “something must be done,” the idea that states refusing to commit troops to end such atrocities are morally bereft is not axiomatic.[iii] Charged with the primary responsibility of protecting national citizens and promoting their best interests, it is pertinent to question whether it is realistic to expect state leaders to make moral decisions independent of national interest when confronted with situations of severe human rights violations abroad.

The question, therefore, is not only one of whether individual human rights or state sovereignty should take precedence in situations where a choice between the two has to be made, as it is often presented, but also one of how the decision to intervene/not intervene is justified to the citizens of the intervening country and whether the deployment of soldiers to protect nationals of a foreign country can be vindicated domestically. The state is thus engaged in a two-level game between domestic and international preferences, where power and morality is inextricably linked. This process is not static, but one in which discourse and action continuously shape the state as a moral actor, and our collective understanding of how and when power can be vindicated.

By focusing on relations between and among entities rather than on the alleged dispositional qualities of static entities within a social context, relational constructivism is useful in analyzing this dynamic process.[iv] From this perspective, the practical activities implemented in response to mass atrocities continually produce and reproduce actors such as “the state” and “the international community” and their notion of moral responsibility in international relations, which again give rise to the observed social actions carried out in its name.[v] Activities devoted to legitimation are particularly interesting in this regard since these activities are among the clearest moments at which actors are produced in practice.[vi] [vii]

An English School analysis of the US response to the 1994 Rwandan genocide provides an illustrative example, suggesting that the government’s dithering response was reflective of an attempt to act according to a pluralist

Moral Responsibility in International Relations: the US Response to Rwanda

Written by Cathinka Lerstad

understanding of international relations in a context challenging its limited notion of moral responsibility among states and individuals across political and cultural boundaries.

The genocide in Rwanda created an unprecedented opportunity for the United States to provide political and moral leadership in the development of a blueprint for post-Cold War collective security responses to mass atrocities. However, concerned that the declaration of “genocide” would demand decisive action according to the UN Genocide Convention, the United States arguably led the international community in a rhetorical dance to avoid the term. Beyond the discursive efforts to undermine the situation in Rwanda in order to avoid expectations warranting undesirable action, the US lobbied for a total withdrawal of UN forces in Rwanda in April 1994. Domestic politics, dominated by democratic infighting; the legacy of Somalia;^[viii] and narrowly defined national interests produced consistent delays and impediments as hundreds of thousands were massacred under the Hutu extremists’ genocidal assault.

Throughout his presidency, the Clinton administration arguably struggled to reconcile its expressed intent to support the solidarist values articulated in the UN Genocide Convention with its commitment to more pluralist principles of state sovereignty and non-intervention in other states’ domestic affairs. This tension was reflected in the inconsistency with which the Clinton administration put the principles of humanitarian intervention into practice and the accompanying erratic justifications of these responses. Drawing on the ideological reservoir of the pluralist foreign policy tradition, the Clinton administration justified its inaction by referencing narrowly defined national interests, thus avoiding discourse that would have warranted intervention on humanitarian grounds.^[ix]

Yet, the Rwandan case also reveals how this process of legitimation simultaneously changed public expectations of how the US should respond to similar situations in the future, thus shaping the identity of the state as a moral actor in international relations. Undermining the pluralist normative foundation of his own administration’s practices during the 1998 “Clinton apology” by delegitimizing the beliefs on which they were based, the president advanced the solidarist expanded notion of moral responsibility later articulated in R2P by attributing moral responsibility to the US to prevent or suppress similar situations of genocide and mass atrocity in the future.

The controversy surrounding the question of moral responsibility in international relations can thus be viewed as reflective of an international community striving to reconcile its pluralist and solidarist foundations. With the evolution of solidarism, new complexities associated with the concept of moral responsibility are revealed at the state level. The question we must ask ourselves is whether the complexity of considerations excuses inaction when confronted with situations of severe human rights violations. Despite the pledge of “never again,” we continue to accept excuses based on a pluralist limited understanding of moral responsibility to stand idly by while genocide unfolds. When is an excuse good enough that we consider it acceptable? How do we expect state leaders to balance different moral responsibilities in an increasingly interconnected global community? The English School account of power and morality; the empirical and the normative; the pluralist and solidarist; order and justice; theory and history, not as opposite positions, but rather as coexisting dimensions of an international order within which tensions arise,^[x] provides a useful starting point for further exploration of these essential questions that are likely to remain among the most central questions of international politics in years to come.

—

Cathinka Lerstad is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Health, Technology and Society at Gjøvik University College, Norway. Her primary research interests include collective security and global health in an international relations and international political economy perspective. This article is part of e-IR’s edited collection, *System, Society & the World: Exploring the English School*.

1. Tim Dunne, “The English School,” *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations* (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2008).

Moral Responsibility in International Relations: the US Response to Rwanda

Written by Cathinka Lerstad

2. In the realms of social and political philosophy, cosmopolitanism is considered the idea that all human beings belong to a single moral community; one which exists regardless of social circumstances, and to which universal moral principles apply (Howard Fienberg, "Morality Comes to IR: Ethical Approaches to the Discipline." Accessed at <http://www.hfienberg.com/irtheory/brown.html> (Jul. 30, 2010)). The pluralist argument, in contrast, delineates the international scene into geographic communities, which formulate the individual's morality, in a social rather than natural context. For pluralists, the nation-state is considered a community whose members are bound by strong ties of solidarity from which moral feelings and a sense of ethical obligation naturally derive (Stanley Hoffman, *Duties Beyond Borders: On the Limits and Possibilities of Ethical International Politics* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1981)). Pluralists thus appeal to particularistic foundations of morality, viewing the state as "the framework that founds and enables the ethical discourse in which social judgments are possible" (Molly Cochran, "Cosmopolitanism and Communitarianism in a Post-Cold War World," *Boundaries in Question: New Directions in International Relations* (London: Pinter, 1995), 48)). In this view, without the existence of a higher authority analogous to the state, this framework does not exist at the international level.
3. Aidan Hehir, "Political Will, Non-Intervention and the Responsibility to Protect," Presentation at the International Studies Association meeting (February 2011).
4. Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, "Relational Constructivism: A War of Words," *Making Sense of International Relations Theory* (London, UK: Lynne Rienner, 2006).
5. David Dessler, "What's at Stake in the Agent-Structure Debate?," *International Organization*, 43:3 (1989), 462.
6. Jackson, "Relational Constructivism: A War of Words."
7. This relational constructivist approach allows for the unpacking of concepts, such as what it means for the "government" to "act." Action, from a relational perspective, is a matter of social attribution, as certain activities are encoded or characterized as the doings of some social actor. The social attribution simultaneously produces the actor as legitimately able to perform the action in question, and legitimizes the action because this actor performs it. Legitimation processes isolate certain activities (i.e. responses to situations of severe human rights violations) and render them acceptable by characterizing them as the activities of "the state." In doing so, they reproduce the state itself. It is in these boundary demarcations that "the state" has its most tangible existence and its most concrete presence in the daily lives of those under its authority. The state is less the determinate origin of any given social action and more a product of the processes of legitimation that produce and sustain it in particular settings. Thus, the government's authority and responsibility has to be continually negotiated and sustained in practice. Thinking of "the international community," "the UN Security Council," and "the government" of the potential intervener in this way, allows us to grasp the stakes of the justifications of responses to situations of severe human rights abuses waged by politicians and other officials. The relational constructivist approach thus views statements as participants in an ongoing process of legitimation directed at humanitarian interventions. In this process, statements draw on rhetorical commonplaces already present in the social environment surrounding a particular incident (Friedrich Kratochwil, *Rules, Norms, and Decisions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 40-42). Specific articulations in the course of a public debate take these notions already in circulation and link them to particular policies, legitimating them and attributing them as actions to some particular actor. In this context, the question of whether "situations of genocide" or "severe human rights violations" justify "humanitarian intervention" and promote "the national interest" is considered extraneous. What matters is that these are the commonplaces invoked, and that the pairing of these commonplaces affords certain kinds of action while ruling others out. What makes this line of reasoning effective is precisely that it deploys existing commonplaces, so that the audience toward which the statement is directed will recognize the argument as sensible, and that it responds unequivocally to possible counter-arguments. Both of these components of a legitimation process are important aspects of this relational constructivist account (Patrick T. Jackson, "Relational Constructivism: A War of Words").
8. The "Somalia disaster" reveals how affect, empathy, and moral beliefs shape what is considered good, appropriate, and deserving of praise in situations where new norms emerge to compete with other norms and perceptions of interest. While initial support for intervention was strong, the brutal images of American soldiers being

Moral Responsibility in International Relations: the US Response to Rwanda

Written by Cathinka Lerstad

dragged through the streets in Mogadishu served to reinforce the boundaries between “Americans” and “foreigners” and the sense that the US government’s primary responsibility as a moral actor is and should be the protection of American lives and interests.

9. The Clinton administration’s response to Rwanda highlights the importance of separating individual and state morality. One of the dangers inherent in current approaches to addressing morality and moral responsibility in international relations is their tendency to collapse individual and state morality. Due to the moral complexity of state leadership, the moral stance of policy makers must be separated from the moral stance of individuals. Robert H. Jackson, *The Global Covenant: Human Conduct in a World of States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) refers to the ethics of statecraft as “a special ethical sphere.” Acting on the ideological reservoir of the state, policy makers are at constant risk of losing moral authority by basing their decisions on precedence considerations in situations where their individual moral compass may not be compatible with state policy. This needs to be considered when analyzing the concept of moral responsibility in international relations.

10. Joao Marques de Almeida, “Pluralists, Solidarists and the Issues of Diversity, Justice and Humanitarianism in World Politics,” *The International Journal of Human Rights* 7:2 (2003), 144-163.

About the author:

Cathinka Lerstad is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Health, Technology and Society at Gjøvik University College, Norway. Her primary research interests include collective security and global health in an international relations and international political economy perspective.