

Non-Intervention and Heterodox Economics

by Wolfram Elsner

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This paper presents a few exploratory themes for a strictly non-interventionist approach to international affairs. While recognizing the value of positive strategies and programs that envision constructive international development programs, the focus is on the simple injunction to do no harm and ideas concerning:

- the region as the appropriate and adequate space for institutional action, cultural growth and change, and to develop collective capacities;
- the exclusive and power-based character of the current global system;
- and the corresponding imperial character of any power-based, violent or military intervention.

Also the article refers to the heterodox economic concepts of inter-regional cultural diversity and historical time.

The adequate space of agency

The region, however specified, is the adequate and most appropriate space for action and the most effective source of institutional and cultural change. It has an action capacity that can be gained only through collectively learned institutions of coordination and cooperation. Collective learning is intense with largely tacit knowledge that endows socio-economic processes with specific efficacy. In regional interactions, dense, face-to-face contacts constitute a large portion of all interactions. The basis of collective capability, readiness and inclination to learning, change and innovation, in the widest sense, is located within a region. Localization and relocation thus means bringing agency to, or back to, or leaving it where the problems are and where people are aware of them and can learn from them.

The current global system

The current global system is an unregulated, exclusive, unimbedded and power-based mechanism. Its logic is a "deliberate destruction of collective action" (Pierre Bourdieu), "undermining the public interest" (Lori Walach). As such, it is predominantly re-distributive rather than welfare-enhancing for the whole socio-economy. It encourages a hierarchical unification, with the homogenization and subordination of cultures, rather than a diversification among regional, national and local cultures. This weakens any inherent problem-solving capacity leading to a reduced ability to absorb shocks, and a loss of resilience in the whole global system.

Being power-based, hierarchical and excessively competitive the global system shows signs of becoming an authoritarian system that is prone to violent, mainly militaristic, intervention as far as international relations are concerned. One might say, "normal" imperialism is back, operating at a higher level.

The problem-aggravating character of any power-based intervention

Against this background, any power-based, violent or military intervention is incapable of solving any problem (even if it appears capable of doing so). Any imported or exported solution is, and cannot help but be, more disastrous in the long run than any endogenously learned solution, however incomplete. Violent interventionism may force adaptation in the short run, but will impede adaptability in the long run (Gernot Grabher/David Stark), since it destroys the basis of real experience, local or national cultural learning, learned trust, openness to change, willingness and inclinations to innovate.

The role of virtual reality to justify military interventionism

Given these facts about the existing power system, there is no basis for anything like a "just war" or violent "humanitarian intervention" and there can be no moral/ethical justification for such an intervention. Under existing circumstances, any violent intervention must turn into a vehicle of imperialism at some stage, if not from the outset.

The historical experience of Europe in WWI and WWII suggests that "the first victim of a war is the truth" applies now more than ever. During WWI, Lloyd George clearly stated, while the war was still going on, that if people knew the truth, the war would end immediately. In the Nuremberg trials after WWII, Nazi-leader Hermann Göring said frankly that any government of any political orientation with a well-working mass media apparatus could make any people support any military intervention within weeks: Just tell them "we are under attack" or "they killed some of us."

In the war against Iraq, justifications were largely based on a massive structure of false information. Now the half-life of such misinformation has greatly decreased. Instead of thirty years for the release of documents, now false claims can be frankly admitted as soon as they have fulfilled their immediate purpose.

Regional cultural diversity and global problem-solving capacity

Real and sustaining problem-solving capacity can only be built on regional cultural diversity, rather than some variant of universalism or cultural/ethical essentialism where there is just one standard or a set of commensurable standards of truth. Most of the current problems in regional, national or local cultures stem from decades, even centuries, of hierarchical unification, foreign interventions and forced foreign influences on local economic and social conditions.

Diversity and equality-based inter-cultural interactions, in contrast, require protection of diversity for regional development and largely endogenously learned problem-solving drawing on the direct experiences of those involved.

Problem-solving and historical time

Finally, real problem-solving requires recurrent interaction, trust-building, collective learning, institutional development and change within regional spaces. Such processes are inherently sequential, path-dependent and time-consuming, which rules out any short-run interventionist solution. Heterodox, institutional and evolutionary economists can contribute to understanding problems of conflict resolution and development by using their well-elaborated theoretical concepts relating to structural power and violence, cultural diversity, path dependence and real, historical time.

I have not argued that nothing can be done from the outside to address regional conflicts. Imported weapons can be kept from areas of conflict or non-violent interventions can be offered. I see the approach outlined here as realistic, pragmatic, implementable, and as an expression of real courage, spirit and individual and collective strength.

Wolfram Elsner, Chair of [ECAAR-Germany](#), presented a related paper at the University of Missouri ICAPE conference in June 2003.

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